In your assignment, try to identify a place that your family has been associated with. Research that place as well as your family history. In researching your family history, most of you will do oral history interviews. Try to include quotations from these interviews in your assignment. Also try to locate your family history in broader national (Singapore) or ethnic history.

Oral History – The Singapore’s Experience

In ‘Reflections and Interpretations’ – a 25th anniversary publication by the National Archives of Singapore, it states clearly in its introduction that ‘oral history is like the patchwork of a nation’s memories that is often lost when not recorded and permanently preserved. These memories hold images of people, places and events that are the blueprint of our life and history’ (Chew, 2005). The techniques of oral history ‘lends itself to understanding heritage and culture’ (Chew, 2005, p.22) and ‘…is one way of recording history that cuts across all strata of society, thereby enriching our knowledge of human experiences across space and time’ (Chew, 2007, p.1).

Linda P. Wood (2007) highlighted that oral history allows the practitioners to see that these individuals ‘are part of the greater society, and that the individual is shaped by society and in turn helps to shape society … they get a snapshot of another person’s life as it interacts with events outside that life and they learn how the individual reacts to the events, learns from them, and attempts to exert control over them’ (Chew, 2005, p.79). Henceforth, the narratives and interviews carried out in this assignment would allow a ‘bottom-up’ approach to see how the place – Chinatown (Temple Street) that my family has been associated with (1977-1983), account for the learning of my family history via personal stories and sharing of memories during the discourse. The use of oral history interviews will also discover new perspectives and insights into my family history and the possible links to a broader national agenda.

The twin focus of this assignment would be to find out the pivotal impact of Mdm. Ng Yew Hung, my late maternal grandmother, as being the influencer in our family history/heritage and Chinatown as the place of residence to nurture self-identity for my family relatives. Life story and family history – the two approaches to the use of oral history methodology will be applied to tease out the possibilities of my family history relating to certain parts of nation building and community history. Before carrying out the oral interviews, an interview guide that would help to facilitate the study of this connection would be conceptualized (see Appendix A). 20 interview questions have been designed based on three criteria: ‘On Memories and Reflections of Chinatown’, ‘On Our Family History and Heritage’ (in view of national progress & development) and ‘On the role of my grandmother to our family history’. Three oral history interviews will be carried out with my two aunts namely Mdm. Yip Choy Kuen (54 years old; second eldest) and Mdm. Yip Chui Har (51
years old; youngest) as well as my mother, Mdm. Yip Kwai Sim (55 years old; eldest) to capture their memories, testimonies, stories, experiences and reminiscences of Chinatown and their family recounts to further lend light to my family history. The eldest son of Mdm. Ng, Mr. Yip Seng Chow, was not available for the interview as he was away for vacation.

Photo 1: My late grandmother Mdm. Ng Yew Hung and my brother, Alex Yew.

The oral history interviews have been duly conducted on 3rd and 4th of November respectively and short notes on the transcript have been provided for reference (see Appendix B-D). The oral interview monitoring log chart has been updated and illustrated below. Further follow-ups and administrative duties can be performed as listed in the chart:

Table 1: Monitoring Log Chart (as of 14 November 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name of Interviewee</th>
<th>Recording (Time Taken)</th>
<th>Administrative / Other Duties</th>
<th>Follow-Up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/11</td>
<td>Mdm. Yip Chui Har</td>
<td>1:14:47</td>
<td>1. Preliminary Sessions (some simple questions via tele-conversation)</td>
<td>1. Update of the family tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Use of interview guide (probing &amp; leading questions)</td>
<td>2. Finding out the connection between family history and national policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Listen to interview clips</td>
<td>3. Finding memory aids or photos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Seek refinement of the interview clips</td>
<td>4. Highlight inappropriate remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/11</td>
<td>Mdm. Yip Kwai Sim</td>
<td>0:50:51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To ensure holistic analysis and understanding of these oral interviews and its relation to the application of these three inter-connected concepts of – history, heritage and nostalgia; Yeoh, B. and Kong L. (1999) ‘The notion of place in the construction of history, nostalgia and heritage’ in Kwok, K.W. et. al. (1999). Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore will be selected as the anchor article to provide key academic concepts or highlights to make sense of the memories and reflections contributed by the interviewees.

As our trails of personal and social histories open up for discussion, these personal recounts also show the interlocking relationship between place and time as it ‘is not only about the passage of time, but also being “in”, moving “through” and experiencing changing places’ (Yeoh & Kong, 1999, p.135). The residents of a particular place become proactive in engaging and identifying meanings of the place and it is not uncommon for individuals and selected communities to imbue memories and reflections that were of significance to their sense of existence. Therefore, ‘reflections on the sense of place is an integral element in the conceptions of history, nostalgia and heritage’ and the mental construction of the place ‘is also intimately drawn into individual interpretations, social constructions and the political uses of time and the temporal sense’ (Yeoh & Kong, 1999, p.146). Although ordinary people like us would not have the power to define places in the same manner as what the authorities are capable of doing, we can provide new updates as each generation will highlight certain facets and thus ‘family history may also be rewritten through the rewriting of places (Yeoh & Kong, 1999, p.136).
There are also some key highlights in this article that would help set the framework for this assignment (Yeoh & Kong, 1999):

- **On places and national histories:** ‘places also become identified with national histories because they feature in an integral manner in events and episodes of collective proportions’ (p.136)

- **On memories and national identity:** a nation must have a memory to give it a sense of cohesion, continuity and identity. The longer the past, the greater the awareness of a nation’s identity…a sense of a common history is what provides the links to hold together a people who came from the four corners of the earth’ (p. 141)

- **On nostalgia and nation building:** ‘…whilst nostalgia is in one sense critique of the present, it may also be reshaped to serve the present needs of nation building and national cohesion.’ (p. 142).

