

Beyond rubber prices: negotiating the Great Depression in Singapore

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Abstract: This paper looks at life in Singapore during the Great Depression in the early 1930s from the perspectives of the ordinary people who lived through it. Besides discussing the slump's impact on businesses, wages and employment, it examines how effectively people responded to the crisis. Their distress was alleviated by immigration controls and a fall in the cost of living at the societal level, and also by mutual help, based on family and kinship ties, at the individual level. It appears that life for many people was not as difficult as might be supposed. The quality of life, reflected in indices such as mortality and crime, seemed generally satisfactory after 1930, while the island was also spared serious social and political upheaval.

Keywords: social history; Great Depression; Singapore

Recent scholarship on the early 1930s Great Depression in South East Asia suggests that the slump caused 'only a relatively modest deterioration in material conditions'.¹ The research, while mostly on rural areas, has also provided a better understanding of the dynamics functioning within the region's cities. Of Manila, Daniel Doeppers painted a variegated picture of employees in various economic sectors faring differently during the crisis, with the bureaucratic class enjoying 'an explosion' in purchasing power.² Likewise, John Ingleson maintained that 'many, if not most, urban Indonesians coped with the depression far better than has often been surmised', for example, by accepting lower paying jobs.³ In contrast, Gregg Huff studied Singapore's

¹ Brown, I. (1997), *Economic Change in Southeast Asia, c.1830–1980*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, pp 222–223.

² Doeppers, D. F. (1991), 'Metropolitan Manila in the Great Depression: crisis for whom?' *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 50, No 3, pp 511–535.

³ Ingleson, J. (1988), 'Urban Java during the Depression', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 19, No 2, pp 292–309.

experience using the concept of ‘entitlements’, factors protecting one from economic shocks. Huff argued that most people in Singapore suffered because they lacked entitlements, having few savings or little access to land, which would have allowed them to take up subsistence farming and escape the scourge of unemployment. Only the farmers on the peninsula, he concluded, were shielded from the slump.⁴

The recent scholarship is economic in nature and underpinned by statistics, with a fundamental concern with the connections between trade, commodity prices, business and industry, and employment and work. Beyond this, the research does not venture much further. People are discussed as units of labour, with their experiences tied to their occupations. In Singapore’s case, this is reinforced by a tendency to frame its history within ‘a Whiggish telos of economic development, progress, modernity, and modernisation since 1819’.⁵ Mainstream Singapore history, in concentrating on the plunge in rubber and tin prices during the Depression, has concluded that it brought ‘serious hardship to all the people, particularly those of the lower classes’,⁶ and ‘was a time of great hardship’.⁷

This paper seeks to provide a more balanced view of life in Singapore during the Depression by combining the economic paradigm with a social framework. It will examine the reaction of the British administration to the slump and the adjustments in the cost of living, both of which had an ameliorative effect on the distress. The final part of the essay, however, deals with people’s responses to the crisis and is a history from below, reconstructed from non-official sources such as oral history interviews, letters to the press, biographies, and coroners’ inquests. The paper contends that many, if not most, people negotiated the Depression’s worst effects through mutual help at the individual level, usually from family members, kinsmen and friends. This is not a paradigm of economic development but of the people’s agency, grounded

⁴ Huff, W. G. (2001), ‘Entitlements, destitution and emigration in the 1930s Singapore Great Depression’, *Economic History Review*, Vol 54, No 3, pp 290–323.

⁵ Wee, C. J. W.-L. (2003), ‘Our island story: economic development and the national narrative in Singapore’, in Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, eds, *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, and Singapore University Press, Singapore, p 141.

⁶ Chui Kwei-chiang (1991), ‘Political attitudes and organisations, c.1900–1941’, in Ernest Chew and Edwin Lee, eds, *A History of Singapore*, Oxford University Press, Singapore, p 88.

⁷ Turnbull, C. M. (1989), *A History of Singapore, 1819–1988*, 2 ed, Oxford University Press, Singapore, p 135.

in social ties. Life during the Depression was shaped by people's survival strategies as much as by official policy and macroeconomic developments. They were part of the island's strong tradition of mutual help based on kinship ties and its transition to a society of settlers. Mutual help and family bonds represent the people's real entitlements.⁸

Before the slump: a city built on linkages

An economic study of colonial Singapore will point to its openness to the global economy as the source of its growth and its vulnerability. Whether as an 'entrepot' serving the east-west trade,⁹ or as a 'vent' for surplus staples from Malaya and the Dutch East Indies,¹⁰ Singapore's economic health was reliant on the prices of the commodities imported, stored, in some cases processed, and redistributed in its trade. By the 1920s, four categories of staples dominated Singapore's trade: most importantly rubber, plus tin, petroleum and tropical produce. A boom in the demand for durable consumer goods such as automobiles in the West after the First World War fuelled the production of these staples in South East Asia.

While Singapore's economy was buoyant in the 1920s after a brief recession from 1920-22, this was due to its international focus. The island had a much weaker manufacturing sector, dealing largely in rubber products and canned pineapple – the enterprise of Chinese capitalists diversifying their investments in the export trade. Manufacturing was connected to international trade: many businesses in both sectors had the same owners, who produced simple manufactures out of the primary commodities they handled in the export trade. Pineapple, for instance, was grown as a 'catch crop' on many Chinese rubber plantations.¹¹ Diversification was a hallmark of Chinese entrepreneurship, but it came at a price, for it was facilitated by the importance the Chinese attached to kinship ties. Tan Kah Kee, the most prominent businessman in the 1920s, was not exceptional in liberally taking

⁸ I am grateful to Gregg Huff for suggesting the link between entitlements and mutual help.

⁹ See Wong Lin Ken (1978), 'Singapore: its growth as an entrepot port, 1819-1941', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 9, No 1, March.

¹⁰ Huff, W. G. (1994), *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp 14-15.

¹¹ *Report of the Pineapple Conference* (1931), Straits Settlements, Singapore, pp 4-5.

unsecured short-term loans from banks owned by fellow Hokkiens. Chinese capitalists used their loans to expand and diversify their enterprises, speculate in currencies and commodities or, in the case of Tan, finance charitable works in Singapore and China, with little regard for financial liquidity. Among the Chinese, business dealing based on kinship ties was unquestioned. As a banker observed, '[i]n the old days, a Chinese businessman's word was his bond'.¹² Chinese traders importing wet rubber and tropical produce used a credit system also based on kinship ties; their kinsmen, as outport dealers in the Dutch East Indies, advanced provisions to indigenous producers of the commodities, which upon delivery they would transfer to Singapore.¹³

The local economy also consisted of service industries lubricating the entrepot trade, including Chinese banks and engineering firms servicing rubber estates, tin mines in Malaya and shipbuilding and repair. There was also a wide range of occupations supporting the international economy: labourers (14% of the active workforce in 1931) such as dock workers, lightermen and general coolies, clerks (7%), transport workers such as rickshaw pullers (4%) and hawkers (8%) who served these employment groups.¹⁴ According to the 1931 Malayan census, the international economy employed only 14% of the active workforce (a figure probably lowered by the Depression), but it had an important bearing on the lives of the remaining majority.¹⁵ The local economy, in which work was characterized by underemployment, was an important shield against destitution, where the jobless could seek temporary or informal work. Nevertheless, by itself the protection was insufficient as, to varying degrees, business and employment in the local economy were affected by the flow and ebb of the international economy.

