Philanthropy in Singapore: A Heritage of Peoples and Places

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| featuring art by dominique Fam |
This e-book was written with material provided by and drawn from the following sources:

[1] Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital
[2] Sian Chay Medical Institution
[3] Singapore Chinese Girls’ School, and Mr Tan Jiew Hoe (SCGS Board Member)
[4] Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution
[5] The Indian Heritage Centre
About the Singapore Bicentennial e-book series

Take a quick dive into the different time periods in Singapore history, the stories and legacies of our different communities. Discover lesser-known histories of people, places and events. Each nugget offers a unique glimpse into the layered lives and histories of our people, going into topics as diverse as natural history, architecture and religious practices.

About the Singapore Bicentennial

The Singapore Bicentennial marks the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the British in Singapore, a turning point in our history. But our story starts way before that.

Travelling back in time to 700 years ago, the Singapore Bicentennial is an occasion for us to reflect on our extensive and textured history: how we have evolved, from a place with a geographically strategic location, into Singaporeans with a unique DNA.

This commemoration features a huge cast of contributors, as well as the regional and global developments that have shaped our lives and identities.
Philanthropy in Singapore: A heritage of peoples and places

On any given day, flocks of tourists can be seen marvelling at the architecture of Sri Mariamman Temple along South Bridge Road. About 600 metres away, at Keng Cheow Street, Muslim workers visit Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka, Singapore’s oldest mosque. Farther north, just outside Novena MRT station, lies Tan Tock Seng Hospital. People enter and leave its premises, making medical appointments, collecting medicine and bringing discharged relatives home.

What do a temple, a mosque and a hospital have in common?

For one, all of them have been recognised for their historical significance by the National Heritage Board. Look closely and you’ll find something else, too—clues to Singapore’s deep and diverse philanthropic legacy.
Founded in 1827, Sri Mariamman Temple bears witness to the philanthropic deeds of Tamil pioneers and their contributions to colonial Singapore's development. This South-Indian style temple is dedicated to the Hindu goddess, Mariamman, whose incarnate is honoured in the annual Theemithi festival held at the temple.
Image 3: Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka.
Courtesy of National Heritage Board.
Omar Kampong Malacca Mosque

Built in 1820, this was the first mosque and house of prayer in Singapore. It has been rebuilt twice; once in 1855 and again in 1981-82. Situated on the southern bank of the Singapore River, Kampong Malacca was designated for Muslims by Sir Stamford Raffles in his 1822 Town Plan. As a result, Arabs, Jawa-Peranakans, Indonesians and Malays gravitated there. Its heritage is reflected in the vibrant architectural styles that can be found in the area, some of which are still evident today.

This mosque was the effort of Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied, an Arab merchant from Palembang. His son, Syed Abdullah bin Omar Aljunied, was responsible for the 1855 rebuilding. The Aljunied family was best remembered for their charitable acts in supporting schools, hospitals and mosques, as well as sponsoring religious events. These philanthropic deeds were recognised in the naming of Omar Kampong Malacca Mosque after its founder, the naming of Aljunied Road and Syed Alwi Road (Syed Alwi was a descendant of Syed Omar).

A new paved road through Kampong Malacca brought worshippers from the surrounding area in 1855. With a bigger congregation, the original timber mosque was not large enough. A larger and sturdier brick structure was built in the same year to accommodate the mosque’s growing needs.

In 1981-82, after more than one hundred and sixty years, new features were added to the mosque. Omar Kampong Malacca Mosque, unlike other mosques in Singapore, had no minaret. It was only in 1985 that a tall minaret with a small roof dome was added at the entrance of the mosque.

The mosque has remained intact since it was last refurbished. A simple attractive building amidst modern skyscrapers, it is well complemented by its surrounding environment. With a seating capacity of 1000 people, it is the focal point of office workers during daily and Friday prayers.

A history of giving

In 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore and, after negotiation with the local chieftain Temenggong Abdul Rahman, set up a trading post. Enterprising settlers from China, India, the Middle East and other parts of Southeast Asia soon came to the island to do business and make new lives for themselves. The colonial administration was primarily focused on growing the economy, and philanthropists from the different communities had to step up to champion neglected social causes. Among the business leaders to do so was Naraina Pillai.

Persuaded by Raffles to leave Penang, he came to Singapore in 1819. According to historian H.F. Pearson, Pillai was unhappy in subsequent weeks after Raffles left Singapore. Pillai had expected help from the colonial administrator but was left to fend for himself. He first worked as a clerk in the colonial treasury but, shortly after, was replaced. He then ventured into business, setting up a kiln and producing bricks for the growing number of houses in the emerging port city.