- **On nation building and heritage:** ‘In Singapore, from the state’s perspective, heritage has important social, economic and political purposes… it serves to bind Singaporeans in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural state together, and also to sell Singapore abroad as an exotic tourist destination – the state to objectify and commoditized heritage’ (p.144)

The oral interviews carried out with my aunties will be infused with new meanings as we also attempt to make connections to what they really think on the socio-political and cultural changes of the city-state and to ‘reflect on how the cycles of everyday life were changing in response to their vision of the Singapore they believed they were shaping’ (Chew, 2005, p.15). The challenge of this assignment is to align these objectives with the ‘social memories’ of my aunties on what they had experienced in Chinatown and working out the intricate details of the past linking to my family history and heritage.

In a nutshell, this quote sums up the rationale of this assignment on oral history: ‘our purpose here is to understand and explain ‘the lived experience’. We seek to understand our subjects (interviewees/informants) as human beings, and what they felt, they experienced at various junctures of their lives. We ask a great number of questions, and listen to what they understand and not only what they did, but what cultural values were embodied in their behavior, why they find certain roles and decisions more psychologically gratifying than others; what were their personal and culturally impaired values and expectations which motivated them. The emphasis should be on ‘lived experience’ and must be seen in terms of self-portrait or self-presentation’ (Chew, 2005, p.34).
The Significance of Chinatown in Singapore

Chinatown has its significance in both the hearts and minds of Singaporeans. In the light of the public outcry on STB’s new efforts to revamp Chinatown in the late 1990s, the then former Minister for Information and the Arts (MITA), BG George Yeo, noted that ‘Chinese Singaporeans regarded Chinatown as special, as many of them could trace part of their ancestry to the area…in fact, if Singaporeans had shown no interest in the way Chinatown was being re-developed, then we should worry because it would then mean that we are just a hotel for Singaporeans…it would mean that Singaporeans are rootless citizens with no sense of where they come from and who they are” (The Straits Times, 1999). It is precisely so that Chinatown is in the ‘personal memories and in their family histories’ that impacted the locals to identify strongly with Chinatown and to have a sense of ownership in it (Kwok, Wee & Chia, 2000, p.3).

Resettlement and relocation of its former residents had diluted the social and cultural fabric of Chinatown where ‘Chinatown is no longer bustling with people’ and commercial forces had caused the place to lose its ‘soul’ and ‘heritage’ (Kwok, Wee & Chia, 2000, p.27). Newspaper reports at that point of time also showed feedback from the members of the public that “even if STB has spent efforts in tourism planning for Chinatown, too many artificial landmarks and projects might go against the authenticity of Chinatown…” (LHZB, 1998) and “…what we want is a real Chinatown…” (Kwok, Wee & Chia, 2000, p.21). Even the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) had commented that STB plans in the creation of ‘themed streets’ were rather ‘forced concepts’ on what Chinatown is not in the eyes of Singaporeans.

Similar remarks were also made by my auntie, Mdm. Yip Chui Har on commercial Chinatown:

“...the real Chinatown can only live in my or our memories…I went back occasionally to take a look at the former residence is just to savor the past and to recall those reminiscences of my memories. Is it good to sacrifice the old Chinatown for the new? In the name of progress? I guess generally is good intention as Singapore needs to survive in the world and indeed, the environment is much cleaner now…but of course on a personal level, it will be hard to hide my loss and emotions for this place.”

Additional comments were made by my auntie, Mdm. Yip Choy Kuen on the new Chinatown being less friendly:

“...Chinatown is a place I remembered as a secondary school student and it is a place where it became part of me…I spent more than 20 over years in Chinatown and there would be some reminiscence of the place. That was life over at Chinatown, Temple Street. It was always buzzing with activities with the hawkers and people. If you want me to compare the old and the new Chinatown, I would say that the old Chinatown has more humane feelings for its people, more home feel than the present where it seems colder and ‘less friendly’.”
In the Committee on Heritage Report (1988), it raised the paradox of maintaining the socio-political function of Chinatown as a heritage landmark for Singaporeans and to constantly markets it as a tourism product for overseas visitors. On one end, ‘the conservation of buildings, structures and other districts which provide the signposts from the past to the present is critical to the psyche of a nation’ (The Committee of Heritage Report, 1988, p.46) while the authorities are aggressively showcasing Chinatown ‘as a distinctively Chinese cultural area’ where ‘the state’s attempt to bolster the tourist industry by selling Singapore as ‘New Asia’, a city of many colors, contrasts and cuisines’ (Chang and Yeoh, 1999, p.113). These new makeovers and facelifts of Chinatown ‘somehow looks
weird and not authentic’ and seemingly in existence as beautified objects just please the tourists’ eyes. Teo (2004) argues that these cosmetic changes ‘betrays the individual and collective memories of those who have grown up with the place’ (p.116). One Singaporean lamented this notion of loss in one of the articles: “We are caught in a frenzy to develop land, property, festivals and nightlife for the tourist and investor. I beg those in charge to have mercy on us common people. When I am old and dull, let me have something to look at to tell me that I once belonged here” (The Straits Times, 16 March 1999).

