The Singapore Rickshaw Pullers: The Social Organization of a Coolie Occupation, 1880–1940

JIM WARREN

Following in the Footsteps of the Elders

This article integrates the history of the experience of rickshaw coolies into the larger history of Singapore in the period from 1880 to 1940. These were decisive years. They witnessed the extraordinary economic development of the vast potential for tin, rubber, oil palm, and tobacco in the Malay peninsula and on the east coast of Sumatra under colonial rule, and the evolution of Singapore as a “coolie town”, with a colonial administrative heart and an entrepôt port, with the birth of the rickshaw and a stream of emigrants from China who poured in faster and faster to pull it. This floodtide of singkeh (newcomers from China) came to Singapore with the hope of forming a foundation for a new and prosperous life. Expanding Singapore, especially at this stage of its growth from the third quarter of the nineteenth century, was often considered by the migrants as a place of hope and betterment. There were in Singapore tens of thousands of Cantonese, Hengwah, Hockchia, and Foochow sojourners who hoped to find a pipeline to prosperity since the second half of the nineteenth century, when dire poverty and overpopulation plagued Southeast China.

But by no means everyone who emigrated did so because of local conditions. Colonial enterprise in Southeast Asia also went far towards determining the number of singkeh who emigrated in any year. Peasants were lured away from Southeastern China by knowledge of the development and expansion of colonial capitalism in rural agricultural enterprises, and in the public works, trade, and finance sectors of the port cities, and adjusted to and were utilised in the colonial process. Sure of better-paid employment, singkeh joined other Chinese migrants to mine tin in Perak, to open up the tobacco plantations of neighbouring North Sumatra, to pioneer rubber-smallholding in Sarawak, and too, to pull rickshaws in Singapore, where life was said to be better.¹

Potential singkeh, poor, leaving their villages to women's care, came in their thousands on foot, by cart, or by river sampan to a seaport where a passage to the Nanyang was sought. Huge profits were to be made in the traffic of importing coolies, commonly referred to as the “pig business”. In the control and regulation of this immigration the secret societies were heavily involved.² Few Chinese peasants could afford to pay their own passage. Recruitment agents of each major society in Singapore or indepen-

dent labour brokers competed to offer the peasant or labourer the starting sum while they waited to sail. The total cost of a credit-ticket was about 33–38 dollars; the recruited indebted immigrant usually took three years to repay the price of the assisted passage after it was transferred from the broker to a Singapore employer such as a rickshaw owner. At the same time, other poor men were more fortunate as they came from families or sending villages where men of enterprise and wealth were willing to back their crossing.

Between 1881 and 1913, when colonial government reform was sought for labour contracts, 37,000 to nearly 103,000 men a year, mostly under indenture, sailed from Hong Kong to Singapore. No other ports, including Swatow and Amoy, ever exceeded 70,000 a year. Hong Kong was the starting point of the scheduled sailings of the passenger steamers and sailing vessels of firms like Syme Muir and Co. and Jardine and Matheson and Co., and the principal port of call for competing German, Danish, and Dutch sailing lines. But there were also junks going to the Nanyang, from harbours small and large all along the China coast.

Singkehs were not always well cared for on the voyage down. Photographs show how small some of these ships were that made regular passages in the South China Sea with emigrants. Passengers were herded like cattle across a sea without the solace of kinship, in crowded, squalid, and unsanitary living spaces onboard ship. Besides the usually appalling shipboard conditions there was the added terror of the unfamiliar — frequently being storm battered on voyages of several weeks duration.

On arrival in Singapore the new labourer was usually disposed of by secret society recruiters to an employer who spoke his own language. Language was one of the most important factors in establishing employment and a sense of place. Communication was the necessary first step towards the kind of community the newcomer had known in China; Hokkien mixed with Hokkien, Teochiu hired Teochiu. Cantonese singkehs followed Cantonese towkays and so forth. Recruitment conducted along speech-dialect lines meant that the stream of newly arrived immigrants had little to say about choice of occupation. If a Hengwah towkay happened to be a rickshaw owner then ipso facto the Hengwah singkeh became a rickshaw puller.

The absence of the family, a pivotal force in traditional Chinese society, was the other important factor in the experience of greenhorns as they institutionalised their lives in Singapore. The major secret societies, the Ghee Hin, Ghee Hok, and Hai San, which were often based on residential and occupational principles, not only found a place for newly arrived labour in the economic system, they also bridged the gulf between the

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4I have rounded the figures off. The exact number of Chinese immigrants leaving Hong Kong for Singapore are 37,341 in 1881 and 102,997 in 1913. See Straits Settlement Government Gazette, 1881, Table B, p. 323, and Straits Settlement Annual Report (SSAR), Chinese Protectorate, 1913, Table A, p. 52.

5Many emigrants still relied on the traditional mode of emigration from South China to the Nanyang during the transition period from sailing junks to steam navigation at the end of the nineteenth century. The bows of the Amoy junks were painted green, while those from Swatow were varnished red. Hence, the emigrant ships were popularly called the Green junks and the Red junks. Ta Chen, *Emigrant Communities in South China. A Study of Overseas Migration and its Influence on Standards of Living and Social Change* (New York: Secretariat, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1940), p. 261.