Life in Singapore, however, was determined by its society as much as by the economy. Two elements of the society, although connected to the economy, had developed independently of it. The first, as illustrated in their business networks, was the importance of kinship to the Chinese. Their attachment to ties based on locality (in China), surname

¹² Yap Pheng Geck (1982), *Scholar, Banker, Gentleman Soldier: The Reminiscences of Dr. Yap Pheng Geck*, Times Books International, Singapore, p 38.

¹³ *Straits Settlements Trade Commission 1933–1934* [hereafter SSTC] (1934), Vol 1, Government Printing Office, Singapore, p 41.

¹⁴ Compiled from Vlieland, C. A. (1932), *A Report of the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics*, Crown Agents for the Colonies, London, pp 252–255.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp 246–247.

and kinship led different *bangs* or dialect-speaking groups among the Chinese to dominate various sectors of the economy and employment. The Malay and Indian minorities were similarly prominent in other occupations. Kinship ties established among the Chinese, Indian and Malay migrants a strong tradition of mutual help in response to the challenge of making a living in a foreign place under an alien administration. These ties explained how, in Chinese banks, 'in many cases the manager was a son of the chief director, the cashier the son-in-law, the assistant manager the nephew'.¹⁶ Chinese businessmen established voluntary institutions to assist (and control) their poorer kinsmen, which provided 'shelters, charity, medical care...and educational amenities to members and families'.¹⁷ Working-class Chinese utilized mutual help on a smaller scale: new arrivals, or *sinkehs*, typically came to join a family member or fellow villager in a chain of migration.¹⁸ Chew Choo Keng, who arrived in Singapore penniless, recalled that '[a]s soon as I stepped out of the Immigration Office, I was received and taken away by a relative to the first floor of a house in Jalan Besar which he rented'. The relative, an uncle from his home village, was Tan Kah Kee's nephew, whose recommendation found Chew work in Tan's biscuit factory.¹⁹

The second element was the emergence of the nuclear family in the early twentieth century. Pre-Depression Singapore stood on the threshold of an important societal transition. Since the late nineteenth century, Chinese sojourners who were successful in business had been settling down instead of returning to their ancestral villages;²⁰ most locally-born Chinese in Malaya were 'traders or shopkeepers, and not labourers or agriculturists'.²¹ By the 1930s, local settlement and marriage had permeated wider sections of Singapore's population. In 1931, due to a more balanced sex ratio among the Chinese and Malays, 39% of the total population and 36% of its Chinese population were locally born. Seven out of 10 people were between 15 and 54 years of

¹⁶ Yap, *supra* note 12, at p 27.

¹⁷ Yong Ching Fatt (1977), 'Pang, Pang organisations and leadership in the Chinese community of Singapore during the 1930s', *Journal of South Seas Society*, Vol 32, pp 49–50.

¹⁸ Wang Gungwu (2000), *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp 57–58.

¹⁹ Chan Kwok Bun and Claire Chiang See Ngoh (1994), *Stepping Out: The Making of Chinese Entrepreneurs*, Prentice Hall, Singapore, pp 90–92.

²⁰ Wang Gungwu (1991), 'The Chinese as immigrants and settlers: Singapore', *China and the Chinese Overseas*, Times Academic Press, Singapore, pp 175–176.

²¹ Vlieland, *supra* note 14, at p 70.

age, indicating a healthy proportion of people of working age. The young dependency burden (children under 15) was considerably heavy (at 26%) and the old dependency burden (people aged 55 and over) relatively light (at 4%).²² These figures suggest that many families had at least some members of working age, which was crucial during the slump. Ties between kinsmen and between family members, and the financial and emotional support they lent, could ensure that most people did not have to mediate economic shocks alone.

After Wall Street: an end to the millionaire rubber kings

As is well known, the Depression was precipitated by a number of massive crashes on the Wall Street Stock Exchange in October 1929. The most serious of these, on 'Black Tuesday', 29 October, slashed the value of stocks by 40%. The shocks reduced the demand for durable consumer goods in the USA, and soon generally in the West. As business investment in the West contracted and excess stocks of raw materials piled up in American warehouses, commodity prices in South East Asia collapsed. The League of Nations report on the slump observed that because 'the prices of raw materials have dropped more rapidly than those of manufactured products',²³ countries producing the former suffered more than manufacturing countries.²⁴ The crisis struck Singapore before the end of 1929 and persisted over the next three years. As Table 1 shows, the value of Singapore's trade fell heavily until in 1933 it was only 44% of the 1929 figure.

The Depression was prolonged by continuing overproduction of the primary commodities. Both European estates, to keep unit costs low, and indigenous smallholders, to sustain their incomes against falling prices, persisted in producing rubber beyond the demand.²⁵ Table 2 shows that the culling of rubber production lagged behind the drop in prices: between 1929 and 1932, rubber prices in Singapore slumped by 80%, but the volume of exports, an indicator of production, dropped by only 27%. At the lowest price of 4.95 cents per pound in June 1932, it was more expensive to produce than to buy rubber.

²² Vlieland, *supra* note 14, at pp 232–233.

²³ League of Nations (1931), *The Course and Phases of the World Economic Depression*, General Secretariat of the League of Nations, p 283.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp 232–233.

²⁵ Dunlop Rubber Co Ltd (1930), 'The rubber plantation industry', PRO CO 825/8/6, 18/09/1930; Drabble, J. H. (1991), *Malayan Rubber: The Interwar Years*, Macmillan, London, pp 49–50.

Table 1. Value of Singapore's foreign trade, 1929–35 (\$m).

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Imports	655	528	334	287	262	342	344
Exports	517	406	268	243	251	326	330
Total	1,171	934	602	530	513	668	674

Source: compiled from *Straits Settlements Annual Report (SSAR)* 1929–1935.

Table 2. Rubber prices and exports in Singapore, 1929–35.