It is apparent that Chinatown has its historical value to Singaporeans which its past serves as a reminder to future generations of our heritage (socio-cultural roots) and national identity. According to Yeoh & Kong (1995), ‘places can retain a position of significance for individuals because they are repositories of personalized memories and centers of everyday routines’ and these ‘constructed places are not confined to the here and now but include places of past experiences (memory), those which reside in the imagination’ (p. 13). Inevitably, a place would have its own identity and ‘that people identify with a place, feel a sense of belonging and attachment to it; where this identity that develops in relation to a place is also rooted in the historicity of the built environment’ (p.21). It is hence easy to understand why Singaporeans are emotionally attached to Chinatown in view of its historical significance in the course of nation building and national education. However such reminiscence of the past can also be manipulated and inflicted by the state.

‘The state has the power to define what constitutes heritage and what elements of the past are worth conserving. The state, in fact, uses this power to push its larger agenda…in building a national identity by reminding Singaporeans of their roots as concretized…’ (p.17). In other words, these places, such as Chinatown, is used as an anchor to fabricate ‘a sense of history’ for its people. It is no wonder Chase and Shaw (1989) highlighted that ‘nostalgia is most likely to surface when society has been confirmed with such rapid change that people come face to face with reminders of the past and vastly conditions of the present all in the same lifetime...’ (p.17-18). The drastic changes and new commercial implementations in Chinatown such as ‘Food Streets’ and ‘Chinatown Heritage Centre’ (with cold ‘plastic versions’ of packaged Chinatown history) would set forth a new interpretation of what Chinatown history is all about and ushering many peoples’ collective memories into nostalgia in their years of living in Singapore.
Photo 5: Chinatown’s ‘Food Street’ (along Smith Street).

Photo 6: Chinatown Heritage Centre was officially opened in July 2002.
Memories and Reflections of Temple Street (登婆街)

Photo 7(a)-(b): (From left): First section of Temple Street; followed by second section of the street.

Photo 8: Former residence at Temple Street, Chinatown, 54A. (Source: 许永顺著《寻访牛车水》)

Temple Street got its name after a Chinese temple *Da Bo Gong* (大伯公庙) built in 1895. Previously, it was officially known as Almeida Street as the land belonged to *Joaquim Almeida*, son of *Jose Almeida*. He worked as a doctor on a Portuguese ship and his ship came to Singapore in 1819. He loved the island and was back six years later to settle in Almeida Street, setting up a clinic and a
trading firm selling Portuguese and Chinese goods (NIE, 2007). This street housed both Cantonese and the Teochews.

*Lai Choon Yuen*, a famous Chinese Opera theater was also located at Temple Street and it soon became a reference point in the heart of Chinatown where people tended to locate Temple Street as ‘Front of Theatre Street’, Trengganu Street as ‘Side of Theatre Street’, Smith Street as ‘Back of Theatre Street’ (Kwok, Wee & Chia, 2000, p.23). Pagoda, Mosque and Trengganu Street formed the nucleus of Chinatown. *Lai Choon Yuen* was built during the latter half of the 19th Century and became an important icon to the Cantonese community with the physical setting of a Chinese teahouse. The building was destroyed by the Japanese bombing in 1942. In 1998, the National Arts Council (NAC) commissioned and relocated ten arts & cultural groups in Chinatown shophouses along Temple Street, Smith Street and Trengganu Street (Danam & Mesenas, 2002). Temple Street was also reputed for its pottery wares and tin works in the past (Geraldene, 1998).

On reflections of Temple Street in the good old days, all three interviewees have their fair share of fond memories where Mdm. Yip Chui Har recalled the days of the street night market in the 70's and Chinese New Year preparations:

“...I only recalled more vividly what happened in the 1970s where street night market became a norm – recalled roasted pork rice stall, *dim sum* stall, music records stall and poultry stall (where the chickens were prepared)...the wet market was located along the Trengganu Street and Chinatown was always a busy place during the Chinese New
Year and there were many goodies. In the 70s, Temple Street was mainly a marketplace that sold fish and dry grocery products and the street night market would be at Trengganu Street…during my teenage or schooling days, I remembered how we spent time to do spring cleaning especially during the New Year’s Eve where we would also decorate the place, preparing glasses and soft drinks. Getting ang pows was one of my favorites. During the first day in Chinese New Year, we would have sumptuous CNY feast – much fish and other poultry meat like duck and chicken.”