8The language of Freedman, ibid., p. 72.
Singapore Rickshaw Pullers

traditional territorial and kinship systems that these men left behind in China and the preponderantly all male society they were forced to fashion in its place.

The voluntary associations were organised on the principle of a common surname, a fictive kinship, dialect group, or area of origin, from places near and far, neighbouring village to distant county or prefecture. Linguistic differences and alignments and recruitment on the basis of surname by clan associations fostered mock kinship, claimed loyalties, and established a framework of social and cultural life — a place of residence, a job, reliance on men of wealth and power — for singkeh from Fukien and Kwangtung. It was the dialect and surname association’s resources — traditional and new — which brought some semblance of strength and mutual aid to the society. In a non-kin environment, without family or lineage support, the immigrant associations were a lynchpin.

The associations created ritual and secular solidarity among members by providing “kinsmen”, “descendants” and “mourners” for festivities, ancestor worship, and funerals. Traditional anniversaries were ritually celebrated with dinners and visits, financial assistance was ensured to those in need, disputes arbitrated, and bereavement and death looked after. Clan associations were also used to tackle a broad range of other problems. The newly arrived member from China who faced problems of housing and work injustices quite correctly sought clan association help. The voluntary associations, however, against the background of several generations of immigration by China-born men deprived of family and marriage, were not a sovereign remedy. Yet, the bonds of artificial kinship did provide a measure of stability in an urban overseas world mainly without kin, but, lacking perduring generational bonds could never provide an adequate substitute for the needs of the great mass of immigrants.

The city was changing in the 1880s, as Chinatown was fast on its way to having a population of several hundred thousand bachelor workers and destined to be called “bullock cart water” in dialect — a filthy booming coolie town. The character of its transport and the pattern of traffic also began to change. Motor cars and buses did not exist yet, and carriages drawn by high stepping Java ponies and horses filled the streets. Most people walked. In 1880, a large consignment of Japanese manufactured rickshaws — “man-powered carriages” — made an impact on the then dominant mode of transport, horse carriage, and quickly became the popular means of transportation. Within the short space of five years, thousands of rickshaws were already engaged day and night negotiating the narrow back lanes of Chinatown with passengers, or carrying goods over short distances around the wholesale markets.

The Hengwah and Hockchia rickshaw pullers knew what they wanted. To begin with, facing poverty and deprivation in their own country, these singkeh had left their families behind in villages, counties, and prefectures in Fukien and Kwangtung provinces. Significantly, they had their own “ambition”, and some were given the strength of a bull and possibly a long life to use it. Their sole goal in coming to all corners of the earth, especially to the promised city of Singapore was to make money, then to return home to buy land and build a house. A beautiful dream, but one with a difference — Singapore offered the same hardships as rural China but with the promise of a future.


ners knew without such hope their life was not worth living at all. They seized the opportunity to migrate, and to do the hard work of rickshaw pulling as the contraptions proved instantly popular, becoming at once an integral part of Singapore’s history and of its society, economy, and life. The sojourning dream gave them physical strength and a sense of purpose, it encouraged them, they felt pulling rickshaws was a relatively quick way of realising their ambition. But in reality it was not as simple as that; their expectations were rarely if ever realised. On the contrary, rickshawmen often were proven to be wrong, very wrong. Rickshaw pulling was a menial, hazardous occupation, and a coolie’s personal and economic well-being inevitably rested on a combination of factors including the attitude of the rickshaw owner as employer, the state of the puller’s health and standard of living, interference of the relevant authorities, for example the Malay Peons’ extortion of the rickshawman, and administrative and transport policy for the city.

A distinctive feature of this emigration of rickshawmen was the absence of women. There were no formal families and lineages, and thus, no customary coherence, no customary stability. Emigration saw the widespread emergence of non-kin institutions rooted in the social structure of late nineteenth-century Chinese society in Singapore, in which secret societies and voluntary associations were shot through by small, “private”, shapeless kinship units, fragments of families and lineages, but possessing the closest of blood ties — brother-brother, father-son, and uncle-nephew. These networks of weak family ties and affinity, criss-crossing South China and stretching as far down as Singapore, were a reservoir of energy, sympathy, and misery among those who followed the same route to be pullers; on the other hand, thankfulness, exploitation, and greed characterized employers and officials alike looking for periodic replacement of cheap labour to pull the rickshaws to keep pace with Singapore’s growth and prosperity.

The credit ticket system, based on cash advances and a period of indenture, in combination with native place and language, tended to determine choice of occupation. But not all poor immigrants relied on the conventional means of labour organisation and recruitment, of brokers, secret societies, and clan associations organised on the basis of sub-ethnic divisions, to secure initial employment. Some found job security by relying on kindred on the spot who provided them with a fund of information on rickshaw pulling and found them employment. The significance of this fact of kin-folk suggesting an occupation, part of the role of elder brothers, fathers, and uncles in economic life, is that the activity of rickshaw pulling was inextricably bound up with personalised economic, social, and political values and affiliations in the Chinese communities in Singapore that began with kinship and emigration, defined work, and the limits of success.