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Price (cents/pound)	34.45	19.00	9.78	7.01	10.21	20.63	20.25
Volume of exports (000 tons)	253.9	233.8	220.5	184.3	230.4	316.0	258.6
Percentage price change	-5.7	-44.8	-48.5	-28.3	+45.6	+102.1	-1.8
Percentage volume change	+26.1	-7.9	-5.7	-16.4	+25.0	+37.2	-18.2

Source: compiled from *SSAR*, 1929–35.

A small recovery in prices only served to stimulate production. In late 1933, the prospect for an international rubber restriction treaty lifted prices slightly, but caused a surge in production in the Dutch East Indies and Malaya.²⁶ The cycle of overproduction and plummeting prices was arrested only in May 1934, with the signing of the International Rubber Restriction Agreement, which placed quotas on both countries from 1 June. Similarly, the prices of tin, petroleum and tropical produce stabilized only when the state imposed restrictions on production or when, belatedly, low prices forced indigenous producers to turn to subsistence agriculture. Tin prices fluctuated the least, owing to the restriction of production from March 1931 by the Tin Control Scheme. But the production of other exports was not restricted. The value of petroleum fell by 20%, while the volume of exports from Singapore rose by 7% between 1929 and 1933. Likewise, the average value of 16 items of tropical produce fell by 61%, while their export volume increased by 13% between 1927 and 1934. Only in 1933 did production of these commodities fall sufficiently to revive prices. That year, Governor Cecil Clementi stated hopefully that 'the worst is now over, so far as we are concerned, and I pray that we may soon be once more in smooth waters',²⁷ although the following years saw only

²⁶ Drabble, *supra* note 25, at p 20.

²⁷ Governor's Address to the Legislative Council (1933), *Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings 1933* (hereafter *SSLCP*), p B122.

modest growth, and for the rest of the decade, Singapore never regained its former prosperity.

The slump had a severe, wide-ranging impact on business and employment in Singapore. For many businessmen, it brought a rude awakening to the disregard for liquidity and the risks of business dealing based on kinship ties. Owing to the plunge in commodity prices, 'most of the millionaire rubber kings were wiped out',²⁸ but the effects spread wider. The number of small rubber estates employing less than a hundred labourers fell from 93 in 1929 to 37 in 1932.²⁹ The greatest business failure was Tan Kah Kee & Company. Tan later described the liquidity crisis that hit him 'like a person running for his life from a robber finding himself suddenly in the presence of a tiger'.³⁰ His rubber goods could not compete with cheap Japanese and Hong Kong imports. With debts of more than \$10 million owed to Chinese and British banks, Tan was pressed into converting his enterprise into a private limited company run by a board of directors appointed by the banks. The protection for Empire goods following the Ottawa Conference in May 1932 gave his rubber shoes a competitive edge over Japanese products. But Tan found his efforts to expand his rubber manufacturing business blocked by the directors. The British would tolerate no competition for their home rubber shoe manufacturers; Tan was told by a Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank manager that '[w]e will not permit any foreigners to encroach on our British interests'.³¹ Tan Kah Kee & Company was voluntarily liquidated in April 1934.

The liquidity crisis also ruined businesses in other branches of the international economy. Most of the bankrupts during the slump years, whose number rose from 634 in 1929 to 1,004 in 1932, were Chinese traders or retrenched clerks.³² David Ng recalled that his father, who advanced goods on credit to his clients in Sarawak, was unable to collect payment to service his bank loans and had to wind up his

²⁸ Macbeth, M. (2003), *Quiet Achiever: The Life and Times of Tan Sri Dr. Tan Chin Tuan*, Times Editions, Singapore, p 23.

²⁹ Labour Department (1929–1933), *Straits Settlements Annual Departmental Reports* (hereafter *SSADR*).

³⁰ Tan Kah Kee (1994), *The Memoirs of Tan Kah Kee*, edited and translated with notes by A.H.C. Ward, Raymond W. Chu & Janet Salaff, Singapore University Press, Singapore, p 334.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 332–333.

³² Bankruptcy Department, *SSADR*, 1929–1934.

business.³³ Indian businessmen like Rajabali Jumabhoy suffered heavy losses from their speculation on the guilder; Jumabhoy had to close down overseas branches of his company and came to regard cards and speculation as the ‘two vices of modern society and the business world’.³⁴ On the pineapple-canning industry, the Pineapple Conference surmised that ‘of the remaining 12 factories [in Singapore, Johore and Selangor in 1931], 5 are not operating owing to the fact that the proprietors have become financially embarrassed as a result of the general slump condition at present prevailing which have affected their financial interests in other directions’.³⁵ A pineapple agriculturist recalled that many cultivators turned to planting vegetables, rearing poultry or salaried work.³⁶

The contraction of the international economy had knock-on effects on businesses in the local economy offering goods and services that were demand-elastic. Insurance companies were hurt by their clients cutting policies out of their expenditure.³⁷ The collapse of the property market reduced work for lawyers, with some charging only \$5 for 10 notices of action.³⁸ Faced with more people pledging articles for cash than redeeming them, pawnshops were forced to sell expired pledges at unprofitable prices.³⁹ Goldsmiths and jewellers in Malaya complained that ‘most of the women were willing to sell their bijoutry, but exceedingly few would buy any’.⁴⁰ Even enterprises that were more demand-stable were not spared. Coffee shops faced increased competition as people retrenched from their jobs ventured into the business.⁴¹ Victor Seah recalled that his parents’ sundries shop, which sold provisions on credit, went bust because the customers – rubber tappers, farmers and coolies whose incomes had been reduced – were unable to pay.⁴² But for other small businesses with low overheads, the slump produced only a minor ebb in their fortunes. Fidahusein Tyebally,

³³ Ng, D. (1986), *Oral History Interview* (hereafter *OHI*), 20/05/1986, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, pp 12–13. All oral history interviews used in this paper are from the Oral History Centre.

³⁴ Rajabali Jumabhoy (1990), *Multiracial Singapore: On to the Nineties*, Chopmen Publishers, Singapore, pp 41–44.

³⁵ *Report of the Pineapple Conference* (1931), Straits Settlements, Singapore, p 10.

³⁶ Ong Koh Bee, *OHI*, 16/06/1981, pp 40–41, 290.

³⁷ Ng Aik Huan, *OHI*, 09/11/1983.

³⁸ *Malaya Tribune (MT)*, 08/10/1932, p 4.

³⁹ *MT*, 02/05/1930, p 3.

⁴⁰ *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs January 1935* (hereafter *MRCA*), p 78.

⁴¹ *SSTC 1933–1934*, Vol 1, p 184.

