SOCIAL HISTORY AND THE PHOTOGRAPH:
GLIMPSES of the SINGAPORE RICKSHAW COOLIE
in the EARLY 20th. CENTURY

by
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It is the advent of the Photograph . . . which divides the history of the world
Roland Barthes, 1981

Introduction: Rickshaws in Singapore

Interest in almost any aspect of economic and social relationships of Chinese
labourers – the lower class culture of a colonial plural society – in the history writing of
Singapore is a new phenomenon. There is a historiographical need to focus attention on
a detailed history of Singapore as a coolie town, to demonstrate the profound impact of
migration and the rapid development of colonial capitalism on the experience of the
coolies of the Singapore population, including labour, exploitation, and conditions of
life. What can be revealed by an inquiry of such relationships are the attitudes
and behaviour that bound people to one another in the milieu of a coolie town. This
approach to the history writing of the 'subject people' \(^1\) of Singapore enables the historian
to confront fundamental questions about the nature of migration, colonial urbanism
and labour, and trace how and why a city like Singapore has developed.

Between 1880, when a consignment of Japanese manufactured rickshaws made an
impact on the then dominant mode of transport in Singapore, horse-drawn carriage, and
the second decade of this century, the Chinese labouring population of Singapore
exploded from 86,000 to nearly 316,000. With its rapidly developing economy, colonial
Singapore offered an attractive place to work to tens of thousands of Chinese immigrant
labourers.

The emergence of Singapore at the end of the nineteenth century as a commercial
centre and entrepôt port, dominated by import and export firms and banks, for Britain’s
imperial expansion and trade-oriented economy in Southeast Asia had a profound impact
upon every aspect of economic and social relationships. It was most marked in the labour
nexus, the spatial segregation, the extreme overcrowding of the lower class Chinese who,
as rickshaw pullers, coal coolies, stevedores and hawkers – the sinews of empire – helped
to shape the expansion of Singapore. The city, especially at the peak of its growth, often
seemed a place of hope and betterment compared to the countryside of China and the
treaty ports.

The rickshaw was invented in Japan in 1869. \(^2\) Originally called \textit{jinrickshaw} from the
characters meaning man-powered carriage, the “jin” was dropped from the term at the
turn of the century and “rickshaw” came into general use. \(^3\) The rickshaw became a
modern form of transport throughout Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries. The rickshaw combined new technology – superior western-styled wheels
– with cheap, seemingly, indefatigable Asian labour.

The rickshaw was tried out for public transport in Singapore in 1880. The first batch
came from Shanghai but they were imported from Japan the following year. They proved to be an immediate success. At the turn of the century, the rickshaw revolutionised the life of Singapore. An inexpensive and convenient mode of transport around town, it was patronised by people from all walks of life including children on their way to school, servants laden with the day’s groceries, hawkers on their daily round, prostitutes, Colonial Officials, and the indigent who found it too tiresome waiting for the tram. Although initially encouraged, by the 1920s, the British felt that the rickshaw was a challenge to their development policy and to the showcase image of Singapore as a ‘modern city’. The demand for rickshaw transport throughout the inter-war years continued nevertheless, as did the harsh social conditions for the pullers. The British refused to encourage the trade, at times ignoring it, and then opposing it with a vengeance at the height of the depression.

The rickshaw not only provided mass transport, it also created new employment in Singapore. The majority of sinkheh back in 1881 came from the lowest stratum of Chinese society in China without skills or capital. Their sole hope was a reputation that preceded them for hard work, endurance and strength, and the Chinese immigrants were in steady demand to work with their hands and bend their backs on construction sites, in factories, and on the waterfront. In such circumstances lineages or even whole villages could not avoid having to send their men to work the astonishing wave of economic development that swept up Singapore in the last years of the nineteenth century. The spectre of starvation in China and the pull of the Singapore dream of success was the basis of most decisions to emigrate. Jobless men in China quickly learned from kin, a father or an uncle in Singapore, about the two-wheeled wooden carriages, the number of sinkheh already involved in the rickshaw trade, and money to be earned from the new profession. Regarded as little more than peasants with little or no hope of a future, they too wanted to be rickshaw pullers. Too poor to stay home, to marry, and multiply, they left.