The Pullers

At the beginning of this century one could readily recognise the place of origin of the very numerous men represented in the rickshaw trade by their speech, residence, place of worship, and where they plied for hire. It is clear that most of the pullers were Hokkien and Cantonese before the abolition of the secret societies in 1890. But within the short space of eight years the Hockchew and Hengwah were increasing rapidly and by their cheap labour driving the Hokkien and Cantonese and others out of the trade. Described as being “dreadfully ignorant” by officials, they came without families from eight different districts in and around Foochow, and from the prefecture of Hengwah.

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15Singapore Municipal Annual Report, Jinrikisha Department, 1898, p. 102.
By 1902, the numbers of coolies engaged in rickshaw pulling suggested that the Foochow communities among the Chinese population exercised jurisdiction over much of the economy and organisation of the rickshaw trade in Singapore. Out of an estimated 22,000 rickshawmen, nearly 15,000 were Hengwah, Hockchia, and Hwee An, who spoke different dialects of Foochow and Hokkien. The Hengwahs and Hockchias formed the largest proportion. Most of them came direct from China from the Hokkien province through Amoy and then to Singapore. Low Ngiong Ing vividly remembers these men from the days of his youth in early modern Singapore:

The neighbourhood [Lower Victoria Street] was dirty and noisy, but full of life. Most of the rickshaw pullers were Hockchias and Hingwas, hailing from two adjoining counties south of Foochow. The Foochow dialect was understood by most of them, though they had their own patios which, like my own, sounded uncouth in finicky Foochow ears.

Estimates of the number of rickshaw pullers plying for hire on the streets between 1880 and 1940 vary. Pullers themselves supplied hardly any information on their numbers in discussions with officials on the rare occasions when they were directly questioned by special commissions or boards of inquiry. The figures derived from the owners with a vested interest in the industry were not always based on the same calculus as that of officials, and discrepancies exist in the estimated number of men who earned their living by pulling rickshaws. The figures given below, which were official statistics of the Rickshaw Department, were calculated on the assumption that there were two coolies to every rickshaw, and very often three by 1918. These figures were a rough estimate because only the owners and not the pullers were registered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>5,046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>5,000 (approximately)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>5,877</td>
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<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>7,331</td>
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<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>11–12,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>12,000 (over)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>15,000 (over)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
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<td>1902</td>
<td>22,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>20,000 (estimated to be over)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>20,000 (about)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>20,000 (exceeds)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was commonplace for words like “about”, “approximately”, “over”, and “exceeds”

16Ibid., p. 30.
19Housing Commission Report, 1918, evidence of Mr Hooper, p. 91.
20The estimates have been compiled from the annual reports of the Jinrikisha Department. See Singapore Municipal Annual Report, Jinrikisha Department, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1891, 1894, 1897, 1900, 1902, 1904, 1908, 1917.
to be used in official reports to estimate the size of this transient work force. Even the estimates of those best informed varied by as much as several thousand men. Alec Gentle, the Coroner and former President of the Municipal Commission, thought there were at least 15,000 rickshaw coolies in Singapore in 1908, but Mr. Hooper, head of the Jinricksha Department, roughly estimated there were over 20,000. Any reduction in the number of men who earned their living by pulling rickshaws was often attributed to fewer coolies arriving from China. In 1918 there were still over 20,000 but the numbers were coming down. The coolies were not coming from China in the same numbers as they had ten years earlier, owing to expensive passage, low exchange value of Singapore currency, and the high cost of living. In 1919 the demand for rickshawmen exceeded the supply and increased prices for the labour of rickshaw pullers were expected. However, by 1921, the number of rickshaws on the streets had increased from 8,022 to 9,244. The rise in the number of pullers resulted from the falling off in employment available on estates in Johore and elsewhere. All the pullers were still China-born with practically no Singapore-born coming into this kind of work. Even during the 1930s the vast majority of them still started fresh from China.

The age distribution of the rickshawmen, which was a principal demographic feature of this emigration, was to have a marked effect on the character of the Chinese community, and upon the city itself. As to age, the only accurate statistics we have come from the coroner’s records. Here we have to begin by saying that even our best estimates with regard to age structure and employment are somewhat skewed by death. Because we cannot estimate development in this distribution with any certainty, we are unable to pinpoint the age at which they came and began to pull rickshaws and the length of time they pursued this occupation; also, we are unable to say when they returned to China, but conclusive evidence does exist on age levels and death in employment. One thing is for certain, rickshaw pulling was an occupation for neither the faint-hearted nor the elderly. The hard work called for physically strong men and preferably young when they were still in the prime of their life. The following table shows the age structure of 102 rickshawmen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>11–20</td>
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<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–60</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61–over</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their age at the time of their death ranged from 19 to 61 years old, but the work experi-