⁴² Victor Seah Tiong Hin (2002), *A Life Worth Reliving*, T.H. Seah, Singapore, p 11.

a modest exporter of rattan to India, remembered that '[m]y business was a little affected but not much' and grew thereafter.⁴³ Likewise, Kheng Hoe, which sold imported cement, nails, ropes and copper plates locally and to Muar and Malacca, did not have many competitors and expanded from 1933. As one of the firm's partners explained, 'I did not experience any fluctuation in the volume of my business as the goods sold were mostly required by the local people'.⁴⁴

Struggling employers substantially reduced wages, work and eventually employment, which affected various ethnic, employment and age groups. The official records contain only statistics on the wages of Indian rubber estate workers, but these could be used as a *de facto* standard wage for Chinese and Javanese labourers, who were thought to be paid 'about the same as the rates for Indians'.⁴⁵ Given the importance of rubber, it is also plausible that 'wages in the rubber industry set the standard for Indian and Javanese wages in all other industries'.⁴⁶ In October 1930, the government in Malaya reduced the standard wage by 20% to 40 and 30 cents for Indian male and female estate workers respectively to ward off retrenchment for an estimated 40,000 out of 280,000 coolies.⁴⁷ Wage cuts also affected 'directors, visiting agents, medical officers, managers and assistant managers' and 'subordinates, such as clerks, conductors and dressers, employed on estates'.⁴⁸ Table 3 shows that between 1930 and 1933, wages for Indian estate workers fell by 39% for males and 40% for females. The wages of Indian labourers employed by the government and other employers fell less, by 21% and 11% respectively between 1929 and 1932.

Retrenchment, unavoidable when the slump persisted, struck estate workers and, in the local economy, labourers, skilled workers and clerks. The number of Indian rubber tappers fell from 4,454 in 1929 to 483 in 1933, as most large companies retrenched heavily (see Table 4).

Clerks were among the first to suffer the retrenchment axe, as their work could be absorbed by others. Those retained often had to work overtime without pay or perform the work of 'three men',⁴⁹ although admittedly the workload in many firms and public offices also fell.⁵⁰

⁴³ Fidahusein Tyebally, *OHI*, 01/08/1982, pp 19–22.

⁴⁴ Yap Ee Chian, *OHI*, 13/08/1980, pp 36–47.

⁴⁵ Labour Department, *SSADR 1929*, p 190.

⁴⁶ Labour Department, *SSADR 1938*, p 39.

⁴⁷ *SSLCP 1930*, p B93.

⁴⁸ PRO CO 273/573, 5774/1930, 02/10/1930.

⁴⁹ *MT*, 13/03/1934, p 14.

⁵⁰ Low Cheng Gin, *OHI*, 03/06/1983, p 187.

Table 3. Wages of Indian labourers in Singapore, 1929–35 (cents per day).

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Male estate workers	50–65*	40–50	35–40	25–40	28–40	30–55	35–40
Female estate workers	45–50	35–45	32–35	20–30	24–30	28–35	32
Government employees	55–70	58–70	47–64	47–55	40–96	40–96	40–95
Miscellaneous employees	60–90	60–80	50–85	50–80	50–80	50–80	55–108

* The lower figure denotes wages for morning work.

Source: compiled from Labour Department, *SSADR*, 1929–35.

Table 4. Number of labourers employed in Singapore by firm, 1929–33.

Industry	Jan 1929	Jan 1930	Jan 1931	Jan 1932	Jan 1933
<i>Rubber estates</i>					
Bukit Sembawang Rubber Co	1,108	1,120	617	573	481
Singapore United Rubber Plantations	344	448	247	266	308
Yunnan Estate	180	163	131	<100*	<100
<i>Mercantile firms</i>					
Alexandra Brick Works	373	348	187	167	152
Asiatic Petroleum Co Ltd	956	1,085	1,130	869	699
East Asiatic Co Ltd	240	377	<100	<100	274
Firestone Tire & Rubber Co Ltd	153	125	177	163	161
Lee Rubber Works	265	312	250	640	640
Oriental Telephone & Electric Co Ltd	245	282	224	193	157
Pulau Brani Smelting Works	384	367	496	472	450
Sin Seng Moh Rubber Factory	285	198	215	<100	<100
Singapore Rubber Works	322	245	354	304	353
Singapore Slipway & Engineering Co	201	206	147	164	133
Sir John Jackson	–	1,489	1,924	2,339	2,684
Tamil Labour Co	1,563	1,820	1,709	1,511	1,356
Tan Kah Kee & Co	4,088	3,626	3,947	2,899	4,108
Tanjong Pagar Labour Syndicate	1,668	1,972	1,654	2,005	1,662
United Engineers Ltd	2,183	2,002	496	420	354

* <100 could mean that the firm had wound up.

Source: compiled from Labour Department, *SSADR*, 1929–33.

The distress struck '[v]ery many people of a good social class, Europeans and Asiatics'.⁵¹ Between 1929 and 1932, among estate workers, 57% of the Javanese (a group the British classified as 'Malays') were jobless, compared with 45% among the Chinese and 75% among Indians. In mercantile firms, unemployment affected 14% of Chinese labourers between 1929 and 1931, and 23% of Indians and 39% of the

⁵¹ *MT*, 06/05/1930, p 8.

Javanese between 1929 and 1932.⁵² Out-of-work European rubber planters had difficulty finding new work,⁵³ while the highly-paid European assistant became ‘an expensive luxury’ in commercial firms.⁵⁴ Scenes of ‘educated Europeans and Eurasians, shabbily dressed . . . hanging around eating-houses and coffee-shops, and walking about the streets for unemployment and unable to find it’ were common.⁵⁵ Many Eurasians, typically clerks used to a high standard of living, suffered from dismissals in that occupation.⁵⁶

The slump affected some social and age groups more than others. As Chinese employers typically hired their kinsmen, employees ‘not closely related to the management would be the first to receive notices of termination’.⁵⁷ Those with difficulty finding work were *sinkehs* with few local contacts, the unskilled, weak-bodied or elderly. An elderly applicant for an advertised position complained of being passed over due to his age,⁵⁸ while some firms released long-serving senior employees on large salaries to cut costs.⁵⁹ Conversely, school-leavers lacking work experience found employment elusive, such as Tay Meng Hock, who had an accounting degree but failed to find a permanent job for nearly a year.⁶⁰ Another young man, freshly graduated from school, had no luck finding clerical work and was the family’s sole breadwinner; his father had passed away and his mother depended on the Widows’ and Orphans’ Fund to support a family with 10 children.⁶¹ Working women often suffered more than men: female factory workers now earned less because they were not employed after 5 pm.⁶²

Government employees fared better. The administration’s wage cuts and economy measures came much later than in the private sector: Temporary Allowances, some 10–20% of the gross income, were removed only in January 1932. As late as the end of 1931, a proposal for a 10% wage reduction for municipal employees was defeated. Systematic retrenchment occurred only in September 1932, when the

⁵² Compiled from Labour Department, *SSADR*, 1929–1935.

