

CHINATOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT

The Historic District of Chinatown comprises four distinct sub-districts: Telok Ayer, Kreta Ayer, Bukit Pasoh and Tanjong Pagar. This guide introduces the history and character of the area and explains its growth from the 1820s, when it began as the first settlement of immigrants from southern China and southern India, until the immediate post-World War II period. Together with the other precincts south of the Singapore River, they made up what was known colloquially as the Greater Town (or Da Po, 大坡) of Singapore. Because of its architectural, historical and social importance, the area was given conservation status on 7 July 1989.

Take a walk and learn why this area is cherished by so many Singaporeans!



THE ORIGIN OF CHINATOWN is linked to Sir Stamford Raffles. In 1822, he formed a Town Planning Committee to plan Singapore Town according to ethnic groups. The area south of the Singapore River was allocated by sectors to Chinese and Indian immigrants of the same provincial origin and language groups. The Chinese immigrants came mostly from the south-eastern coastal provinces of China.



The Jackson Plan of 1822.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE, NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD

View of Kreta Ayer from Pearl's Hill in the early 1860s. The gopuram of Sri Mariamman Temple at South Bridge Road is visible. Ann Siang Hill at Telok Ayer was still undeveloped.



Chinatown in 1970 with Shenton Way in the foreground. The low-rise shophouses were overcrowded and dilapidated due to decades of neglect.

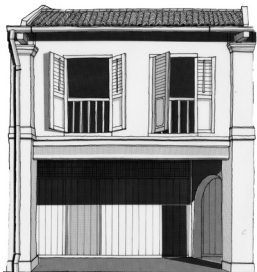


Chinatown in 2010. Most of Chinatown's conserved buildings have been restored to their former glory.

THE ARCHITECTURAL STYLES OF SHOPHOUSES

Chinatown's shophouses can be grouped into six general styles. The styles are roughly chronological and are the result of changing economic and technological circumstances, tastes and fashions.

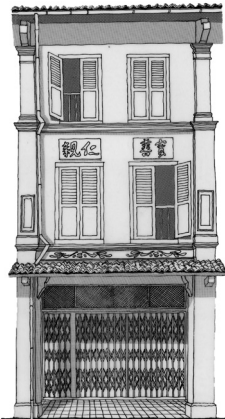
EARLY (1840 - 1900)



9 Erskine Road

- Low, two storeys with minimal plaster ornamentation
- Locally-sourced construction materials used
- Usually one or two timber windows on the upper storey façade

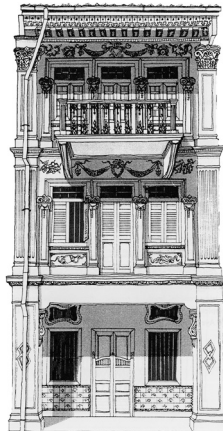
1ST TRANSITIONAL



120 Telok Ayer Street

- Taller and more decorated in a Chinese style due to the influx of skilled labour and rising affluence
- Usually two windows on the upper storey façade

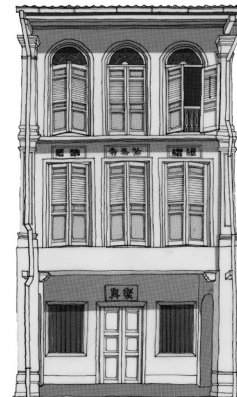
LATE (1900 - 1940)



21 Bukit Pasoh Road

- Highly decorated
- Due to an increase in exposure to European tastes and fashion of the time, ornaments used include moulded plaster festoons and imported hand-painted tiles
- Usually three windows on the upper storey façade for maximum ventilation

2ND TRANSITIONAL



10 Stanley Street

- Combination of the Chinese and European styles
- Simpler than the Late-style and more streamlined
- The third floor was often added on to an existing two-storey building

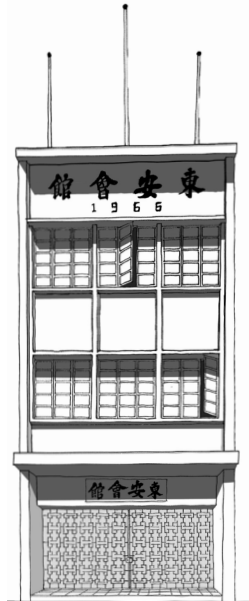
ART DECO (1930 - 1960)



30 Bukit Pasoh Road

- Geometric designs and pre-cast elements used
- Special emphasis given to street corners with the year of the building's construction usually displayed on the façade

MODERN (1950 - 1970)



285 New Bridge Road

- Functional and simple as a reflection of the post-war situation
- Industrial materials like steel and reinforced concrete used
- Common features include thin sunshade fins and air vents that are both functional as well as decorative

The Malay name Kreta Ayer (or Niu Che Shui, 牛车水) comes from the ox-drawn water carts that used to deliver water to the area. In the 19th century, this predominantly Cantonese area was known for round-the-clock entertainment with a concentration of teahouses, opera theatres and brothels. Today it is best known for its Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn celebrations, street market and bustling atmosphere.