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22Singapore Municipal Annual Report, Jinricksha Department, 1919, p. 2–E.
24This table was compiled from data on Rickshaw pullers in the Singapore Coroners Inquest and Inquiries, 1902–1939. An even more age-specific breakdown into groups is as follows: 11–15, 0; 16–20, 3; 21–25, 12; 26–30, 18; 31–35, 11; 36–40, 21; 41–45, 14; 46–50, 14; 51–55, 7; 56–60, 2; 61–65, 1; above 66, 0.
ence overwhelmingly represented was that of manhood, the period between 20 and 50 years of age. Sixty-eight per cent were between 21 and 40, a time for hard work. There were also 27 per cent between 41 and 50. Significantly only 3 per cent were under the age of 20, and 9 per cent above the age of 51, with one man, Lim Phua Sim, an elderly Hengwah puller, over 61 years of age. The largest groups were in the age spread between 21 and 30 (30) and 31 to 40 (32); there were few youths between 16 and 20 years of age. The sudden sharp decrease in the numbers above the age of 50 is dramatic. Age was a sign to stop and step outside the shafts before it was too late. When men entered their fifties rickshaw pulling began to take its toll on the body in a remorseless way, even upon the toughest street-wise pullers. The choice was simple. They had to slow down or die.

Single, transient, most rickshawmen lived in crowded two and three storey tenement houses. It has already been mentioned that the occupation of rickshaw pulling rested on the principles of kinship, speech and/or locality/origin. Residence was no exception. There are plenty of indications of the phenomenon of residential segregation. Rickshaw pullers of particular sub-ethnic groups congregated along certain streets next to one another, lodging house by lodging house. These areas where the men seem to have been living, from a few weeks to a number of years, were dominated by a distinctive identity and character that was Foochow or Hokkien and not, for example, Cantonese, and there were numerous signs on a street to symbolise this and to evoke the residents' way of life, from temples to dialect associations or the name of the street itself and its derivation, and a cacophony of daily sights and sounds all orchestrated in the dialect of its occupants.

The number of men living in these houses, who dosed down in shifts, varied in 1918 from as few as 15 at No. 96 Queen Street to the very severe overcrowding of No. 124 Victoria Street with 175 occupants in the house, with the average number ranging between 35 and 60 along Johore Road, Bencoolen Street, and New Market Road. The number of men in the two houses listed in 1918 as occupied by rickshaw coolies on Mosque Street, Nos. 36 and 41, were high: 80 and 85 respectively; at No. 96 Bencoolen Street, a big compound house, crowding began to approach the unbearable with 110 coolies, at 70 dollars a month rent. As high as these figures are, they do not represent a considerable increase in pre-war densities for some areas such as Kreta Ayer. It seemed reasonable, as early as 1904, to situate the new “commodious and substantially built” rickshaw station at Kreta Ayer (which is now being renovated) in that “crowded part of town, where so many jinricksha owners and pullers live”. But by 1918 there was no more housing in the area; the pullers did not want to go far out of the city. Mr Hooper, appearing before the Housing Commission Inquiry that year, testified that Duxton Road and Craig Road near Kreta Ayer were “very crowded, and the vicinity of Peoples Park”, Manassah Lane, off Park Road, was described by him as a “dreadful place”. Certainly more houses were required. All around Muar Road and Angullia Road the crowding was extremely bad. The head of the Rickshaw Department finished his testimony on a sombre note by saying that “the houses in the [rickshaw] coolie districts are filled and overcrowded”.

Many of these lodging houses were either owned or rented by rickshaw proprietors.

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25Singapore Coroner Inquest and Inquiry of Lim Phua Sim in No. 597, 2/12/33.
27Singapore Municipal Annual Report, Jinrikisha Department, 1904, p. 3.
29Ibid.
Nearly forty-five years later Ng Kar Eng could still remember where he went to hire his rickshaw as a young hopeful:

Yes, the rickshaw belonged to the owner of the house where I stayed. There were only three or four rickshaws left then [1937] ... they were used by some old men to make a living, while some younger men used trishaws.30

The pullers were nearly always under an obligation to go into the lodging house of their employer. There they lived in cramped dormitories, with friends and strangers, in miniscule cubicles, each occupied by several men, so as to gain a little additional income and defray the cost of rent. The length of time rickshawmen lived in a particular lodging house varied, and there was continuous turnover, but if the atmosphere, despite overcrowding, was supportive, and that often depended on the presence or absence of kin, and current relations with the owner/landlord, a man would stay years. Differences in rent payments tended to be manifested by the location and extent of overcrowding in a lodging house. The rents were apt to be higher in the downtown area or on its fringe in the less overcrowded rickshaw housing than anywhere else. There are also some indications that rent payments sometimes included the cost of the provision of a certain amount of chandu daily to regular pullers who smoked opium, but in moderation.

Rickshawmen who were married constituted a very small percent of the total, and lived in coolie lodging houses with far from homogeneous populations. A report on the sanitary conditions of Singapore compiled in 1907 catalogues the household composition of the 64 residents living in a three-storey tenement house at 20–3 Sago Lane, a street in an overcrowded area of Chinatown.31 The rents in the lodging house ranged from $1.50 to $4.50 per month. The report tells of a rickshaw puller and his wife and child occupying cubicle No. 6 on the first floor with an area of 80 square feet, and windowless. The married man paid $2.80 a month to Lim Ah Keng, the sub-tenant, who slept in the passage. The occupations of the other tenants on the first floor included a seamstress, a tailor, and a revenue officer who paid $4.50 per month rent, while a prostitute and her child lived directly above the married rickshawman on the second floor.32 Under such circumstances, payment of rent was more difficult, as families could not crowd into cramped dormitory quarters in the big compound houses, nor sleep in shifts, to reduce rent.