⁵³ *MT*, 19/08/1930, p 8.

⁵⁴ *MT*, 24/08/1934, p 10.

⁵⁵ *MT*, 02/10/1930, p 11.

⁵⁶ *MT*, 12/01/1932, p 8.

⁵⁷ Lai Kai Joo, *OHI*, 09/04/1981, p 40.

⁵⁸ *MT*, 20/02/1933, p 2.

⁵⁹ Somasundram, S. C., *OHI*, 15/03/1982, pp 133–134.

⁶⁰ Tay Meng Hock, *OHI*, 28/08/1984.

⁶¹ *MT*, 19/02/1932, p 5.

⁶² *MRCR August 1932*, pp 23–26.

government accepted recommendations by the Straits Settlements Retrenchment Committee for a 13% cut in personal emoluments, a 10% cut in the pay of senior officers, a freeze in recruitment, and the suspension of miscellaneous allowances. In November, the Municipality implemented a 10% salary cut, reductions in allowances and retrenchments in several departments. The government downsized its pool of Indian labourers from 15,077 in 1929 to 9,105 in 1934. Still the measures did not hit as hard as in the private sector. Wages for municipal coolies, reduced from 58 cents to 50 cents in 1932, remained 'appreciably higher than those paid elsewhere in the town'.⁶³ Retrenchment did not affect all public employees equally. The Police Department, claiming the importance of its work, successfully resisted '[d]rastic reductions' to its force.⁶⁴ According to Soh Wah Seng, a surveyor-draughtsman with the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), which was responsible for urban development, the Trust escaped retrenchment because it had a small staff and low overheads. Soh remembered some laid off in other departments receiving six months' salary in compensation, but they were recalled when the economy improved after three months, gaining an additional three months' pay!⁶⁵ However, as Gregg Huff pointed out, government employees – only 8% of the active workforce in 1931 – were too few to raise the general standard of living.⁶⁶

The unemployment crisis was worsened by the heavy retrenchment of Chinese tin-miners in Malaya. Singapore, as the port of entry and exit for Chinese migrants, experienced an 'invasion of unemployed persons from other parts of the Peninsula, no doubt hoping to find work in this wonderful city or, if they cannot get work, perhaps to get away by sea' (Indian emigrants went to Penang).⁶⁷ The Tin Control Scheme, which reduced work for miners after March 1931, increased the number of homeless sleeping out at night from 3,000 to 5,000 between March and August 1931.⁶⁸ In early 1930, noticeably more beggars were harassing pedestrians,⁶⁹ many of them not professional beggars and decrepits, but young and able-bodied.⁷⁰

⁶³ *Singapore Municipality Administration Report 1932*, (hereafter *SMAR*), p 13-F.

⁶⁴ 'Comments by the Straits Settlements Government on the Report of the Straits Settlements Retrenchment Committee', February 1933, *SSLCP 1933*, pp C57, C77-78.

⁶⁵ Soh Wah Seng, *OHI*, 22/08/1983.

⁶⁶ Huff, *supra* note 4, at p 311.

⁶⁷ *SSLCP 1930*, p B130.

⁶⁸ *SSLCP 1931*, p 97.

⁶⁹ *MT*, 01/05/1930, p 11.

⁷⁰ *MT*, 17/05/1930, p 11.

Remarkable evidence to the contrary

One might have expected the hardship to be reflected in a number of indices on the quality of life, for instance, an increase in mortality, crime and social unrest. In the first full year of the Depression, there were signs that the distress was building. As Tables 5 and 6 show, the death rate in 1930 climbed from 25.8 to 27.6 per thousand, with increases in the major categories of disease (pneumonia and bronchitis, tuberculosis, malaria, diarrhoea and enteritis, beriberi and dysentery). This the authorities attributed to lower dietary standards and resistance to disease caused by the slump,⁷¹ and ‘the congregation of out of work Chinese coolies from all over Malaya in Singapore’.⁷² Cases of non-seizable crime (minor punishable offences such as street indiscipline) rose from 67,670 to 72,649, and of seizable crime (more serious offences such as murder and robbery) from 4,598 to 5,101 (see Table 7). The hardship also spurred some occupational groups and workers into collective action. In December 1929, a large number of hawkers gathered at the Chinese Protectorate to protest at the police crackdown on itinerant hawkers.⁷³ Two strikes occurred in August 1930: 150 of Tan Kah Kee’s employees against a 10% cut in wages,⁷⁴ and more than 3,000 Indian labourers at the Singapore Naval Base against the reduction of daily wages from 80 cents to 70 cents and poor conditions of work.⁷⁵

However, the following two years, the worst period of the trade recession, saw the situation improve, while it deteriorated somewhat in 1934–35 when the economy was recovering. Between 1931 and 1935, it seems that mortality, crime and social unrest were affected less by the Depression than by factors internal to the field, with the austere conditions even having a beneficial effect in some cases. The mortality rate fell in 1931, which the government noted as ‘remarkable’.⁷⁶ Indeed, the 1932 figure was the lowest in Singapore’s history to that period. But the economy’s recovery in 1934–35 brought non-immune immigrants to Singapore, resulting in a fresh cycle of infection and

⁷¹ Health Department, *SMAR 1930*, p 57-D.

⁷² *SSAR 1930*, Vol 9 (Archive Editions Limited, 1998), p 1.

⁷³ Yeo Lian Bee, K. (1989), ‘Hawkers and the state in colonial Singapore: mid-nineteenth century to 1939’, MA thesis, Department of History, Monash University, pp 140–144.

⁷⁴ *MT*, 16/08/1930, p 9.

⁷⁵ *MT*, 19/08/1930, p 9.

⁷⁶ Medical Report, *SSADR 1931*, p 1010.

Table 5. Death rate (per thousand) in Singapore, 1929–35.

1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
25.84	27.62	24.20	20.40	22.51	24.07	24.32

Source: compiled from Registration of Births and Deaths, *SSADR*, 1929–1935.

Table 6. Deaths by disease in Singapore municipality, 1929–35.

Disease	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Pneumonia & bronchitis	2,033	2,091	1,881	1,539	1,644	1,632	1,934
Tuberculosis	1,500	1,622	1,377	1,088	1,189	1,253	1,312
Malaria	1,080	1,403	551	463	366	413	814
Diarrhoea & enteritis	830	969	782	684	656	699	718
Beriberi	701	818	651	509	434	538	642
Dysentery	448	531	432	382	325	286	261

Source: compiled from Health Department, *SMAR*, 1929–1935.