On reminiscence of the political events that happened along Temple Street in the early 1960s, Mdm. Yip Choy Kuen told her personal account on these incidents:

“…I remembered in one of the political riots that happened outside Temple Street in the 1960s. There were demonstrations put in by the Barisan Socialis and the police came. Some of its members or street demonstrators came up the stairway and knocked on our doors to ‘let them in’ as ‘they don’t want to be caught by the police’. These people were students and still schooling, begging us frantically to let them in. Of course, we did not do so. They are so called the communists and we didn’t want to get into trouble…I also remembered the Hock Lee bus riots and the mandatory curfews in the 1960s just before independence.”

On the simple pleasures of life along Temple Street, Mdm. Yip Kwai Sim provided her pleasurable interactions with the street vendors and life at home:

“…especially when it rained…we would fold paper boats and played in the rain. Before 1965, I also enjoyed chatting and looking at the wares brought about by the sellers who would come right to our doorsteps. Examples would be the homemade wine seller for praying purpose and we usually bought a bottle from him. I also recalled the Kajung Putey man where he sold cones of peanuts. I usually won in one of those games he offered and got a free cone of peanuts. I would bath early before I did my homework or after I had done with my housework because I was always scolded by the samui women Sister Kian to bath before she came back from her work. She would lament that the tap water will run much slowly if both bathing cubicles were used at the same time. So I usually bath early to avoid the scolding…”

Kong, Yeoh & Teo (1996) explored the dynamics on how the elderly who are currently living or those who have stayed in Chinatown relate to their places of residence. It was discovered that it was influenced much by ‘sociogenic aging – social stereotyping and social redundancy – as by biological aging – deterioration and the loss of physical capabilities’ (p. 534). To achieve a sense of security, these elderly people ‘reconstruct’ their loss of place through reminiscence. These recollections of the past are closely linked up to their sense of self-esteem, identity and rootedness. Chua (1995) also noted that such ‘nostalgia’ – by viewing the past in a favorable light, celebrating and even glorifying past events related to the place showed efforts to capture ‘a lost past’. In Singapore, the ‘harking back to the past during the 1980s and 1990s [by Singaporeans] were much attributed to the critiques
and resistance to the relentless drive towards economic development, frenetic pace of life, high stress level, new found materialism and consequent ‘industrialization of everyday life’ (p.109).

All the three interviewees were emotional when they mentioned Chinatown and the role of Mdm. Ng Yew Hung, their mother, provided a sense of identity for them and their families:

“There were many memories with regards to Chinatown, I grew up there and got married in 1976. There were a lot of familiarity and affinity to the place. I even went back Chinatown for dinner in 1981-82, I remembered before I relocated to West Coast to stay with my second sister, Mdm Yip Choy Kuen then. In 1983, I shifted to Jurong East for a short stay with my eldest sister before getting my own flat in Jurong West shortly afterwards…I do agree with you that there were much change in Chinatown. I felt a sense of loss, loss of place and loss of my own reflections as well…it is hard to find back those past feelings and touch of the place and how I felt about it…our old residence in Chinatown Temple Street 54A is my old home, where I stayed since I was a child and those feelings…could not be described at this point of time…I do went back to take a look at the place…the loss of what I could not get back (both the old Chinatown and the past)…this loss was something that bothers me and making me feel somehow a sense of ‘lostlessness’ and sad…when I look at the shophouse 54A now, what I saw from my eyes were the old appearance and the outlook of the shophouse, not in the present…a lot of things went through my mind when I was there…” --- (Mdm. Yip Chui Har)

“My mother is certainly a good hearted woman and she is kind in her ways. She was always courteous to others and she sacrificed to be a role model and took care of the children and provided them with an education. When people needed her help, my mother would try her best to lend money to her friends in need. She was a good friend and a good mother…even though there were times when the fish stall business was not running smoothly and there were lack of money, she would never tell us but give us her best…even when she battled her sickness from 1995 to 1998, she was strong in her will to fight it to the end…after looking back these years, my greatest regret was she never had a good life and to enjoy the blessings of her children and grandchildren…often I asked myself…if she could bear all these, why couldn’t me as a daughter and a mother to go through the challenges in life for my children? I often wondered how she could run her errands and marketing in Chinatown and tugged all the red plastic bags full of vegetables and fishes back home…it must be heavy and she did it. If she could do it, why couldn’t I? Nowadays, I also woke up early in the morning to prepare breakfast and lunch boxes for my children. I don’t find it tough as long as I remembered how my mother had done it. She was an inspiration and a source of strength for me…even after many years when she was no longer around for us…” --- (Mdm Yip Choy Kuen)

“Chinatown was a famous place but I still preferred the ‘old’ Chinatown…the new Chinatown does not represent what was Temple Street in the past anymore…the busyness, taste and old charm of Chinatown was not there anymore…you have to live everyday to the fullest…so there will be no regrets. My mother had taught me integrity and honesty, and I am happy that she is my mother. Chinatown in the past had this reputation of children growing up to be wayward kids or saam seng…but I failed to agree on this as we are those that grew out of Chinatown and we are fine, I thank God to have these wonderful parents and my mother will always have a special place in my heart…” --- (Mdm Yip Kwai Sim)
Concluding Remarks