The average daily earnings of a rickshawman in 1893 was about 40 cents. That was his gross earnings before he paid between 8 to 10 cents for the hire of his rickshaw.33 By 1908 an experienced man grossed between $1.70 to $2.00 per day, while at the same time the wages of the ordinary coolie was 45 to 50 cents a day, a day labourer in the tin mines earned 70 cents, and one dollar a day was the most a coal coolie ever earned.34 Rickshaw puller’s net earnings stabilized at about one dollar a day by 1924, but the inexperienced ones and opium addicts were fortunate if they could make, net, 40 cents to buy food and chandu.35 By then, government legislation freezing the wage of rickshaw pullers and soaring inflation, taken together, had affected the rickshaw coolies, particularly those with families, to an appreciable extent. Accommodation, rice, and staples such as salted vegetables and cooking oil were almost beyond their means. The

30Interview with Ng Kar Eng, Archive and Oral History Department, Singapore, Reel 3.
32Ibid.
34Straits Settlement Opium Commission, 1924, pp. 32, 279.
pattern of a puller’s monthly income in the inter-war years was complex because it rested not simply on what people were paid, but on personal circumstances: good health and the number of trips averaged a day, whether the wife was working, the owner and job security, how many children. A wage which was a luxury for a nineteen-year-old Hengwah, Ong Teck Cheng, living with clansmen in a rickshaw coolie lodging house, or for a married couple who were both working with no children at home, was penury for a young married man like Lim Ong, whose wife had to stay at home to look after two young children.

Rickshaw fares were cheap. For a journey up to one mile the charge was 6 cents in 1897. The set fares were gazetted by the Rickshaw Department, but in actual fact any distance was negotiable in money terms; bargaining went on between the passenger and the puller, and fares ranged from a few cents up to 60 cents according to the distance, time of day, and weather. The small unexpected windfall usually came from generous foreigners — tourists, soldiers, and sailors — visiting briefly, attracted by the “city lights”. But for the regular inhabitants of Singapore the fares changed with the onset of wet weather. Rickshaw fares climbed sharply with sudden torrential downpours. However, it was not unusual at the end of the journey for inexperienced pullers or those lacking in cunning to be either caught in a wrangle over the sum agreed to or be bilked.

It was not easy for the Singapore rickshaw coolie, despite his reputation for hard work and thrift, to become a bona fide owner of the rickshaw he pulled. Few of their number were ever able to obtain sufficient funds for the purchase of a rickshaw, and to still eke out a satisfactory living notwithstanding the heavy liabilities with which they were saddled to meet the requisite expenditure. Perhaps two pullers in a hundred owned their rickshaws. The rest of the rickshawmen — there were 20,000 coolies registered in 1902 — rented their vehicles on a shift basis from rickshaw owners. The owners, because the rickshaw trade was labour intensive with a low capital overhead per vehicle, made a much better living out of rickshaws in Singapore than their pullers. The rickshawman’s net income could only improve by getting rid of the rental he had to give to the owner, that is, if he owned his own rickshaw or shared the purchase of one with a group of pullers on an instalment basis. The rickshaw was central to the work and life of Hengwah, Hockchia, and Hokchew immigrants, and ownership of one was their ray of hope. But the material investment involved to become an owner remained beyond the means of most of the men, struggling against rent capital, the high cost of living, and fluctuating exchange rates.

The Owners

The owners of rickshaws usually came from the same area or dialect group in China as their pullers. Owners were primarily Hengwah, Hockchia, and Hokkien in this century. Earlier, most were Cantonese. But other dialect groups normally accounted for the purchase and maintenance of some of the thousands of rickshaws in operation then in Singapore. The vast majority of owners were men. Women’s names occasionally stood in the register of the Rickshaw Department as “owner” of a numbered rickshaw, usually as wives of owners or widows.

37Singapore Municipal Annual Report, Jinrikisha Department, 1890.
38Singapore Municipal Annual Report, Jinrikisha Department, 1902, p. 30.
39Singapore Municipal Annual Report, Jinrikisha Department, 1898, p. 102.
On the face of the evidence few appear to have come up through the ranks of the rickshaw trade the hard way as pullers. But there were exceptions, particularly among those men who had enough capital to start in Singapore with their own rickshaw. A number of these went on to own 15 or 20 and retire from pulling. Owners were sometimes towkays, small-time rent capitalists, such as shopkeepers and lodging house proprietors, who kept and maintained several rickshaws as a side investment. They usually operated in restricted areas of the city with a particularistically defined rental policy towards various sub-ethnic communities. Another category of rickshaw business was half ownership and half operator, in other words, the puller owned the rickshaw and rented it out, usually to kin, when he was not pulling it himself. These rickshawmen were rarely encountered on the streets, though, as they were the exception, the cost of ownership (160 dollars for a new one in 1917) was prohibitive and most could not hope to save the capital sum necessary to become a rickshaw owner. Most often after a lifetime of trying to save money to buy their own vehicle, coolies still had insufficient capital to be able to settle their daily living expenses and debts, let alone purchase even a second-hand one. By far the most important category was the rickshaw entrepreneurs. They accounted for the vast majority of the rickshaws that thronged the streets of Singapore. These individuals, who frequently owned between 30 to 50 rickshaws, derived their income primarily from a monopoly of ownership and rentals. All their rickshaws were rented out to pullers. In some instances they did not restrict renting only to pullers of the same ethnic group; as long as members of other Chinese communities who wanted to ply for hire were considered trustworthy, the rickshaws were hired out.