1 FORMER GREAT SOUTHERN HOTEL 旧南天大酒店
70 Eu Tong Sen Street

This former hotel was designed by architectural firm Swan & Maclaren and was once regarded as the Raffles Hotel of Chinatown. Popular with high society including celebrities from Hong Kong and China, it was once the tallest building in the area and was the first Chinese hotel in Singapore to boast a lift service.



2 FORMER MAJESTIC THEATER 旧大华大戏院
80 Eu Tong Sen Street

This was originally a Cantonese opera house built by philanthropist Eu Tong Sen in 1927 for his wife after she was reportedly refused admittance to an opera performance elsewhere. A highlight of this Art Deco building is its decorated façade of hand-painted tiles depicting opera characters and flying dragons.



3 FORMER S.I.T. GOVERNMENT QUARTERS
42 to 50 Mosque Street, 175 to 189 New Bridge Road and 38 to 64 Upper Cross Street

The predecessor to the Housing and Development Board was the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), set up in 1927 by the colonial government to solve Singapore's chronic housing problems. These four-storey reinforced concrete buildings were built in the 1930s to house Customs workers. Take a close look at the timber parapet behind each window; on each are two heart-shaped cut outs.



4 JAMAE (CHULIA) MOSQUE
மஸ்ஜித் ஜாமிஆ (சூலியா)
218 South Bridge Road

One of the oldest mosques in Singapore, Jamae Mosque was completed in 1835 by the Chulias who hailed from southern India's Coromandel Coast. It boasts an eclectic mix of Chinese, Anglo-Indian and Malay architecture, of which the most significant feature is its South Indian style front entrance comprising of two minarets flanking a miniature palace façade. It was gazetted in 1974 as a National Monument.



5 SRI MARIAMMAN TEMPLE
ஸ்ரீ மாரியம்மன் கோவில்
242 South Bridge Road

Established in 1827, this is Singapore's oldest Hindu temple. It was founded by Narayana Pillay, the Tamil pioneer who accompanied Raffles to Singapore. The temple is dedicated to the goddess Mariamman and the original statue of the deity installed by Pillay still stands in its principal shrine. This temple gave name to Temple Street and Pagoda Street, and was gazetted as a National Monument in 1973.



6 FORMER COOLIE QUARTERS
37 Pagoda Street

Most coolies came from southern China in search of better job prospects but upon arrival were sold off as indentured labourers. Those who were not immediately auctioned off were kept in cramped and sordid quarters. This shophouse is believed to be the former premises of Kwong Hup Yuen, one of the most infamous coolie firms.



7 FORMER LAI CHUN YUEN 旧梨春园
25 Trengganu Street

Built in 1887, this three-storey former theatre building with unique cantilevering wooden balconies was the centre of entertainment in Kreta Ayer until it was badly damaged during World War II. Its popularity was such that surrounding streets were colloquially named after the theatre itself; Smith Street was Theater Street, Temple Street was Theater Rear Street, and Trengganu Street was Theater Side Street.

KRETA AYER

Telok Ayer, Malay for Water Bay, is the oldest sub-district. It started to develop in the 1820s and remained as the key Chinese commercial district until the late 19th century. The population in this area was predominantly Hokkien. The area is often associated with the laid-back atmosphere of Ann Siang Hill, and the religious buildings along Telok Ayer Street.



8 EU YAN SANG 余仁生
267 to 271 South Bridge Road

Built in 1910, this is the first Eu Yan Sang outlet in Singapore set up by Eu Tong Sen. Besides dealing in the retail of traditional Chinese medicine, it used to offer money remittance services to China. The building was designed by Alfred Bidwell from the firm Swan & Maclaren. He was also responsible for the design of the Raffles Hotel and Victoria Memorial Hall.



