

# Balestier, a mix of new and old

by Kelvin Ang

*The Subject Group on areas with Old World Charm has recommended that nuggets of Balestier's history and local memories should be publicised. Skyline brings you the highlights of this historical gem.*



Built in the 1840s, Balestier Road currently presents an interesting streetscape of the new and the old.

Nowadays, most of us associate Balestier Road either with food (the 'to-die-for' tau sa piah!), lighting shops or heavy traffic! Some may be aware that the Sun Yat Sen Villa is also in the neighbourhood. However, few know that there is more than meets the eye to this road. Hidden in the jumble of shophouses and little lanes, is an area with a rich and evolving history for many of Singapore's communities.

Over 160 years old, Balestier Road was named after Joseph Balestier, the first American consul in Singapore. He bought the land in the area in the 1830s and developed it into a sugar cane and cotton plantation. Balestier employed numerous immigrants on his estate. The Chinese labourers settled and called the area 'Go Chor Tua Pek Kong', after their landmark temple, built in 1847. The temple still remains standing today.

As the area developed, shophouses were built in the late 19th century to provide services to the local community. By the 1880s, bungalows were built in the area for the richer immigrants. One survives today as 'Wan Qing Yuan — Sun Yat Sen Villa' on Tai Gin Road, which hosted Dr Sun Yat Sen when he was in Singapore promoting his revolutionary activities.



The only remaining free-standing wayang stage in Singapore today, was built for the Go Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple in 1906.

In between the shophouses and bungalows, many cottage industries were also set up by pioneering immigrants. For example, by Whampoa River, there were many cottage industries dealing with rattan. There were also sugarcane plantations, from which we have the name 'Jalan Ampas' — residue of crushed sugar cane.

In the early 20th century, the increasing number of settlers led to more temples being built. However, the Tua Pek Kong Temple still remained the main focus of the Chinese community there. A permanent wayang stage for the temple was erected and funded by Tan Boon Liat in 1906 – 1909. A mark of the temple's importance, this is now the only remaining free-standing wayang stage in Singapore.

**The Subject Group (SG) has supported URA's proposal to conserve the 161 selected shophouses along Balestier Road through the 'old and new' conservation approach. In addition, the SG highlighted the historical significance of Go Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple and its wayang stage, and recommended conserving them. To retain the distinctive, old world vista of Balestier, the SG has proposed that guidelines be formulated for new developments to retain the fine-grained, low-rise character of the shophouses.**

In the 1920s, the Balestier Market was built for the locals to sell their produce. During World War II, it was a centre for the distribution of food rations in the area. This is now the only 'rural' market still standing and in operation. Many of the stallholders have been operating their family stalls in the market for generations.



Balestier Market, the one and only rural market remaining in Singapore today and a historical landmark along Balestier Road.

**The SG agreed with URA that the Balestier Market and utility block should be conserved as it is a historical and familiar landmark along Balestier Road. Guidelines could be drawn up to ensure that future upgrading works maintain the spatial quality of the market. The SG also recommended retaining and revitalising the current market use, if possible. Alternatively, it could be reinvented into a niche market specialising in local produce.**

As Singapore's population grew, more residents moved outwards from the city centre. Wealthy developers built more ornate Late-style shophouses in the late 1920s. They can be seen at the junction of Kim Keat Road and Jalan Kemaman. Charming terrace houses were also built along Pegu and Martaban Roads in the simpler Transitional style.



A Transitional-style shophouse along Balestier.

The 1950s was when the Shaw Brothers Film Studios at Jalan Ampas produced many of the films that made up the Golden Age of Singapore and Malay cinema. The well known P Ramlee — actor, musician and director — created his masterpieces off Balestier Road.

In the 1950s and 1970s, public housing was developed by Singapore Improvement Trust and the Housing and Development Board in the Balestier area at St Michael's Estate. This spurred further growth in buildings and activities along the road and the Modern-style shophouses were built. Cinemas, schools, markets were built, adding to the excitement of the street.



A traditional, fresh-from-the-oven bakery shop — a rare sight in the local scene nowadays.

A new generation of Singaporeans began to use Balestier Road as their local shopping area. Shops and eateries were established along the road and this continues to this day.

Balestier today has a special mix of the old and new buildings, with an interesting streetscape, a colourful past and a vibrant present. The shophouses and terraces have since given way in part to newer developments such as apartment blocks and shopping centres. Through its buildings and activities — some decades old, some newly established — Balestier Road today reflects its physical and social developmental history over time. Conservation of the more significant older buildings will allow for its rich history to be told and passed on to future generations.