Almost all fleet owners in Singapore rented their rickshaws for half a day. Rickshaws were usually hired out on two shifts. The day puller went out with his rickshaw at 6 a.m. and returned between 2 and 3 p.m. Night pullers worked a series of shifts, the most common times being 2 p.m. to midnight and 5 p.m. to 3 a.m., providing service throughout the city, but especially in the brothel districts and the vicinity of the harbour, till sun up. Many coolies religiously came at certain hours to hire their vehicles for half a day or night. The rickshawman's routine preference for a particular hiring time also sometimes extended to going back for months, in some cases, even years, to an owner, who more often than not was from the same speech group or locality in China, and as a matter of course choosing a customary rickshaw. When the rickshaw owners were sufficiently well acquainted with the men, especially regulars and "old hands" who lived in their boarding houses or close by and pulled their rickshaws, to comment not only on the idiosyncracies of their hiring habits but on their character and personality too, and hence by inference on their relationship with them, it is not surprising to see them stress those qualities they deemed as both necessary and desirable in the making of a good puller, qualities that cost them next to nothing but immeasurably enhanced their authority and profits from renting rickshaws. Namely, cooperation and reliability, good health and physical strength, and common sense and being economical with money.

The prices the rickshaws were let out for by the owners to a rickshawman varied in different districts and according to quality, the usual rates between 1904 and 1916 can be seen in Table 3.

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40Straits Settlement Opium Commission, 1908, the evidence of Mr Hooper, p. 28.
The owners, because the rickshaw trade was labour intensive with a low capital overhead per vehicle, made a much better living out of rickshaws in Singapore than their pullers. The sweat and suffering of these hard-worked coolies made fortunes for the rickshaw capitalist from whom they had to rent rickshaws. For these men, inspired by the profit motive, the rickshaw was a lucrative investment, the return on capital being as much as 100 per cent per annum. The rental system made owners rich, and pullers hard-driven, exploited, and poor. As long as the ownership of rickshaws was concentrated in the hands of rent capitalists there was no means for the puller to increase earnings, to save, to purchase a rickshaw, except to run harder, longer. Pulling like that could kill. Two elements, the high rental fee and restricted ownership, were a sign of the inequality of their life and death, and of the undue influence and power of rent capital in regulating the social relations of Chinese coolies in a colonial society.

The Social Environment and Morbidity

Most rickshawmen saw no future in marriage. They realised the impossibility of having a family, and chose to live alone as bachelors. This is what it meant to pull a rickshaw in Singapore — to be solitary. Thousands upon thousands of men pulled rickshaws to a moronic rhythm of work, little or no leisure, and work for years on end. Apart from drawing a rickshaw, the single puller’s life was strongly “empty”, lacking the joys of family life, parenthood, and for some, even friendship. There was no limit to the amount of work such a puller could do. His time and energy was his own. But it was precisely this concentration of energy that produced the abnormal will power and strength to pull a rickshaw year after year, alone.

Work was compulsive for most rickshawmen. A more leisurely social life was constrained by absence of family and lack of money. But occasionally there was free entertainment in the neighbourhood. Wayang-going was a common way to break down the wall between work and life. Men could actually get away from it all to unleash the frustrations of pulling a rickshaw and living alone. The streets in the rickshaw quarter were a stage when a Chinese “wayang”, or street opera, played to the delight of the pullers. Temple and native-place associations often arranged such open-air entertainment in order to celebrate a religious holiday. The operas ran for many days with itinerant wayang troupes performing on makeshift stages from dusk to dawn; the surrounding streets became a hub of activity, alive with spectators socializing, filled with the sound of Chinese music, of clashing cymbals and drums, and hawkers providing delicious fare along the five footway for the marathon performances.
Besides wayangs, festivals, and religious holidays, the art of living was maintained among rickshawmen by fulfilling their social obligations to a deceased puller. Death, from the point of view of the native-place association, called for a certain set of social activities and obligations that stressed ancestral worship, strengthened social ties among mourners, and promoted clan solidarity. The personal and social relationships between two rickshawmen were expressed in the reciprocal rights and duties associated with the mourning ritual as fictive kin. The rickshawmen played a part in the preparations for a simple burial and formed the funeral procession to a clan cemetery or the municipally run pauper’s cemetery with its fixed grave plots.