Table 7. Reports of crime in Singapore, 1929–35.

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Non-seizable crime	67,670	72,649	61,023	60,115	56,876	72,657	73,681
Seizable crime	4,598	5,101	4,996	4,905	3,829	3,307	3,725

Source: compiled from Organisation and the Administration of the Straits Settlements Police, *SSADR*, 1929–1935.

increases in malaria deaths.⁷⁷ Deaths from beriberi were at their lowest during the trough of the slump but rose in 1934, because ‘the enforced consumption of home grown produce during times of economic stress ousts the more expensive highly polished rice with the resulting benefit to health’.⁷⁸ Similarly, cases of non-seizable and seizable crime fell after 1930. The police surmised that while ‘prolonged stress, poverty and temptation, will be reflected in the criminal statistics of a country not only as regards offences against property but also offences against the person’, ‘[I]ittle or no confirmation of this theory is to be found’.⁷⁹ The hardship reduced some types of crime, such as gambling (with cases prosecuted and the amount of fines falling in 1930 and 1931) and

⁷⁷ Medical Report, *SSADR 1934*, p 997; *SSADR 1935*, p 848.

⁷⁸ Medical Report, *SSADR 1935*, p 850.

⁷⁹ Organisation and the Administration of the Straits Settlements Police, *SSADR 1933*, p 496.

extortion.⁸⁰ The police observed that ‘the disappearance of much valuable and domestic property during the slump had reduced the amount of valuable loot available for the robber and thief’.⁸¹ The slump also curtailed the influence of Chinese secret societies and gangs, since ‘[p]rostitutes and others who pay “protection money” more and more frequently find courage to report their troubles to the Police’.⁸²

No serious social unrest erupted in Singapore. The protests of the hawkers, Tan Kah Kee’s employees and the Naval Base labourers were peacefully resolved. With troublesome workers easily replaceable, there were few strikes between 1929 and 1934. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) failed to exploit the unemployment situation, largely because of internal disorganization and the careful surveillance and censorship of the Special Branch.⁸³ But the Depression also reduced the MCP’s membership and voluntary subscriptions,⁸⁴ with the effect that, as the government reported in 1933, ‘the general condition of the communist movement in the Colony has never been so low’.⁸⁵ Most workers endured low wages during the Depression as ‘inevitable exigencies of the time’, and only with the economy’s improvement from 1934 did workers begin to demand higher pay.⁸⁶ In March 1934, Chinese engineers obtained a wage rise through the Chinese Engineering Guild,⁸⁷ barbers in 50 shops successfully demanded to receive full tips in October,⁸⁸ while rickshawmen struck in February 1935 against the restoration of charges for rickshaw hire, which were waived during the slump.

Removing the unemployables and ‘HCL’

Singapore’s ability to avoid a calamity was partly due to two developments at the societal level that ameliorated the distress after 1930. British policy played a key role. The government was disinclined to create

⁸⁰ Straits Settlements Police, *SSADR 1930*, p 501; *SSADR 1931*, p 433.

⁸¹ Straits Settlements Police, *SSADR 1934*, p 194.

⁸² Straits Settlements Police, *SSADR 1931*, p 429.

⁸³ See Ban Kah Choon (2001), *Absent History: The Untold Story of Special Branch Operations in Singapore 1915–1942*, Raffles, Singapore, pp 119–166.

⁸⁴ *MRCA December 1930*, pp 56–57.

⁸⁵ Straits Settlements Police, *SSADR 1933*, p 502.

⁸⁶ Yeo Kim Wah (1976), ‘Communist involvement in the Malayan labour strikes: 1936’, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol 49, No 2, pp 44–45.

⁸⁷ *MRCA March 1934*, p 32.

⁸⁸ *MRCA October 1934*, p 57.

jobs through large-scale public work and was adamant that 'under no circumstances will the Government make contributions for the purposes of doles'.⁸⁹ The regime's response instead was immigration restriction and mass emigration, reversing the long-standing policy of free and open immigration. This, for a small territory like Singapore, was akin to the effects of the departure of urban dwellers to the countryside. Gregg Huff argued that 'only mass emigration prevented the depression from turning into a disaster'.⁹⁰ In August 1930, the British limited the number of adult Indian and Chinese male arrivals to the Straits Settlements to 5,238 (less than half the figure for 1929), a number slashed repeatedly to 1,000 in June 1932. Between 1930 and 1933, the quotas reduced the number of Chinese immigrants arriving in Singapore from 242,149 to under 28,000. They were revised upwards in May 1933 with the recovery of the economy and the demand for labour. The British also repatriated all unemployed Indian labourers and destitute and decrepit Chinese from Malaya, although not the numerous unemployed able-bodied Chinese labourers, except on two occasions, between August and November 1931 and May and July 1932, when Chinese unemployment was particularly severe.

The immigration policy alleviated the unemployment crisis by removing many jobless Chinese and Indians and improving the quality of arrivals. Victor Purcell, the Immigration Officer of the Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements, noticed that only traders and shop assistants could afford the increased prices of passage fares charged by the shipping companies.⁹¹ By the end of 1930, new Chinese arrivals were generally better skilled.⁹² Similarly, repatriation targeted 'mining and agricultural labour', particularly 'the older and less fit members of the labouring class'.⁹³ By 1934, it appeared that 'the unemployed is more likely to be the unemployable, the broken down coolie or rickshaw puller who is past regular work, than the able bodied and intelligent labourer required for industrial purposes'.⁹⁴ However, the immigration policy was by itself inadequate: it targeted mainly male labourers and did not cover most able-bodied Chinese, the white-collar class and locally born, particularly the Straits Chinese, Eurasians and Malays, or

⁸⁹ *SSLCP 1931*, p B134.

⁹⁰ Huff, *supra* note 4, at p 313.

⁹¹ Victor Purcell (1965), *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, Cassell, London, p 222.

⁹² *SSLCP 1931*, p B7.

⁹³ Medical Department, *SSADR 1934*, p 995.

⁹⁴ *SSTC 1933-1934*, Vol 1, p 152.

women and children. People who remained in Singapore still had to eke out a living.

