



HERITAGE ON FOOT

Tours of clans around Chinatown keep rich personal histories alive.

Past the yellow art deco façade of the shophouse, is a cool long hall lined with framed calligraphy and black and white photographs.

Just beside the entrance, a stack of leaflets informs visitors that the Kwong Wai Siew Li Si She Shut Association (or Li clan), has been here since 1954. This main hall is true to its original 1960s character, when the building was last renovated.

The association, founded in the late 19th century and offering the public a step back in time, has

been a regular feature on the National Heritage Board's HeritageFest roster over the past four years.

During its open house, the Cantonese clan, known as a "literary studio" for its promotion of education and culture, offers talks and demonstrations on calligraphy.

Through such opportunities, a rich historical aspect of the Chinatown conservation area is retained. But the road to reinvention has been a gradual process.



Top:
Yan Chang acting as guide
for the URA Clan Tour at
Ying Fo Fui Kun

Keeping relevant

Executive Architect Lee Yan Chang, from the URA's Conservation department, remembers when the Li clan, and other associations, needed a little nudge to open themselves to the public, especially Singaporeans.

"Most of the clans were active, but were not actively promoting their activities," he recalled. "Some did not have internet access, and use of social media was rare."

The Conservation department was keen to see these associations – founded as welfare organisations for the early immigrants, now mainly guardians of cultural traditions – stay in Chinatown.

"[The clans] add to the story of the history [of Chinatown]. We always talk about Ann Siang Hill and Bukit Pasoh Road as being a 'street of clans'," said Yan Chang.

From 2010, he and his colleagues began knocking on doors to suggest the clans take part in a guided tour that would allow the public to peek at what they were about.

The clans responded, encouraging participation through word of mouth and passing on contacts to the URA officers. The following year, a few clans were highlighted by Yan Chang as part of a guided tour.

In 2012, six clans came onboard for the tour as part of HeritageFest. The participating clans have since doubled, and additionally developed their own open houses. Most have also produced leaflets on their histories and characteristics with Yan Chang's assistance.

Such open houses have given the associations a chance to showcase their arts and culture to new visitors. Mr Lai Weng Pew, of the Singapore Poon Yue Association, said taking part in HeritageFest had given more exposure to his clan's traditions.

"Most of [the visitors] had not seen this kind of Taoist performance before, especially the foreign visitors," he said.

The Poon Yue Association has since also launched a theatre drama on the Cantonese diaspora culture.



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Volunteers about town

Besides the clans, the Conservation department has begun working with other volunteers to conduct tours of Chinatown and other conservation areas.

Last year, the docents from Friends of the Museums (FOM) led their first free outdoor tour, around the Bukit Pasoh area. Developed with the URA, they have since gone on to develop two other free tours, of Telok Ayer and Kreta Ayer. They have also planned a “children’s tour” that involves activities and quizzes.

The aim is to build up such sustainable volunteer schemes for tours of conservation areas, said Yan Chang. The FOM tour could become a regular one in the future, where the expertise of the docents can help in presenting the historic associations to the Singaporean public.

Through clans’ eyes

Yan Chang, who has since joined the Li clan himself, speculates that his father might have been a member as he had worked with the clan’s storyteller, Lee Dai Soh.

He feels that the younger generation can trace its roots, as well as learn more about the hardships that brought its forefathers here and their subsequent progress, through visiting the clans.

The clan associations’ opening doors provide a glimpse of a nation’s personal histories, and traditions that stay alive today.

Look out for future tours at the conservation page on URA’s website, or get the walking map of clans at www.ura.gov.sg/uol/publications/lifestyle-reads/walking-maps-trails/central/chinatown-clans.aspx