Despite spartan living conditions and a colonial government whose control reached into the most intimate aspects of the rickshawman’s work-a-day life, most of them — even those most left alone — managed to pursue their private passions. They found some solace in the four evils. The four evils were well known amongst the rickshaw pullers of Singapore, and the four went together in the city. They were opium smoking, prostitution, drinking, and gambling. The four evils individually and in combination prevented many young hard-working pullers from fulfilling the “inexorable duty of every son” — the regular remittance of money to support destitute kin in their home villages in China. In their early years in Singapore especially, they sent their income at regular intervals. Being in a new land was no excuse for forgetting their past, the survival of the family depended on them pulling their rickshaws undyingly. But as time passed and men began to smoke opium or visit the brothels out of loneliness, remittances were apt to be sent less frequently. The bond of loyalty linking single men pulling rickshaws to family and village in China began to fray, and then come apart as the years went by in Singapore. Men began to fritter the money away on opium, daughters of joy and flower girls, alcohol and cigarettes, and on gambling — money that their whole families relied on for income. When rickshawmen failed to remit money or answer the Stinginess letters reprimanding them for their laxity, kin, mostly wives, wearied of waiting. In the eyes of their people these men had been unsuccessful. Some of them finally left China to look for their brothers or husbands in Singapore, only to discover on arrival once having found them that they left a past at home perhaps a lot better and happier than the present. The cause of the paradox was that their brothers and husbands had become different men after long years of working alone with rickshaws in Singapore — they had become addicted to opium, alcohol, gambling, and were infected with venereal disease.

The four evils were the sole recreation afforded to rickshawmen in Singapore. The paradox surrounding them was that they helped to make what in most respects was an intolerable life for the puller more tolerable, even exciting, joyous on occasion, if only for a moment, a few hours, or a day or two at most. But ultimately their health, ambition, sense of responsibility, and dreams were consumed by the opium, sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol, and gambling “fever”. The four evils also destroyed the bonds of reciprocity between generations that linked filial sons to elderly parents in China. Their parents, the ancestors, and the past were forgotten for the passion of the moment in a city that had slowly worn them down. The colonial government, on its part, was neither prepared to raise the puller’s wages nor create a more beneficial environ-


ment with appropriate housing, suitable recreational facilities and open spaces as a substitute for the sole means they had at their disposal to enjoy themselves.

An inherent economic and social inequality was linked with high morbidity and mortality in the Singapore of the rickshawmen, precisely because it was a “cooler town”.43 Underlying the depressing economics and health hazards of rickshaw pulling there was a demographic pressure crushing the Singapore Chinese that was a direct consequence of the symbiosis of colonial capitalism and migration from southeastern China. The alternative for those living as “dust to be blown around” to excessive opium smoking, whoring and gambling, to excessive pain and illness, to excessive loss of strength and ageing, to excessive loneliness without kin, was suicide. Singapore in the words of the senior army medical officer was “a nursery for disease” in 1872.44 Rickshawmen were to live with disease-infectious death for more than half a century after he said that; despite an unprecedented rise in the death rate from endemic killing diseases like typhoid, cholera, malaria, and tuberculosis, both the Colonial Government and municipal authorities time and again refused to be put under pressure and to take effective steps for social care and the eradication of disease in Chinatown. The authorities consistently chose alternatives that minimized costs and therefore supplied a rational but less than humane approach to Singapore’s housing, water supply, and waste disposal problems. Slum property retained its inflated value right through the Depression. Inflated precisely because it was overcrowded, and this was especially so in the rickshaw quarters. As long as the Government was not prepared to pay the market price for this class of property, death from these diseases caused by poverty and overcrowding, particularly from tuberculosis and pneumonia, continued to take their toll of lives among rickshaw pullers. The city’s decision to cope with its environment in this way from the 1880s through the 1930s meant that a puller came home each day to a neighbourhood that lived in the shadow of death. He knew what his friends were going through in this cramped, filthy, disease-ridden place called a city — the sleepless nights with malarial fever, the fear of not being spared by the cholera, the nights he lay awake because of the sound of the hacking cough of his tubercular clansmen coming through the dark from the floor below, but some nights he wondered amidst all this death whether the disease would spare him. Yet, the truth of the matter was that it didn’t really matter to him any more; he didn’t seem to care as he knew the worse was coming. The environment of the city was gradually destroying him too:

Men have separated themselves from the animals but now drive their own kind back among the beasts. [He] remained in this … city but he was being transformed into an animal. Not a bit of it was his own fault. He had stopped thinking and, therefore, the human being in him was destroyed. He bore no responsibility for that all. He’d never hope again. He’d just sink blindly, stupidly, lower and lower, into a bottomless pit. He ate, he drank, he whored, he gambled, he cheated, and all because he had no heart left in him. Others had taken it from him. All that remained was his big frame and now he waited for it to burst open like an abscess. He was getting ready for the potter’s field.45

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Most of them experienced the loss of human dignity because of this social and physical environment and the reluctance of the Colonial Government to change all this. Examination of the major sequential decisions made by Colonial Singapore in regard to the interdependence of housing, water supply, waste disposal, and sewerage from the 1880s through the 1930s shows that the city’s rulers consistently chose alternatives that minimized costs at the expense of the coolie population. The tragedy was that rickshawmen and their families, because of these policies, were very vulnerable to disease, so pullers with very ill kin could only stand by helplessly and hopelessly. They were aware that the medical problem was not just a disease, it was the social and physical environment of the city and its policies that interfered with their state of well being, and they felt the need to change it. But their failure to do so led some of them, after they had quarreled over rent, had contracted tuberculosis or syphilis, or gambled away their savings, to behave in a way that gave their kinsmen and clansmen anxiety as to their safety; they cried out in anger and shame as the vision that was planted in China swept them up and spat them out. In such circumstances, mounting health problems, income difficulties, and high levels of dependency among men who very often were unable to support their dependent members, in the course of time, drove them to the point of suicide.