9 CLAN AND TRADE ASSOCIATIONS
Ann Siang Road and Club Street

Clan and trade associations were important institutions for mutual assistance in 19th and early 20th century Singapore as they helped new immigrants from China settle down and looked after their welfare. Along Ann Siang Road and Club Street are numerous clan and trade associations where stepping into one, time seems to stand still. Some still retain their meeting halls filled with portraits of members from the past and century-old furniture. Some of these associations can be found at 17 (Ching Yoon Wooi Kwoon) and 25 (Kwong Wai Siew Li Si She Shut) Ann Siang Road, and 84 Club Street (Nam Sun Wui Kun).



10 SIANG CHO KEONG 仙祖宮
66 Amoy Street

This temple was completed in 1869 and built in the Hokkien style, where the ends of the curved roof ridge sweeps outwards like swallow tails and the clay roof tiles are not glazed. Its foundation plaque records that it was located on this site because of its good feng shui (geomancy) properties as it used to front the sea and behind it stands Ann Siang Hill.



11 NAGORE DARGAH INDIAN MUSLIM HERITAGE CENTRE
நாகூர் தர்கா இந்திய முஸ்லிம் மரபுடைமை நிலையம்
140 Telok Ayer Street

Originally known as Shahul Hamid Durgha and dedicated to the memory of a holy man, Shahul Hamid of Nagore, the former shrine was built by Chulias from southern India between 1828 and 1830. On the upper part of the façade are niches, where oil lamps can be placed within them to illuminate the building on festive days. It was gazetted as a National Monument in 1974.



12 THIAN HOCK KENG 天福宮
158 Telok Ayer Street

This is one of Singapore's oldest and most important temple for immigrants from southern China's Fujian province. Completed in 1842 and standing on what used to be the shoreline, it is dedicated to the worship of Ma Zu Po, the Goddess of the Sea. While most of the building materials came from China, the temple incorporates cast-iron railings from Scotland and tiles from England and Holland. In 1973, it was gazetted as a National Monument. Its restoration in 2001 gained an honorable mention from UNESCO.



13 AL-ABRAR MOSQUE
அல்-அப்ரார் பள்ளிவாசல்
192 Telok Ayer Street

Also known as Kuchu Palli, Tamil for Mosque Hut, it was originally a thatched hut believed to have been erected not long after 1827. The present building was built between 1850 and 1855 and declared a National Monument in 1974. Unlike the Jamae Mosque along South Bridge Road, this mosque is able to conform to the street grid while facing Mecca.



14 TELOK AYER CHINESE METHODIST CHURCH
卫理公会直落逸礼拜堂
235 Telok Ayer Street

Designed by Swan & Maclaren and built by a French firm, Bross & Mogin in 1924, this was the first Chinese Methodist Church in Singapore. It features upturned roof eaves; a reference to traditional Chinese architecture and the community that it serves. In 1989, the church was gazetted as a National Monument.

TELOK AYER

Bukit Pasoh was developed at the turn of the 20th century as an extension of the already densely populated Telok Ayer and Kreta Ayer areas. Its name means Pot Hill in Malay, referring to its origins as a place where earthen pots were made. Its charm lies in its gently sloping and curving streets fronted by shophouses that house a mixture of institutional and commercial activities.

15 POON YUE ASSOCIATION 番禺会馆 281 New Bridge Road



The association was founded in 1879 at Upper Cross Street with financial assistance from Hoo Ah Kay, a well-known community leader from Whampoa district in Guangdong province. The association relocated to New Bridge Road in 1917. The building is a hybrid of Neo-Classical and Art Deco styles which were popular with Chinese developers in the past who wanted to project a modern image. To the Chinese, New Bridge Road was colloquially referred to as Da Po Er Ma Lu, Mandarin for Greater Town's Second Road. The first road referred to in this instance was South Bridge Road.

16 SRI LAYAN SITHI VINAYAGAR TEMPLE ஸ்ரீ லயன் சித்தி விநாயகர் கோயில் 73 Keong Saik Road



This Hindu temple was built in 1925 by Nattukkottai Chettiars, a noted money lending community from Tamil Nadu and dedicated to Ganesha, the elephant-headed god. It is an important stop for the annual Silver Chariot Procession where the deity Murugan is taken on a procession from the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple in Tank Road. The temple was given the name Layan Sithi as it was originally located at the old Sepoy Lines where Indian soldiers, known as Sepoys, used to be housed.

17 KONG CHOW WUI KOON 冈州会馆 321 New Bridge Road



This Cantonese clan association was established in 1839 at Upper Chin Chew Street and moved in 1924 to the present building, designed by Westerhout & Oman. During the Japanese Occupation, the custodians volunteered the building as a clinic and hence its antique interiors remained intact. The association is well known for its lion dance troupe and martial arts. This is one of Chinatown's first community museums and entry is free.