Among this coolie element leaving from Amoy, Swatow and Hong Kong on bat-winged junks and tramp steamers were represented all the major dialect groups, Cantonese, Hokiens, Foochows, Teochius, and Hainanese, as well as a far smaller proportion of Hengwah and Hockchew speakers who were to supply much of the skilled and unskilled labour required for the expansion of the rickshaw enterprise.

**Photography and Social History**

In order to grasp what the experience meant to pull a rickshaw in mid-1900 the historian must immerse himself in the whole range of sources available on Singapore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is a wealth of tangential information about Chinese labouring classes in the colonial records waiting to be interpreted. An imaginative use of these official records can go a long way towards assisting us in our understanding the course of Chinese life, and lower class at that, in a Chinese city outside China, for whom they were not meant to extol. They bring the rickshaw coolies, their clansmen, kinsmen and women of a forgotten part into the historical forefront; empirical evidence is provided on age, sex, marital status, address, place of birth, occupation, length of time in Singapore, diet, dress, sickness and death. The causes of death often depict the deprivation experienced in pulling a rickshaw. Much also can be learned about housing, health, and poverty, and the almost hopeless struggle to survive from literary sources, the detailed accounts of European and Asian observers of Singapore,
and by observing the yet ‘unreconstructed’ part of Singapore’s Chinatown.

It must be stressed, however, that, as critical as these sources are for reconstructing a picture of the life and times of rickshawmen, generalisations regarding their experience cannot be based wholly on these records. If this detailed evidence is to be used to advantage in a representative account it must be supplemented by exceptional information in photographs and pictures that show the Singapore the rickshaw pullers knew.

There exists an important photographic record of rickshaws in Singapore. Intrepid photographers with unwieldy equipment and glassplate negatives were already taking interesting photographs of excellent quality at the time the rickshaw was invented, and first introduced to Singapore in the early 1880s. It is their images of bygone Chinese society that remain to haunt Singapore in the present and bear witness to the past of the rickshaw puller. The most important photographs are found in the photograph and post card collections of the National Archives and Record Centre, the photo files of newspapers, and in books, periodicals, and magazines such as British Malaya.

First, before discussing their significance as a source, it is necessary to draw attention to several problems involved in the use and interpretation of relevant photos of rickshawmen. In some respects, no medium was less appropriate for recording how rickshawmen ordinarily acted than the early camera. The stillness required of the puller, quite unnatural to him, was singularly unsuited to capture accurately the motion of a rickshaw, and the strength and strain involved in pulling it. Later on, photographers — professional and novice — roamed the streets of Singapore with Brownie Box cameras in hand seeking the exotic East, an ethnographic oddity, or simply to promote the tourist trade. These photographers, by their presence and activities, frequently turned rickshaw pullers along with street hawkers and beggars into caricatured specimens for ‘artistic effect’, or for the fashionable genre of magazine pictures and picture postcards of the time.

Misunderstanding was created in the eye of the camera by insensitive Europeans who approached the rickshaw puller as simply one more curiosity Singapore offered to the traveller. Rickshawmen were asked to pose as still-life subjects (actually objects) against backgrounds that excelled in scenic beauty, such as the primeval setting of the Botanical Gardens or facing the sea on the Esplanade. By the use of these disguised settings the photographer distanced himself from the image of the straining, sweating, rickshaw coolie. The resultant photograph prevented the person from facing the depth of his emotion — anxiety, guilt, pity — over having been pulled in a rickshaw by a coolie. Instead, the exhausting life and the rickshaw ride became a pleasing sight to remember. Such photos inevitably robbed pullers of their humanity and, as objects of curiosity about a journey to the East, misrepresented what life they had. We know of at least one rickshaw puller though who drew the line when his unthinking European passenger attempted to take a ‘picturesque’ photo of him; he took it as a sign of bad luck — an invasion of his soul:

“I came up here against a curious superstition, for my rickshaw puller refused to have his photograph taken, lest I might enclose his soul in the body of my camera.”