The Abolition Campaign

In that furious time that stood between the two wars, rickshaws and the men who pulled them were pencilled into the margins of Singapore’s future. By the 1920s, the British felt that the rickshaw was a challenge to their development policy and the showcase image of Singapore as a “modern city”. The demand for rickshaw transport throughout the inter-war years however continued as did the harsh social differences sustaining it. The British refused to encourage the trade, at times ignoring it, and then opposing it with a vengeance at the height of the Depression. Officials believed that rickshaws were an uneconomical, slow, and hazardous mode of conveyance, and that they would ultimately have to go to improve the flow of public transport. From this time on the city’s roads were restricted to motorized transport. The traffic-official argument was that rickshaws were slow-moving and snarled the flow of other vehicles. Thus, to free Singapore’s public transport from traffic congestion restrictions on rickshaws had to be introduced.

The rationale was all wrong. The plain fact was that the rickshaws were far more manoeuvrable in dense traffic than any other motor vehicle, they rarely broke down like the trams and buses, and handled most of the short distance trips on the small congested streets and alley-ways off the main roads where motorized public transport could not penetrate. There were no similar restrictions in these years on private cars and taxis despite an appalling increase in motor vehicle traffic accidents. The planners were not to be deterred. The systematic removal of rickshaws as “slow-moving vehicles” began in 1928, but it did not improve the traffic situation on the main roads. From this time onward the future of the rickshaw coolie was bleak. The Rickshaw Department began to withdraw licences while at the same time not issuing any more new licences and cancelling expired ones. This sudden removal of thousands of rickshaws and the services they provided caused disruption among those living at the lowest income levels, who had to count every cent, for there was no alternative system of transport except to walk.

With admirable clarity the 1930s demonstrated the ways in which the growing deprivation of the rickshawmen was being further aggravated by the policies of a
government bent on gradually abolishing rickshaws in the interests of the motor car. The unequal distribution of wealth and power, and the advent of a large-scaled motorized transport system combined against the puller’s livelihood with a vengeance. The history of the inter-war years was to show that the experience of the rickshaw pullers was to be one of confrontation with the government and rickshaw owners, then “temporary peace” through mediation and settlement, and then resistance and strikes. This cycle was to repeat itself several times over the course of these years culminating in the coolie’s display of solidarity in the strike of 1938 when the authorities and owners sought to end their way of life. The rickshaw pullers’ future had been threatened before by owners, government officials, and planners, but now they were fighting for survival. As more rickshaws were pulled off the streets in an effort to restrict their numbers, the owners raised the rental fee. In 1938 a life and death struggle with the owners erupted over the rental fee and manipulation of the puller’s contribution to the China Relief Fund to assist their countrymen who were then in “deep water and scorching fire”. When the wage demands of the rickshaw pullers were not met they closed ranks, demonstrating against the owners and smashing their rickshaws.

The pullers had stopped work because of owner exploitation, hard times, and the issue of the manipulation of the monthly donation to the China Relief Fund. They expected the Chinese public to rally to their cause. But the mass of Chinese in Singapore remained apathetic, even hostile at times, refusing to support them openly. The government condemned the stoppage. The owners refused to sit down and negotiate a prompt settlement. They relied on time, once all hope of a quick resolution had faded, hoping to starve the pullers into submission, and backed by the force of colonial law, as police constantly assisted them by patrolling affected areas, protecting their rickshaws, and arresting strikers. But by doing so the owners did not diminish the puller’s strength or resolution, the strike only magnified it.

Yet, despite a massive display of support and sacrifice from fellow pullers, some of whom earned as little as thirty cents a day, the rickshawmen had little reason for optimism. Throughout the strike, arbitration by various individuals and groups failed. The pullers also had to forgo tens of thousands of dollars, and a large section of them suffered from hunger and destitution, forcing some to take advantage of the government offer of repatriation. And, as a result of the policies of rickshaw abolitionists, the vast majority of vehicles remained firmly in the hands of a small number of towkays. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the rickshaw strike had not reached beyond the confines of puller politics and community to touch the concerns of other Chinese coolies in order to confront the power and prejudice of a colonial system that was overwhelming them. Singapore was saved the humiliation and fear of having to face a general strike in the widest sense in the coolie’s struggle against oppression and injustice. The pullers had obtained a considerable reduction in the rates of hire for their rickshaws, but the 1938 strike didn’t change anything else — the owners endured.

This article has described the social organisation of a coolie occupation, the role that rickshaws and rickshaw pullers played in Singapore’s history and the marginalised lives the coolies led. They can no longer be relegated to the back and side of the stage of Singapore history. Nor can they be seen as only the foundation of the stage. Now the experience, words, and their voices come back to us — seventy or more years later — as their descendants in our time write a different epitaph on their past and their life.