He also set up a cotton bazaar at Cross Street. Unfortunately, in 1822, it caught fire and he became indebted to European merchants who had lent him cloth on credit. He persuaded them to give him time to settle his debt. Later, with the help of Raffles, who had returned to Singapore, Pillai revived his business in Commercial Square, now known as Raffles Place. Regaining his wealth, Pillai turned his attention to building a temple for the Indian community, many of whom were Hindu.

The temple was of modest stock at first. Made from wood and attap, Sri Mariamman Temple was completed in 1827. Pillai installed a small deity, Sinna Amman, within the compound. In 1831, the temple expanded with a donation by the landowner Seshachala Pillai. In 1843, the wood and attap structure made
way for a sturdier brick foundation that was built by Indian convict labourers. The temple was not just a place for worship, but a refuge for new immigrants who had trouble finding work, a dispute mediation centre and an early registry for marriages.

Since the 19th century, Sri Mariamman Temple has been renovated and refortified on many occasions. Its philanthropic heritage, however, is still palpable. The Sinna Amman deity Naraina Pillai first installed for the Hindu community can be found, garlanded and looked after, within its main sanctum.

Image 7: A tiny statue of Sinna Amman or Little Goddess, installed in 1827 by Naraina Pillai.

Photo: Anasuya Soundararajan and Sri Asrina Tanuri. Photo and caption: courtesy of National Library Board.
Naraina Pillai was not the only entrepreneur who was attracted to Singapore in 1819. Another came from Yemen in the Middle East and was part of a rich family of traders. His name was Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied.

After doing business in Palembang and Penang, the enterprising Arab came to the port city and extended his trade network to Siam, Madras and Bombay, now known respectively as Thailand, Chennai and Mumbai.

Like Pillai, he was invested in charitable causes and wanted immigrants to have a communal space for themselves. In 1820, he built Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka that served Malays, Jawi Peranakans, Indonesians and Arabs. Continuing his father’s philanthropic legacy, Syed Abdullah bin Omar Aljunied, the son of Syed Omar, rebuilt the mosque in 1855. The original timber made way for bricks. Between 1981 and 1982, the mosque was refurbished again and for the first time a minaret was installed. Today, this addition can be seen towering over the mosque, giving sheen to the quaint and modest compound.

In hindsight, Syed Omar’s philanthropy seems somewhat uncharacteristic of his time. Much of philanthropy then proceeded along racial and religious lines. Bucking this trend in 1823, he donated a tract of land for the building of St Andrew’s Cathedral. Since its completion in 1836 and subsequent renovations, the church, replete with an unmistakable tower and spire, has become a defining landmark for Anglicans.

Syed Omar’s diverse philanthropy is an early sign of the multiculturalism that is now synonymous with Singapore. What may not be known to many people, for instance, is that he and the Parsi community were the only non-Chinese donors for one of Singapore’s most famous hospitals. It bears the name of a Chinese pioneer, who is also a philanthropist. Now known as the Tan Tock Seng Hospital, it did not always go by the name of its founder.
When he was 21, Tan Tock Seng boarded a ship for Singapore. He too arrived in 1819. Unlike Syed Omar, he started his new life with little money to his name. As the historian C.M. Turnbull writes in *A History of Singapore 1819-1988*: “Most of the influential early settlers were already prosperous when they arrived and did not fit the popular rags-to-riches success stories of penniless youths rising by hard work and acumen to wealth and eminence. The Hokkien Tan Tock Seng was an exception.”

Bringing produce from the countryside to the city, Tan sold vegetables, fruits and poultry by the roadside. By 1827, he saved enough money to open a shop at Boat Quay. It was not until he met J.H. Whitehead, a partner in the trading firm Shaw, Whitehead & Co., that he became a renowned businessman. Through a joint venture in land speculation, Tan became wealthy and amassed large tracts of land.

With his rising stature, he was sought by fellow Chinese to settle disputes among them and earned the title, “Captain of the Chinese”. Tan had a passion for serving people, particularly the poor. Forking out his own money, he buried unclaimed bodies of immigrants and aided those who could not afford funerary rites for their deceased family members.