For them, the other societal factor was the Depression's beneficial effect in reducing the prices of imported foodstuffs and other consumer goods on which Singapore was reliant. In the 1920s, buoyed by a booming economy, the high cost of living, or 'HCL' was a frequent complaint in the newspapers. Table 8 shows the slump causing a modest fall, after a time lag, in the cost of living in 1930 and a larger one between 1931 and 1933, particularly for the Asian standard of living. Between 1929 and 1933 (see Table 9), the prices of food and groceries fell by 47%, rent by 44%, clothing by 24%, and tobacco by 23%. These items totalled 64% of overall expenditure, or more if food took up a larger proportion of the expenses – Gregg Huff has suggested 72%, as opposed to 46% in the British records.⁹⁵ The price of Siamese rice, the chief Asian staple, fell from 52 cents per *gantang* (gallon) in 1929 to 25 cents in 1933. Ng Lee Kar, a shop proprietor, remembered that rubber tappers with reduced incomes could support their families because of the low price of rice, and also by buying cheaper, locally grown vegetables, or growing their own.⁹⁶ Rents were high in 1930, with landlords criticized for being ignorant of market conditions,⁹⁷ or preferring to keep their houses vacant.⁹⁸ However, by 1931, many landlords had reduced rents by 20% or more, with those in the outlying areas of the town making the greatest reductions, or allowing tenants to pay by instalment.⁹⁹ The price falls for other items between 1929 and 1932 were smaller – about 2% for light and water (with a larger fall in 1933), 5% for transport and 14% for education. But with the exception of water, these items were strictly speaking non-essentials, and people could economize on them or substitute them with others.

Real wages (see Table 10) can be calculated by weighing the wage index of Indian labourers (Table 11) against the Asian cost of living index. Labourers in the municipality and manufacturing who retained employment benefited from the lowered cost of living: their real wages were stable in 1930 and rose considerably thereafter. Those who suffered were the smaller numbers working on rubber estates and

⁹⁵ Huff, *supra* note 4, at p 304. Huff bases his estimation on the Dutch East Indies' cost of living index.

⁹⁶ Ng Lee Kar, *OHI*, 16/03/1982, p 311.

⁹⁷ *MT*, 17/12/1930, p 4.

⁹⁸ *MT*, 13/05/1931, p 11.

⁹⁹ Assessment & Estates Department, *SMAR 1930*, p 2-A.

Table 8. Cost of living index in Singapore, 1929–35 (1929 = 100).

Standard	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Asian	100	94.8	80.3	69.8	63.8	66.3	69.5
Eurasian	100	94.7	84.2	74.9	70.0	71.9	72.2
European	100	96.5	90.2	83.3	79.0	80.2	80.4

Source: Labour Wages & Cost of Living, *Straits Settlements Blue Book (SSBB)*, 1929–1935.

Table 9. Cost of living index in Singapore by item, 1929–35 (Asian standard of living, 1929 = 100).

Item	Weight (1914)	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Food & groceries	46	100	93.7	68.8	57.8	52.6	55.7	62.7
Servants	11	100	98.3	88.7	80.2	74.5	79.6	81.9
Transport	11	100	95.3	107.2	99.2	95.2	94.2	91.9
Education	9	100	97.8	89.7	86.1	84.5	89.2	91.6
Rent	9	100	92.1	78.7	63.7	55.8	55.8	55.8
Clothing	8	100	99.1	94.5	78.0	75.8	70.6	70.7
Light & water	4	100	97.8	97.8	97.8	75.4	93.9	93.9
Tobacco	2	100	92.3	92.3	89.2	77.0	77.0	69.3
Total weight	100							

Source: compiled from Labour Wages & Cost of Living, *SSBB*, 1929–1935.

Table 10. Wage index of male Indian labourers in Singapore, 1929–35 (1929 = 100).

Type	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Municipal	100	100	91.4	78.6	137.1	137.1	135.7
Estate	100	76.9	61.5	61.5	61.5	84.6	61.5
Rubber factory	100	75.0	75.0	68.8	68.8	68.8	68.8
Manufacturing	100	100	94.4	88.9	88.9	88.9	120.0

Source: compiled from Labour Wages & Cost of Living, *SSBB*, 1929–1935.

Table 11. Real wages index for male Indian labourers in Singapore, 1929–35 (1929 = 100).

Type	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Municipal	100	105.5	113.8	112.6	214.9	206.8	195.3
Estate	100	81.1	76.6	88.1	96.4	127.6	88.5
Rubber factory	100	79.1	93.4	98.6	107.8	103.8	99.0
Manufacturing	100	105.5	117.6	127.4	139.3	134.1	172.7

Note: real wage index = wage index/Asian cost of living index.

factories. Since the wages of other labourers were based on those of Indian estate workers, a similar experience may be true for other ethnic and employment groups. Soh Wah Seng, who retained his job at the SIT, remembered luxury items such as leather shoes from England, suits and silk socks being remarkably cheap.¹⁰⁰ Still the reduced cost of living did not bring relief to all. The real wages index does not cover the unemployed or take into account the reduction in actual work done because of the rotation of work.

Having cordial relations and the right contacts

To comprehend fully how people avoided the worst effects of the Depression, one must understand their responses at the individual level. The slump nurtured a strong spirit of self-help and resilience and innovation amid adversity. Coffee-shop owners enticed customers by placing bowls of sugar on tables,¹⁰¹ while competing barbers slashed their rates from 40 cents to 5 cents, or even gave away free soap.¹⁰² For other businessmen, the Depression was an opportunity as well as a crisis. Yeo Tiam Siew, who compiled the first Chinese telephone directory just before the Wall Street crash, made a \$3,000 profit from the first issue, and by 1933 was making nearly \$4,000 yearly. His directory was popular with most Chinese who could not read English.¹⁰³ Similarly, Lien Ying Chow's modest Wah Hin & Company, which supplied foodstuffs to the British forces and small shops, fared well because his 'prices were always competitive' and he 'always gave them good service, and they liked to give contracts to the people they knew'.¹⁰⁴ The best example is Aw Boon Haw, maker of the traditional Chinese analgesic, Tiger Balm. Aw profited during the slump by increasing the supply of Tiger Balm to South East Asia and China. Aw had an uncanny business sense:

Rich or poor, people get sick and sick people need medicine. The poor cannot afford to see a doctor or even a *sinseh* [Chinese physician]. But they can afford a few cents to buy our medicines. We will keep our prices low. Our suppliers

¹⁰⁰ Soh Wah Seng, *OHI*.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, *OHI*.

¹⁰² Liaw Ching Sing, *OHI*, 28/07/1981.

¹⁰³ Yeo Tiam Siew (1993), *Destined to Survive: The Story of My Life*, Yeo Tiam Siew, Singapore, pp 70–73.