On the other hand, especially in the Singapore of the 1930s when pullers were living in appalling conditions, the sensitive photographer simply could not get it all in — the damp nocturnal world of the cubicle, limbs deadened by pain, and the worn weather-
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beaten faces of the men. While the results of the efforts of photographers like Julius Friend were not responsible for distorting reality at that time, they often could not capture its essence. The poverty and despair defied translation. However, a ‘reading’ of the photographic record of Singapore is necessary to tell the story of the rickshawmen. A thoughtful analysis of still photographs can provide compelling information on a decisive moment in time and reveal in the process something about the behaviour of rickshaw pullers, the physical details of rickshaws themselves such as the uncommon use of pneumatic tyres, and the characteristic environment of the men who pulled them. In this context, the images of these still photos, this moment rather than that, are a means of seeming to outwit time.

With these photographs, gathered from archives, newspaper files and magazines, I can delve into all corners of Singapore to develop an understanding of the city the rickshaw pullers knew — filthy, bustling, chaotic, swarming with rickshaws at major street corners, idly parked outside the Raffles Hotel, and in motion along the Esplanade and Collier Quay from dawn to dusk. Just as significant is the immediate impression created by these snapshots of the kinds of work represented in the ordinary everyday life of the urban landscape which ranged from the street vendors, a sinkheh eating at a stall, a Chinese scribe engrossed in his work, to Poh Sam women plying their needles industriously. The rickshaw puller is there too, frozen in motion amidst the confused pattern of traffic, so are the images of doomed older men capsulized, in a rare moment of well-earned rest, sleeping in their rickshaws at twilight.

Bearing Witness

Sinkheh 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. However, it is the posed photo depicted on the odd postcard and in travel accounts that speak of the general character of an extraordinary exodus of young men going abroad to pull rickshaws in Singapore. Most of them came from Kwangtung and Fukien provinces in search of a new life. But they had no intention of staying. It was the ideal pattern of circular migration: ‘men go abroad, earn, remit money, and return.’ A singular photograph of a juvenile puller, kneeling between the shafts of his immaculately set out private rickshaw, wearing his best work shorts, his hair combed for the occasion, with his straw hat inconspicuously tucked away between the floorboard and the wheel, and looking straight into the eye of the camera; a rare picture of a sojourning youth that would probably be sent to someone dear in China. (Photo A.)

It was a common sight all over Singapore at dawn to see owners and pullers getting their rickshaws ready for the day. We can actually see and experience at close up this ritualistic day break activity by carefully ‘reading’ a period picture postcard entitled ‘Jinrickisha Station’. The scene is Sago Lane in the Kreta Ayer section of Chinatown circa 1910: it has rained, the street is relatively deserted, the rain hoods have been put up on the rickshaws flanking both sides of the street. As one puller draws away on the puddle soaked street with shafts held high, others stand or squat nearby chatting. In the left foreground an owner or puller leans down to clean, possibly repair, the mudguard on the rickshaw. The vehicles rain soaked hood, which has been taken off, is on the ground in a heap beside the shafts. Almost out of the picture in the left corner, another man, partially naked, stands between the shafts busily at work. Further down the street a
puller bends over to check a wheel. While just across the way, on the upper right hand side of the street, a rickshaw coolie wearing a conical-shaped straw fibre hat inspects the rainhood on a rickshaw. (Photo B).

The amount of traffic in Singapore grew in direct proportion to the size of the town, its population, its wealth, and its business in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Rickshaws were a significant part of that growth. In 1917, a twelve hour survey at six main bridges in Singapore recorded 72,772 crossings of rickshaws. At the turn of the century there were no traffic regulations or road signs, nor does there appear to have been a hierarchy among road users. In old photographs and illustrations, such as ‘The Padang, Singapore, circa 1905–10’, Singapore traffic was seen to be difficult with private carriages, hack gharries, bullock carts, rickshaws, tramcars, hawkers carrying heavy loads in baskets, handcarts, and pushcarts, pedestrians on foot, and motor car drivers, all jostling for right of way. On these streets, jammed with traffic, the motor vehicles sounded their horns at the pullers, the pullers shouted at the pedestrians, and the pedestrians tended to ignore both.