18 CUNDHI GONG 準提宮 13 Keong Saik Road



This was founded in 1928 for the worship of the 18-arm Cundhi Bodhisattva. It is a purpose-built temple built in the Nanyang style which is a hybrid between Chinese and shophouse architecture. On the roof ridge, cut porcelain pieces are used to form dragons, phoenixes, birds and flowers. The timber trusses over the five-foot way feature traditional paintings and its exterior walls are adorned with hand-painted tiles.

19 EE HOE HEAN CLUB 怡和軒俱樂部 43 Bukit Pasoh Road



The club was founded in 1895 by a group of Hokkien community leaders for the wealthy Chinese elite. More than a social and business club, its members were actively involved in the political development of China in the early 20th century. It supported the 1911 Xinhai Revolution which overthrew the Qing Dynasty, leading to the establishment of the Republic of China. During World War II, it was the headquarters of the anti-Japanese China Salvation Movement in Southeast Asia. The ground floor Pioneer's Gallery is open for visit and entry is free.

20 CHIN KANG HUAY KUAN 晉江会馆 29 Bukit Pasoh Road



This association was established in 1918 by immigrants from Jinjiang County in southern Fujian, China. The current building contrasts with its ornately decorated neighbours. The use of straight lines, concrete ledges and mild steel framed windows is typical of the Modern style that was popular from the 1950s to the early 1970s. During World War II, the building was used by the Overseas Chinese General Mobilisation Council which helped the British in supplying labourers and volunteers for the defence of Singapore.

Tanjong Pagar in Malay means Cape of Stakes, a name which reflects its origin as the site of a fishing village. It was with the opening of docks nearby in the mid-19th century that accelerated the development of the area due to its location between the docks and town. Today, the area is popular with eateries, entertainment joints and wedding boutiques.



21 FORMER ENG AUN TONG 旧永安堂
89 Neil Road

Eng Aun Tong (Hall of Everlasting Peace) was built by Aw Boon Haw in the 1920s as a factory to produce the internationally renowned Tiger Balm. This is one of the few flat roofed buildings from before World War II. On the roof is a six-sided pavilion, a reference to the six-sided glass bottle that Tiger Balm is sold in.



22 9 NEIL ROAD

Between 1987 and 1988, 32 dilapidated shophouses of a hybrid Hokkien-Teochew style were restored by the Urban Redevelopment Authority. This was the first ever project undertaken by the government to demonstrate to the private sector that it was technically possible and commercially viable to restore Singapore's heritage buildings to their former glory. The first unit to be restored was 9 Neil Road and converted into a teahouse which hosted Queen Elizabeth II on her State visit in 1989.



23 JINRIKISHA STATION 人力车站
1 Neil Road

The building was built in 1903 by the Municipal Council as the administration centre for rickshaws, a form of transportation imported from Japan via Shanghai in the 1880s. It is of the Edwardian style, where the exposed brickwork is contrasted with white plaster mouldings. Look out for the crest of the Municipal Council at the front of the building, featuring a lion standing on an island with a palm tree.



24 FORMER JING HWA CINEMA 旧金华戏院
1 Tanjong Pagar Road

Together with the Majestic and the Oriental, Jing Hwa Cinema, built in 1958, was one of Chinatown's three famous cinemas. It was designed by local architect Wong Foo Nam in the Modern style and was the first to have a basement carpark and extensive floor-to-ceiling windows. It is remembered fondly by many as the venue of romantic first dates and holiday treats.



25 MURRAY TERRACE
2 to 28 Murray Street

Built in 1929, this Art Deco streetblock has exposed brickwork and unique lion head rain spouts. In 1977, instead of urban renewal through demolition and rebuilding, the Urban Redevelopment Authority pioneered the rehabilitation of the then State-owned property for adaptive reuse. Along with other rehabilitation projects at Tudor Court and Emerald Hill, these buildings were the forerunners of Singapore's conservation programme that was to start in 1989.



26 FORMER CUSTOM HOUSE
32 Maxwell Road

This Neo-Classical style building with unique sun-ray moulded panels and staggered corner was built in 1932 to house the Department of Customs and Excise, Film Censor's Office and Maxwell Road Post Office. When the Singapore Customs moved out in 1989, it was put to commercial use and renamed the White House, a name many Singaporeans still remember the building by.