Though Singapore became increasingly wealthy under British rule, there were still many people who languished on the streets, suffering from poor sanitation and disease. The Chinatown district, which housed many Chinese immigrants, was a hotbed for malaria, cholera, leprosy, tuberculosis and smallpox. The British were slow to act and members from the Chinese community, including Tan, stepped up to fund a hospital.
Healthcare institutions set up by Chinese philanthropists

Tan was not the only Chinese philanthropist who was attuned to the healthcare needs of the poor. Several Chinese migrants came together to set up clinics in the early 19th century. In 1867, for instance, a group of them operated Thong Chai Yee Say out of a rented shophouse along Upper Macao Street, now known as Upper Pickering Street. “Thong Chai” comes from the Chinese words 同 (tong), which means equality, and 济 (ji), which means to help.

The Governor of the Straits Settlements Sir Cecil Clementi Smith found out about the clinic and granted land parcels to Thong Chai. In 1891, with donations from the public, the clinic found a new home along Wayang Street. One of the major donors behind the new building was Gan Eng Seng, the Malacca-born Hokkien businessman and philanthropist.

The Sian Chay Medical Institution was another healthcare institution set up by volunteers. In 1901, it opened as a medical centre to provide traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and treatment for the poor. Since its humble origins at Victoria Street, Sian Chay has expanded to 15 TCM branches that serve an estimated 775,386 people.

Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital, which began operations in 1911, differed from these Chinese clinics in that it offered patients the choice between TCM and Western treatments. The Cantonese community who set up the hospital modelled it after a free hospital in Guangzhou, China. Besides providing treatment, the hospital also arranged the funerals of patients whose bodies were unclaimed after death. The bodies were buried at Peck San Theng cemetery and every year, staff from the hospital would perform rituals for the dead during Qing Ming, or Tomb-Sweeping Day.
In 1844, after finally getting the British onboard, the foundation stone for “The Chinese Pauper Hospital” was laid at Pearl’s Hill. The building was completed in 1846, but the British ended up using the premises as a temporary jail, leaving patients to be treated in an attap shed at the foot of Pearl’s Hill. It was only in 1849, when a storm wrecked the shed, that patients were moved to the hospital.

Later, the hospital was renamed “Tan Tock Sing Hospital”. This spelling, with an “i” instead of an “e”, was changed in official documents in the 1850s. With a growing number of patients and expanded medical services, the hospital has changed location a few times, from Balestier Plain to Moulmein Road and, finally, to its current location at Jalan Tan Tock Seng. This history is charted in the Heritage Museum on the second floor of the main building. Encased in glass are Peranakan tiles, medical instruments and other remnants of history. Among the most striking artefacts are the engraved foundation stones.
Image 8: Stele at Tan Tock Seng Hospital Heritage Museum.

Courtesy of Simon Vincent.
Female pioneers

The colonial period was one of rapid political, social and economic changes. As industries grew, the role of women changed. More women were gaining financial clout and becoming public faces of society. Among the earliest female philanthropists is Hajjah Fatimah binte Sulaiman. She came from Malacca and was the wife of the Sultan of Gowa in Sulawesi. After his death, she took over his business and traded in Southeast Asia, concurrently building up a reputation for charitable work.

In the 1830s, a house she built on Java Road was ransacked and set on fire. Grateful that her life was spared, she donated money for a mosque that was built on the site of this house in 1846. Hajjah Fatimah also set aside the surrounding land for houses for the poor. These were part of a wakaf, an Islamic form of voluntary charitable endowment from one’s personal belongings or wealth. The mosque still stands today at Kampong Glam, admired for its tilting minaret. It is one of few mosques bearing the names of female benefactors.

Hajjah Fatimah, according to her descendants, died in 1865. Her daughter Raja Siti then continued her philanthropic work. Raja Siti, who married into the prominent Alsagoff family, often held feasts for the poor in commemoration of her mother’s death anniversary. In 1883, she too created a wakaf. As per her wishes, the income gained from rent from her and her mother’s houses was divided into two parts. The first was distributed as inheritance to her family and the second was donated to charity.
1. The Background:

The Charitable trust was created by the Will of the late Raja Siti binti Kerayang Fulli dated 30th Muharram 1309 @ 29th November 1982.

She directed her executor’s to collect rent from houses belong to her and those given to her by her mother, the late Hajjah Yatinah. The income after deducting all expenses are to be divided into two parts. One part is to be distributed among her kins in accordance with the Islamic law of inheritance. The second part is to be distributed as charity in accordance with her wishes.

2. Death of Raja Siti binti Kerayang Fulli:

Raja Siti died in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, on 16th April 1991. Probate was granted by the High Court of the then The Straits Settlements, appointing Syed Mohamed b. Ahmad Al Safi, her surviving son, as the sole Trustee and Executor of her estate in accordance with her Will (Para 8 of R.S.K.P. Will).