In the New Economy where things happen at breakneck speeds, forging a sense of ‘community and national identity is an increasingly challenging task in the face of the increased mobility of people’ (Teo, 2004, p.217). The re-engineering of our heritage sites and landscapes should be carefully managed as it quietly weaves in our family histories and heritage together with our nationhood and agenda. Through this exercise and a series of oral history interviews, I begin to appreciate part of my own family history & heritage and discovering a different perspective of what existence and family really means to them as their stories unfold. It was therapeutic and an emotional release for them to clear certain mental blocks on the ‘love-hate’ relationship between progress and past memories; also seeing the broader framework of national development in impacting ordinary Singaporean families like ours. In the midst of rapid change where there is ‘almost complete disappearance of the ‘natural’ and the ‘old’ (p.213), the future generations have to be resilient and consistently reconstruct the meanings in these changing landscapes as these underlying concerns and policies are affecting our family heritage and history in a big way.

Photo 10(a)-(b): My cousins – from children to young adults. Future generations should appreciate and understand how the broader framework of national development is impacting ordinary families.
Appendix A

Interview Guide for Oral History

On Memories and Reflections of Chinatown
1. What are your favourite memories of Chinatown when you were young?
2. Did you miss any food, people, or any form of activities during those times? Why so?
3. What does Chinatown mean to you then? What does Chinatown mean to you now?
4. In your opinion, do you think there is a difference between the ‘old’ Chinatown and the ‘new’ Chinatown? Why?
5. Do you think the change in Chinatown is due to our progress as a country over the years? Do you think these changes are good?
6. Do you think Singaporeans have some shared memories of Chinatown?

On Our Family History and Heritage (in view of national progress & development)
7. What were some of the most unforgettable moments in your family?
8. Can you recall some of those memorable times you had with your family members?
9. Are these family activities and events important? What did you learn from these experiences after thinking about it now?
10. Do you like your family? Are there any memorable in the family you would like to share?
11. Did Chinatown change you and your family?
12. Do you regard Chinatown as part of your identity? Why?

On the role of my grandmother on our family history
13. What is the role of my grandmother in the family? What do you think?
14. Do you think your mother is doing a good job? Why and why not?
15. Would you like to share what you think about my grandmother from your impression of her?
16. Did she play an important role in the family? How and why so?
17. Can you recall any memorable incidents that she had done and impacted you?
18. After many years now, did you miss her? Why? What would you say to her if she is still around?
19. How did grandmother change your life?
20. Do you have any comments or things to say on: Chinatown (place of residence) or grandmother (family member) that you would like to share?

*Note: Questions are simplified during the interview to provide flexibility, understanding and comfort to elicit possible responses from the interviewees. Some questions were also translated (in Cantonese and Mandarin) during the course of the interview to explore relevant issues or content in the light of the subject matter discussed.
Appendix B

Transcript (Short notes on Oral History Interview)
3 November 2007, 530p.m. – 645p.m.
Mdm Yip Chui Har (51 years old)

-born in the 1950s, Yangzheng primary school (养正小学)
-memorable to write calligraphy
-drenched in the rain, playing ‘water boats’ during the monsoon season
-only recalled more vividly what happened in the 1970s where street night market became a norm –
recalled roasted pork rice stall, dim sum stall, music records stall and poultry stall (where the chickens
were prepared)
-the wet market was located along the Trengganu Street
-Chinatown was always a busy place during the Chinese New Year and there were many goodies;
still have fire crackers during the late 1960s
-in the 70s, Temple Street was mainly a marketplace that sold fish and dry grocery products and the
street night market would be at Trengganu Street
-grandfather would start his business at 7a.m. and would take a short afternoon break. He would be
back by 5p.m.
-grandfather would collect the fish in Jurong early in the morning like 3-4a.m.
-during my teenage or schooling days, I remembered how we spent time to do spring cleaning
especially during the New Year’s Eve where we would also decorate the place, preparing glasses and
soft drinks. Getting ang pows was one of my favorites
-during the first day in Chinese New Year, we would have sumptuous CNY feast – much fish and
other poultry meat like duck and chicken
-we would visit our aunties and grandmother (梁阿友) who were staying in Katong (whom sometimes
also stayed with us); my impressions of them were vague as I was pretty young then. Yes, my
grandmother knew a bit of Chinese characters and could read Chinese newspapers then. She spoke
Cantonese only
-during my childhood days, we often visited them at Katong but seldom after she passed away when I
was a teenager
-I could not remember the name of my great grandmother though
-those were the past...I remembered all three storeys of the shophouse were rented out...we left
Chinatown when one of the walls of the adjacent shophouse collapsed in 1984 and we had to
move....hmmm....it could be 1983 when I remembered my eldest sister (Mdm. Yip Kwai Sim)
relocated from Outram Park to Jurong East. That was like a timely move when the URA was also
requesting us to sell the shophouse back to the government for conservation and new lease. As far
as I could remember, the shophouse was still rented out till 1981. Our grandmother, Ng Yew Hung,
got her own flat at Teban Gardens together with Uncle Seng (Yip Seng Chow) in 1985, I think
-there were many memories with regards to Chinatown, I grew up there and got married in 1976.
There were a lot of familiarity and affinity to the place. I even went back Chinatown for dinner in 1981-
82, I remembered before I relocated to West Coast to stay with my second sister, Mdm Yip Choy
Kuen then. In 1983, I shifted to Jurong East for a short stay with my eldest sister before getting my
own flat in Jurong West shortly afterwards. I also had my first child, Edward in 1983
-yes, I do agree with you that there were much change in Chinatown. I felt a sense of loss, loss of
place and loss of my own reflections as well...it is hard to find back those past feelings and touch of
the place and how I felt about it...our old residence in Chinatown Temple Street 54A is my old home,
where I stayed since I was a child and those feelings...could not be described at this point of time
-I do went back to take a look at the place...the loss of what I could not get back (both the old
Chinatown and the past)...this loss was something that bothers me and making me feel somehow a
sense of ‘lostlessness’ and sad...when I look at the shophouse 54A now, what I saw from my eyes
were the old appearance and the outlook of the shophouse, not in the present...a lot of things went
through my mind when I was there
-the real Chinatown can only live in my or our memories...I went back occasionally to take a look at
the former residence is just to savor the past and to recall those reminiscences of my memories
-is it good to sacrifice the old Ch inatown for the new? In the name of progress? I guess generally is
good intention as Singapore needs to survive in the world and indeed, the environment is much
cleaner now…but of course on a personal level, it will be hard to hide my loss and emotions for this
place