A typical Singapore traffic scene in New Market Road during the mid-1930s. Note how automobiles and lorries tend to dominate the space close to the drainage culvert on the left side of the street, forcing the rickshaw puller to veer out into the path of oncoming traffic.
A hard and garrulous lot, rickshaw pullers knew almost every alley and side lane in their part of Chinatown like the backs of their hands. Old photos show that one could always expect to find scores of rickshaws around the luxury hotels, the major market places, and business districts, catering to tourists, would-be-shoppers, and business men; they all turned to the rickshawmen, who sat in their bleached blue cottons and coarse straw hats — waiting, chatting, smoking, dozing between the shafts.

Rickshaws were also hired by travellers arriving by rail from the Federated Malay States at all hours. A postcard of the station at Tank Road shows nearly twenty rickshaws neatly lined up next to one another with foldable rain-proof hoods raised and lowered; the station clock showed the time to be nearly 5 pm. The Tank Road railway station was so far from the business centre of the city and the Raffles Hotel that any passenger by train had to take a rickshaw from the station to his destination.

The Structure of Life

The following ensemble of photos bear witness to the rickshaw pullers of Singapore, chronicling their interaction with the city, and the causes and effects of immigration and colonial policy on their working and personal lives.

A rickshaw coolie's clothing, for example, at the beginning of this century normally comprised of a pair of running shorts and a straw fibre hat. In 1900 pullers were prone to run on the streets naked from the waist up. Clothing became an essential item of expenditure when laws were passed requiring rickshaw coolies to wear certain clothes so as to look decent and not offend unduly the sensibilities of the travelling public. A
careful study of old photos shows that pullers were forced to become more clothes conscious and were dressed somewhat differently by 1914; they retained their traditional garb — tight fitting 'coolie blue' shorts or black baggy pants and straw hats, adding the ubiquitous loose fitting coat-shirt to cover up the strain, sweat and nakedness.

A rickshaw coolie sitting naked from the waist up, smoking an opium pipe. The photograph was taken prior to 1910.

A photo-postcard of a rickshaw puller posed sitting on the floorboard of his rickshaw. Note the shirt-jacket. The photograph dates from after 1914.

In the overcrowded rickshaw districts, the lives of the rickshawmen and their families were bounded by the cubicles they lived in. The interior of the cubicles became their whole world. A small world of gloom in which the dust settled heavily, the air became stale, and the light dim, even in the middle of the day. We know from turn of the century photographs of the interior of lodging houses, taken with a magnesium flash, that cubicles were pitch dark and simply furnished. There were no windows and no means of light in many of them. Ventilation was poor and virtually non-existent in the windowless ones. Despite positive recommendations of the Emergency Housing Commission Report of 1918 calling for cubicles to be dealt with systematically, the dark cramped room portrayed in Dr. Simpson’s celebrated report of 1907 on housing in Singapore did not
disappear from Chinatown, not even before the last rickshaw went off the streets in the 1950s.

Most of the rickshaw tenement houses were dreadful, decrepit, dangerous and old by the first decade of this century. This photo was taken with a magnesium flash in 1907.

There were no windows and no means of light in many of the cubicles. The lodging houses were densely packed, the heat and humidity almost unbearable at times, and visibility was rarely beyond the next few steps along the narrow passage.
The photographic record shows in detail the work-a-day world of the rickshaw coolie. These photographs of everyday life in old Singapore both document and challenge our assumptions about a place, a people and a time.

A view of South Bridge Road at the turn of the century. By the mid-1900s rickshaws were the most popular form of public transport. The stinging competition of the rickshaws pressed hard on the hackney carriages.