Probate No. 33 of 1992 was issued by the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlement on 4th April 1992.

3. Derivative Executors:

Syed Mohamed b. Ahmad Al Safi died on 3rd July 1905, leaving a Will and two codicils dated 24th November 1902, 24th June 1904 and 22nd May 1906 respectively.


Syed Omar b. Mohamed Al Safi and Syed Ali b. Mohamed Al Safi was discharged from the office as executors under the Will of Syed Mohamed b. Ahmad Al Safi by order of Court in Suit 39 of 1915.

4. Trustees of the Will and two codicils of S.M.A. Al Safi:

Syed Abdul Karim b. Abdul Rahman, Al Safi and Syed Abdul Rahman b. Taha Al Safi was appointed as trustees of the Will and two codicils of the late Syed Mohamed b. Ahmad Al Safi later to be known as the S.M.A. Al Safi Wakaf Fund (Para 5. Will of S.M.A. Al Safi)

Syed Abdul Karim b. Abdul Rahman Al Safi died on 19th April 1907. Syed Omar b. Mohamed Al Safi was appointed to succeed the late Syed Abdul Karim by order of Court made in Singapore in 1907 (Suit No. 375 of 1907) together with Syed Abdul Rahman b. Taha Al Safi as Trustees.
The wakaf was a formal mechanism for philanthropy that was particular to the Muslim community. The philanthropic work of women in other communities often revolved around domestic and ceremonial functions and, as such, has been glossed over in history. Women “gave by being responsible for the welfare of both immediate and extended families, doing ‘women’s work’ of ensuring children were fed and clothed, deities worshipped, obligations fulfilled, and culture and social norms passed on”, writes Yu-Lin Ooi, a senior research associate at the Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy, in her study of the philanthropic contributions of Asian women.

The temple was a key site for philanthropic action for Hindu women. While men like Naraina Pillai might have provided money and built houses of worship, women were the ones who kept the places running. They served meals for bachelor immigrants and taught children Hindu rites and dance.

Mrs Appiah, a Ceylonese Hindu, was one such woman uncovered from history by Ooi. Appiah Mami, as she was fondly known, was a devoted member of Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple, supplying the mothagam sweets to Lord Ganesha and assisting in religious celebrations. In *Celebrating 100 Years*, a 2010 book commemorating Ceylon Tamils, she was recognised as the “doyen” of her community.

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Women created unique philanthropic models to challenge the prevalent state of affairs in society, which was organised around men as heads of households and primary income providers. One such group was the members of the Sor Hei sisterhood, who had left China in sisterhood groups for various colonies such as Singapore.
The Sor Hei sisters, who were against being forced into marriage, tied their hair into buns and took a vow of celibacy to signify their independence. They entered the sisterhood through a ceremony called “Sor Hei” (梳起), which means “combing up” in Cantonese. Many became samsui and amahs, working as construction workers and domestic helpers.

Often, these pioneers and contributing members of the economy had been cast out from their own families and wider society, and had to rely on themselves to survive.

By banding together, they funded support spaces for women. Oei examines these breakthrough places, which included coolie houses they rented by pooling their wages together. These places were used by sor hei sisters who could not find
lodgings with their employers. Besides being a shelter, a coolie fong, another term for a coolie house, provided help and took care of those who had fallen on hard times. The sisterhood also formed nursing homes to tend to their ageing members.

Philanthropy in an emerging nation

While people had grievances against the colonial administration, its rule was largely accepted because of its perceived military might. This changed with the Japanese occupation of Singapore during World War II. The period between 1942 and 1945 was one of hardship and deprivation. When the British reclaimed Singapore after the war, its legitimacy had eroded. The myth of British exceptionalism had been shattered and a sense of nationalism had developed among the people of different races and religions through their combined struggle for survival. This was a pivotal moment of nation-building, and philanthropists, both men and women, played a big role.

Among the crucial post-war philanthropists was Che Zahara. In 1947, using her own home, she founded the Malay Women’s Welfare Association to provide food, accommodation and jobs for women. Those who had been forced into prostitution because of wartime hardship found a safe haven at her Desker Road residence. Between its opening and the 1960s, the association looked after more than 300 women and children of different races and religions.

One of the first foundations to be formed after the war was the Lee Foundation. Started in 1952, it was headed by Lee Kong Chian, who wanted a long-term means of philanthropy that was not subject entirely to fluctuating economic circumstances. A number of community organisations, such as the Ramakrishna Mission and the Federation of Boys’ Club, benefitted from donations given
by the foundation. It was also active in supporting education, contributing to Umar Pulavar Tamil School and St Margaret’s School.