-my family ties were quite normal, just the same as any normal families. I vividly recalled how my
father (Yip Song Wah) used the abacus and how we had to keep quiet during dinner time. Table
manners were important and my father was serious about it. He loved the cooking and dishes
prepared by my mother (Mdm. Ng Yew Hung). Personally, I loved the Cantonese soup and steam fish.
In those days, families would have their dinner and meals together everyday.
-sometimes, if my father was out drinking, he would bring supper back for us. He would read
Nanyang Siang Pau and Singtao Daily, both Chinese newspapers in the afternoon. He worked more
than 10 hours for his fish stall business and he got this assistance called Ah Liew who would help him
to tidy up the stall

-yess. I remembered my father had a stroke in 1980. I am not exactly sure what the main reason is or
trigger to the stroke. What I was told then was his alcoholism and much drinking after work. His
friends and acquaintances in Chinatown knew about this and somebody approached us to get the fish
stall rented out

-actually, my mother also had her own fish stall but shortly, she did not continue her business…she
was very pretty and a strong woman in her 30s during the 1960s…I knew my mother did not have
much chance to study and she would ask me sometimes to read her the news of the day in the
Chinese papers. We also had Rediffusion in those days and we just subscribed and paid a small fee,
about few dollars. We had a black and white TV in the late 1960s

-my mother actually gave us a lot of freedom during our growing up years but my father was much
stricter. There was freedom to go out…my impression of my mother was much deeper especially
when I got married. She would call from Teban Gardens, asking me how's my life, having small
conversations and bringing some fish and vegetables from Chinatown for us. She is a very kind-
hearted woman, has good character and values. During the Chinese New Year those years when we
were all married, she still prepared so many dishes for us. I was most touched when she took care of
my children and she was always in action…she was always a role model by doing it and having so
much energy to handle the daily chores in life...

during this period (from 1980 to 1990), 10 years, she took care of my father and at the same time to
run so many errands everyday…this independence showed her strong side
-cancer took her life away in 1998. She first knew she had breast cancer in 1995 but she was quite
positive about it… and it is going to be 10 year anniversary next year (2008)...I still recall her as a
friendly woman and it gave me a chance to learn her ways to be more open-minded and not always
put things to heart. I missed her…sometimes when we (our sisters) meet up nowadays, we often
talked about her also in our conversations, there would be some brief mentions...

-yes, she is a very capable woman to handle our family affairs and plays a role, to give me values as
a Cantonese Singaporean…yes Cantonese Singaporean as I see myself as more Cantonese speaking
than Chinese Singaporean. I first learned Cantonese at home than followed by Mandarin when I went
to primary school

-if I have a chance to tell her one thing now, I will say I love her very very much…for I feel regret not
telling her so when she was alive and she will always be my mother and she will live in my heart, always
Appendix C

Transcript (Short notes on Oral History Interview)
3 November 2007, 9 p.m. – 1040 p.m.
Mdm Yip Choy Kuen (54 years old)

-I studied in Parkroad Primary School in 1960 as primary one...it was a all English school and I still remembered crying devastatingly when we saw an 'ang moh’ teacher for the first time in our lives...we cried badly even though the British teacher was very nice to us...he was our form teacher and we learned some simple English from him...we also learned Malay Language...we learned more when we were Primary 3 and 4
-it was not stressful those days and we were happy studying there...we were happy as we feel like elites speaking and learning English then...it was a more 'direct' language and it was fashion to speak English in Singapore...I could remember how we copied words and sentences from the blackboard and we also learned many subjects. I spoke Cantonese at home
-there were no TV then and we played mahsek mahsek when we finished our homework and relaxed.