A rickshaw puller in full stride with three passengers, on a stretch of New Bridge Road that runs parallel to Wayang Street, showing the Chinese Theatre Hall near the old Thong Chai Medical Institute.
Rickshaw stands scattered about the fronts of the best hotels in Singapore were considered to be lucrative spots to work by the pullers. This photograph taken in 1921 by a West Australian hotelier captures the daily activity of the rickshawmen around the Raffles Hotel.

An old photographer’s print shows a large number of pullers congregated around the steps of the Thian Hock Keng Temple, Telok Ayer Street. Their rickshaws stand idle, close by in front of them, while their patrons worship the goddess MA-CHO-PO, mother of the heavenly sages.
Small peer groups organised on a sub-ethnic basis divided up different parts of the city and handfuls of rickshawmen could regularly be found occupying a particular place, huddling together. The photo depicts one such group of rickshaw coolies in front of the Clyde Terrace Market on Beach Road in the 1930s.

Each part of the city had its principal users and trip purposes, and the rickshaw was there — readily available, flexible and cheap, catering to a particular population and its needs: this was particularly so in the rainy months when the roads in and out of Singapore became impassable. This photo presents rickshaw pullers sloshing through ankledeep water in the heart of town on South Bridge Road.
Food hawkers roamed the streets and set up wherever rickshaw pullers were found. There was no extravagance but all of a sudden the facilities were there to enjoy a good cheap meal. On the docks, in Raffles Square, near the Railroad Station, one could always see the itinerant Chinese hawkers with their cooking pots, lowering their poles to cater to the appetites of hungry rickshawmen. One such scene took place near the Read Bridge in the early 1900s.

A new Rickshaw Station was opened in 1903 by the Jinrikisha Department for the licensing and inspection of rickshaws. This impressive building, which is situated at the southern end of South Bridge Road at the junction of Neil and Tanjong Pagar Roads, has been renovated by the Singapore Government and now houses a maternity and child-care centre.
Conclusion

The current of history has been remorseless, unswervingly deaf to persuasion when it has come to finding a place for the rickshaw coolies and other sinkheh in Singapore's past. Their predominant presence in that past is all the more ironic as the rickshaw pullers appeared in the background of nearly every photograph or pictorial postcard in their time, yet in a very real sense remained 'hidden', invisible to the naked eye but not to the camera.

These photos cannot give Singapore back what has been. But they do describe visually the role that rickshaws and rickshaw pullers played in Singapore's history and the marginalised lives the coolies led. Except in old photographs and pictures of Singapore, there are no further traces of rickshaws on the streets of Chinatown. Old Singapore, unchanged in many respects for over eighty years, is almost gone now and can be found only in these types of photographs with their fugitive images of rickshaw coolies — only their images remain as an element of the past in Singapore's present.

FOOTNOTES


2 The rickshaw was a small light hooded cart, provided with springs and large diameter wheels, and drawn by a man running between the shafts. The hood could be quickly raised or lowered against the weather. There were also front and side curtains to conceal the passenger from downpour. The rickshaw was described in *The Century Dictionary* in 1899 as a little vehicle 'not unlike a Hansom cab, without the seat for the driver — there being no horse to drive!' *The Century Dictionary* (London: The Times, 1899).

3 The invention of the rickshaw has been credited to at least three different men: an American missionary named Jonathan Gable: Akiha Daisuki and an out of work samurai called Yousouke Tzumi. Rickshaws were first called *jin-riki-shaw*, which literally means 'man-power carriages'. Phonetically the word is derived from the Chinese *jin* for man, *lek* meaning energy or strength, and *sha-carriage*. In Hokkien the word rickshaw is *kan-cha* (pull carriage). *Malay Mail*, 27 April, 1965.

4 Valuable photographs can turn up in the oddest places; a photo of rickshawmen standing in front of the Raffles Hotel was found among the personal papers of Reg Harrison, a prominent Perth hotelier, who briefly visited Singapore and the island of Java as part of a trade delegation in 1921, by a Murdoch University honours student in the course of her researches on women's work in the hotel, catering and restaurant industries in Western Australia. The photograph is in bundle No. 3 of PR. 549411-4 in the Battye Library, Western Australia.