Philanthropy was not just about the wealthy. Social and community workers were an important part of the equation, committing their time to raise the profile of important causes. Daisy Vaithilingam was one such person. In 1955, she became the first local Senior Almoner, now known as the Chief of Medical Social Workers. She was instrumental in setting up the first foster care scheme for children, assigning attendants to take care of children abandoned in hospitals. She was a pioneer in championing for the rights of mentally disabled children, securing financial aid for them and advocating for their integration into mainstream education.

As some of these examples show, philanthropic work extended from one person or organisation to another, irrespective of race and religion. Syed Omar’s diversified philanthropy had become a norm.

When Singapore came into self-rule, after the People’s Action Party (PAP)’s victory in the 1959 election, politicians were working towards a union with neighbouring Malaysia. This period in Singapore history was characterised by the urgent need to develop Singapore’s physical and social infrastructure. Everyday citizens and businesses played a big part, especially during crises.

A telling example is the response to the Bukit Ho Swee fire. While fires sometimes broke out in slum areas, there was none quite like what happened on 25 May 1961. It razed schools, factories and attap houses, leaving 16,000 kampong dwellers homeless.
The Social Work Department, the Singapore Red Cross and St John’s Ambulance Brigade set up relief and first-aid centres. The government set up a Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund that amassed over $1.5 million for victims. Of this amount, $250,000 came from the government, while the rest was made up of contributions from businesses, workers’ unions and various social and political organisations. Lee of Lee Foundation donated $25,000. Trishaw riders and taxi drivers pitched in too. This society-wide relief effort culminated in Operation Shift, when affected families were shifted to public flats.

Responding to evolving needs

The period after the war was marked by other tumultuous events. Singapore’s merger with Malaysia in 1963 was short-lived. On 9 August 1965, Singapore became independent and developing the country on a wide and efficient scale was the main priority
of the government. Voluntary organisations, concerted citizens and business leaders formed a crucial safety network. In 1969, Dr Khoo Oon Teik, for instance, started the National Kidney Foundation, raising donations and rallying volunteers to provide affordable dialysis treatment for those with kidney disease. Other philanthropic efforts included the Asian Women’s Welfare Association that formed in 1970 to help impoverished women, and the Singapore Leprosy Relief Association that formed in 1971 to house former victims of the taboo-ridden disease.

The scale of philanthropy increased with Singapore’s economic growth. In 1983, the government began the Community Chest Fund, quickly raising more than $1 million. The Community Chest TV show, which was first telecast in 1985, raised a record $9.6 million in 2018. The charity initiative has become a integral means by which corporations pledge a part of their earnings to philanthropic causes.

Since independence, philanthropic work has become more institutionalised, with foundations becoming a preferred platform for donation. Among the renowned post-independence foundations is the Lien Foundation. Founded in 1980 by Lien Ying Chow, it has channelled money to educational and environmental causes, and to advocacy for the aged. In 2008, together with the Duke-NUS Medical School, it started the research and training arm Lien Centre for Palliative Care.

Today, palliative and elder care has become a prominent and urgent philanthropic cause because of Singapore’s ageing population. By 2030, the number of citizens aged 65 and above is set to double to 900,000 and providing adequate service for the aged will be crucial. Besides the Lien Foundation, another important organisation in this field is the Tsao Foundation. Since its founding in 1993, the foundation has become a major advocate for community-based care for the aged. Its Hua Mei Senior Clinic pioneered the provision of outpatient primary geriatric care.
By responding to society’s evolving needs, philanthropists—
young and old, immigrants and citizens, men and women—are
part of a long and diverse tradition. The roots of philanthropy in
Singapore can be traced to its period of independence, wartime
struggles and even to the distant colonial era.

This heritage of giving is an indelible part of nationhood. See
it, feel it, as you walk past temples, mosques, churches, schools,
hospitals, community centres and other monuments to compassion
and service.
About the author

Simon Vincent is a journalist from Singapore. His byline has appeared in Nikkei Asian Review, Southeast Asia Globe, Mekong Review and OZY. He has also written for local online news sites Yahoo! News and The Middle Ground. Simon previously worked for Six-Six News, where he covered topics ranging from politics to lifestyle. He is the author of The Naysayer’s Book Club, a book of interviews with influential personalities on the future of Singapore. He is currently a content strategist for Tuber, a design and editorial consultancy.
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