When I was Primary 3 & 4, I already helped out at my father's fish stall in the morning. Both my father and mother would go together to the Teochew market to get the fish supplies then later getting them in Jurong...my mother also had a fish stall at Sago Street or Lane...couldn’t remember but I did follow them to the fish market. The highest bidder will get the best fish. My father had to be smart to get the best price
-I recalled carrying baskets of fishes and my father sold bigger fishes like garoupa and big prawns whilst my mother sold the smaller ones. Yes, it was good business and that was why we could go to school and get dressed up all the time
-there were many such happy moments. The first one was watching English movies at the old Capitol. We would go together as a family, all dressed up, taking a taxi there. We spent a dollar a ticket and we had supper at the Padang – the Satay Club. These activities were frequent and I wondered how my father knew all this. Perhaps he had read the Chinese newspapers and he knew when there were special shows and good ones. I remembered watching English movies like Ben Hur and stories on Rome. After supper, we would go back home around 11 plus. That was quite late then. If we would want to watch these movies, we could go to Great World City and watched it again at half price, that is to say, 50 cents; it was certainly memorable as a child to me as not many of the families did that in Chinatown

-my father was picky about food and he would decide the menu of the day by buying back ingredients for my mother to cook for dinner. My mother was a good cook and he liked the food done up by her. My favourite is the fish head
-how did my father marry my mother? I did not know and also did not find out from them then. I guessed it was not through match making...when I was in my teenage years, my mother’s fish stall business was not good so we decided to close that stall. My father was still in the business
-anything memorable about Chinatown? Yes, indeed. I remembered in one of the political riots that happened outside Temple Street in the 1960s. There were demonstrations put in by the Barisan Socialis and the police came. Some of its members or street demonstrators came up the stairway and knocked on our doors to 'let them in' as 'they don't want to be caught by the police’. These people were students and still schooling, begging us frantically to let them in. Of course, we did not do so. They are called the communists and we didn’t want to get into trouble...

-I also remembered the Hock Lee bus riots and the mandatory curfews in the 1960s just before independence

-My great grandmother (黄阿银) was 80 when I was in secondary 3 and our grandmother (梁阿友) was the landlord lady that would take monthly rents from the coolies and mah jies (samsui women) whom she had rented out the compartmentalized rooms in the shophouse. We stayed on the second floor together with one of the samsui woman called sister Ah Jian. My grandmother was richer than my great grandmother and she was a nice lady. She spoke Cantonese. Some of her family brothers (10 of them, including herself) were involved in some sidelines such as horse bookies and gambling dens.

-Chinatown is a place I remembered as a secondary school student and it is a place where it became part of me. I got married and shifted to West Coast in 1978-1979. I spent more than 20 over years in Chinatown and there would be some reminiscence of the place. That was life over at Chinatown,
Temple Street. It was always buzzing with activities with the hawkers and people. If you want me to compare the old and the new Chinatown, I would say that the old Chinatown has more humane feelings for its people, more home feel than the present where it seems colder and 'less friendly'

-after we relocated to Teban Gardens, we rented out the fish stall in 1983 onwards to Ah Lum and in the 1980s, URA redeveloped the area, this was issued by the Government to conserve Chinatown

-regarding my mother, although she was traditional, she took care of us a lot and there were no restrictions and we were free. I remembered secondary school days when we attended birthday parties or to catch a show in the evening, my mother would help us to sneak out of the house when my father fell asleep. Even if he woke up before we were back, my mother would always have good reasons to offer. Usually we would be smart enough not to be caught by my father as we knew when he would sleep and wake up to prepare for the next day

-my mother is certainly a good hearted woman and she is kind in her ways. She was always courteous to others and she sacrificed to be a role model and took care of the children and provided them with an education. When people needed her help, my mother would try her best to lend money to her friends in need. She was a good friend and a good mother…even though there were times when the fish stall business was not running smoothly and there were lack of money, she would never tell us but give us her best…even when she battled her sickness from 1995 to 1998, she was strong in her will to fight it to the end…she died at the age of 68

-after looking back these years, my greatest regret was she never had a good life and to enjoy the blessings of her children and grandchildren…she spent 10 years taking care of my father and not long after (5 years later), she was diagnosed with cancer…she should deserve a good break and enjoy herself…It was unfortunate that this happened…if she is still around, she would be in her seventies…

-my mother really left a deep impression on me…often I asked myself…if she could bear all these, why couldn’t me as a daughter and a mother to go through the challenges in life for my children? I often wondered how she could run her errands and marketing in Chinatown and tugged all the red plastic bags full of vegetables and fishes back home…it must be heavy and she did it. If she could do it, why couldn’t I? Nowadays, I also woke up early in the morning to prepare breakfast and lunch boxes for my children. I don’t find it tough as long as I remembered how my mother had done it. She was an inspiration and a source of strength for me…even after many years when she was no longer around for us

-if she is still here, I would hope she could have a better life and to travel around the world as she only went to Malacca in 1991 and that was her only trip overseas
-I studied in Parkroad Primary School besides People’s Park Complex…it was no longer around now. There was nothing much to do then except to listen to the Rediffusion and to walked across the streets to find my friends Miaojun and Annie who stayed a few shophouses away…I usually stayed at home to help up with the household chores and seldom went out of the house

-what I remembered about Chinatown was the curfew…I had to be back at home by 7p.m. everyday. It was pretty scary for me as it was quite chaotic out there

-there were also other good moments too, especially when it rained…we would fold paper boats and played in the rain. Before 1965, I also enjoyed chatting and looking at the wares brought about by the sellers who would come right to our doorsteps. Examples would be the homemade wine seller for praying purpose and we usually bought a bottle from him. I also recalled the Kajung Putey man where he sold cones of peanuts. I usually won in one of those games he offered and got a free cone of peanuts. I would bath early before I did my homework or after I had done with my housework because I was always scolded by the samui women Sister Kian to bath before she came back from her work. She would lament that the tap water will run much slowly if both bathing cubicles were used at the same time. So I usually bath early to avoid the scolding

-after my primary school days, I was initially posted to a Methodist school far away from Chinatown. I was lucky that Uncle Hwa, one of our friendly neighbors brought me to MOE, at the old Tanglin Road to request for a change in school. In the end, I was posted to Kim Seng Secondary School at Great World. I did not continue with my studies as I really wanted to start working. It was also pointless for girls to study so much at that time. I was already working part-time as waitress then and I would like to quickly start on a job. I had a very good friend then. Her name was Cheng Waikah. We were in the same secondary school and same class. She was an interesting character as her mother was in the coffin business and she would help to manage funeral business for her mother. Her family consisted of 6 girls (including herself) and 1 boy. She did not continue this business later ion her life. She did something else

-if you ask me, family life in Chinatown was simple for me. I also remembered movie outings with my family where I missed the fish curry at the Padang. We would take a taxi back home. I still fondly remembered my mother would always tailored clothes for us. The three sisters would always wear clothes in white with flowers on it. But when we were in secondary school, we seldom went out as a family. We went out with our own friends.

-I always thought that we were a happy family and there were some family values that we cherished. There were always enough to eat, like duck, chicken, satay…my mother was a good chef and her dishes were very nice to eat, especially the soup. I also loved the dish ginger with gailan (a type of vegetable). I recalled strict discipline and table manners. My father was very strict. We don’t talk when we were eating. I guessed the reason was also to be more hygienic! There were always fish and prawns on the table. there were also times when the fish stall assistant Ah Liew would come and cook for us lunch when both my father and mother were busy at the stalls. Ah Liew would could porridge for us or even beancurd with rice. Simple and nice

-I also recalled my father who liked to put on this brand of British perfume or cologne given by his friend. He would put it on even if he was going to the wet market for his business. I think he loved the smell

-yes, I was a rather quiet girl and I did most of the household chores in the family…but I also liked the street market in the night and would have a bowl of wanton noodles along Temple Street…I also remembered Hong Kong style porridge that were available in the 70s

-mooncake festival was also memorable for me where I could see beautiful lanterns in my primary and secondary school days…also Chinese New Year where we would go to Katong to visit our relatives….my grandmother had a lot of children at her house in Katong. In those days, Katong Shopping Centre was a favourite hangout for Singaporeans in the mid-1960s to 1970s

-Chinatown was a famous place but I still preferred the ‘old’ Chinatown…the new Chinatown does not represent what was Temple Street in the past anymore…there are small shops and restaurants over there now. The busyness, taste and old charm of Chinatown was not there anymore. It was rather quiet
now. Whenever I have time, I would pass by there to take a look at Temple Street, 54A. There were a lot of changes...

-My impression of my mother's character is that she was an open-minded lady and she understood we were all growing up then and we had our needs. So we enjoyed freedom when we were younger. She also felt that it was her duty to take care of us, to give us food and education and make sure we were well looked after. My mother was capable and hardworking even though she had to manage her stall at the same time.

-I even had tuition for my secondary school homework. One of her friends recommended a tutor and I had my 'O' level tuition together with the daughter. It lasted for a year. I left school in 1969 and my first job's salary was $110. I worked as a chambermaid in Mirama Hotel for 7 years before moving on to sales. When I got married in 1974 at the age of 22, we first rented a one-room flat at Outram Park. Later, we shifted to Jurong East after refusing previous HDB allocation to Woodlands and Yio Chu Kang. I still recalled how my marriage brought some financial windfall to my parents as I gave them a 4D number from my dream that occurred to me one night. My mother reaped $10,000 Sing dollars then. It was a big sum of money then. As a result, the wedding dinner was a grand occasion with 30 over tables and more than 300 guests turned up at the Da Tong Restaurant.

-I have many thanks for my mother, especially after all that had happened, I hoped she is here with me today. But I did realize life is short and ephemeral...we really can't predict what's going to happen tomorrow, you have to live everyday to the fullest...so there will be no regrets. My mother had taught me integrity and honesty, and I am happy that she is my mother.

-Chinatown in the past had this reputation of children growing up to be wayward kids or saam seng, or even grown adults going to jail...but I failed to agree on this as we are those that grew out of Chinatown and we are fine, I thank God to have these wonderful parents and my mother will always have a special place in my heart.
References


**Oral History Interviews**

Interviews by the writer:


*Acknowledgement:* Interview extracts used with special permission from the above interviewees.

**Oral History Sources**


**Photo Sources**

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