¹⁰⁴ Lien Ying Chow (1992), *From Chinese Villager to Singapore Tycoon: My Life Story*, Times Books International, Singapore, p 68.

need money. They will sell cheap, even cheaper than previously. So you see, my brother, we can afford to maintain low prices and sell to make a bigger profit.¹⁰⁵

Many people, including white-collar workers, were willing to take on jobs in the local economy ‘considered *de classe* in happier times’.¹⁰⁶ Hawking was one such occupation. In 1931, there were some 6,000 licensed and 10,000 unlicensed hawkers, among whom ‘at least half of the Hokkien hawkers [the most numerous group] are potential vagrants, either because of slump conditions or that they have previously followed trades which by reason of age or infirmity they can no longer continue’, and ‘[e]very Cantonese thrown out of employment can be regarded a potential hawker’.¹⁰⁷ The itinerants included Chinese women from the building industry who had turned to planting vegetables. These peddlers, not truly hawkers, had ventured into informal work, typically in agriculture or artisan work, due to unemployment.¹⁰⁸ Hawkers endured a difficult year in 1930 due to a police campaign started in 1927 to arrest unlicensed hawkers. The authorities’ refusal to grant hawking licences to unemployed able-bodied men and cripples exacerbated the problem.¹⁰⁹ In 1930, the public witnessed frequent scenes of hawkers being roughly handled and dragged to the police station to be charged with unlicensed hawking or street indiscipline. Likely fines of \$2–\$5 for hawking without a licence, or \$4–\$8 for hawking in a prohibited area,¹¹⁰ were heavy penalties, for ‘[h]ow could a man only capable of earning about 80 cents per day afford to pay a fine of \$10 or more?’¹¹¹ Worse was the destruction of their goods, usually obtained on credit. Asian unofficials in the Legislative Council warned the government that the occupation provided ‘employment to a certain class of indigent people who otherwise would have to starve or live by crime’ and that ‘[t]his avenue of employment should certainly not be completely closed to the poor’.¹¹² In late 1931, the government ceased

¹⁰⁵ King, S. (1992), *Tiger Balm King: The Life & Times of Aw Boon Haw*, Times Books International, Singapore, p 265.

¹⁰⁶ *MT*, 13/07/1932, p 3.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question in Singapore’, *SSLCP 1931*, p C27.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p C73.

¹⁰⁹ Yeo Lian Bee, *supra* note 73, at pp 118–120.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 138.

¹¹¹ *MT*, 18/08/1930, p 7.

¹¹² *SSLCP 1930*, pp B7–8.

its campaign against hawkers and made licences available for itinerants, which brought some relief.¹¹³

People also turned to farming and other informal work in the local economy. Chinese market gardeners grew vegetables, which supplied much of the town's needs, and reared pigs, poultry and carp.¹¹⁴ Locally grown vegetables competed well against imports, with about 12 tons produced daily and the acreage rising to 3,000 acres in 1933, due partly to Chinese squatters using rubber land for vegetable-growing.¹¹⁵ Educated persons found other work such as giving private tuition. When Chua Boon Hean, who painted cinema posters, suffered a large pay cut on joining another firm, he compensated by giving tuition in Chinese.¹¹⁶ Tay Meng Hock, despite his accounting degree, was unable to find an accounting or managerial job for nearly a year. To support his widowed mother and family, he laboured as a cutter in a pineapple factory, and when work ceased because of the slump, a friend recommended him to work as a gate collector for weekly football matches at the Anson Road stadium, where he earned 50–70 cents daily. Six months later, through another friend, Tay was hired by the American Life Insurance Company.¹¹⁷

The positive responses of individuals also resulted in mutual assistance within their social circles, among family members, friends and kinsmen. Where kinship ties had been important in better times in helping the Chinese do business and find employment, in an economic crisis they were vital. Mutual help was less effective at the institutional level, as contributions to voluntary organizations were reduced by failures of businesses and widespread retrenchment. In August 1932, the Legislative Council was warned that such 'private efforts which have been made to deal with it [unemployment] have not met with a great measure of success'.¹¹⁸

Mutual help was much more effective among individuals or individual entities. Many struggling businesses decided to cooperate or amalgamate. The best known of these were the three Hokkien banks, Chinese Commercial, Ho Hong and Oversea Chinese, which faced cash-flow difficulties due to unsecured loans made to businessmen such as

¹¹³ *SMAR 1932*, p 13–I.

¹¹⁴ *SSAR 1931*, Vol 9, p 23.

¹¹⁵ *SSAR 1932*, Vol 10, p 19; *SSAR 1933*, Vol 10, p 20; *SSAR 1934*, Vol 10, p 23.

¹¹⁶ Chua Boon Hean, *OHI*, 25/07/1990.

¹¹⁷ Tay Meng Hock, *OHI*.

¹¹⁸ *SSLCP 1932*, p B90.

Tan Kah Kee. To reduce overheads, pool resources and combine their assets, the banks amalgamated into Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC) in October 1932. The move proved to be a turning point for Chinese banking in South East Asia, where banks that survived the slump would restructure along more modern principles of banking.¹¹⁹ The OCBC did so by recruiting a corps of 'pioneer bank officials', including 'compradores, chief clerks, cashiers, accountants, sub-accountants or officers of the European banks or trading firms'.¹²⁰ Newly appointed directors such as Lee Kong Chian and Tan Chin Tuan were familiar with Western business practices and did away with the policy of preferentially making unsecured loans to clansmen.¹²¹ They saw the lesson of the slump as the 'need for liquidity and financial management',¹²² and made efforts to keep at least half the bank's assets liquid as part of a 'safety first' policy.¹²³ After a hesitant start, the OCBC expanded when the slump receded, which has since been seen as a 'blessing in disguise' for the bank.¹²⁴

A mix of entrepreneurship and business and family ties was responsible for the success of Lee Kong Chian, who expanded his modest rubber company by buying rubber plantations at rock-bottom prices.¹²⁵ Lim Nee Soon, a businessman who had invested heavily in rubber, was saddled with bank debts during the slump. After Lee helped negotiate a settlement with his creditor, Lim leased his rubber factory to Lee in return. Tan Kah Kee, Lee's father-in-law, also leased his rubber and pineapple assets and biscuit factory to Lee when his company was liquidated.¹²⁶ Nonetheless, Lee's success was due to his business philosophy as much as to his patrons. Unlike the older business generation, Lee did not speculate in rubber, and traded immediately what he imported, a conservative but safe policy in a time of falling rubber prices.¹²⁷ He also took care to repay his long-term loans.¹²⁸ Later

¹¹⁹ Brown, R. A. (1994), *Capital and Entrepreneurship in South-East Asia*, Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, pp 170–172.

¹²⁰ Yap, *supra* note 12, at pp 35–36.

¹²¹ Melanie Chew (1996), *Leaders of Singapore*, Resource Press, Singapore, p 218.

¹²² Yap, *supra* note 12, at p 38.

¹²³ Grace Loh, Goh Chor Boon and Tan Teng Lang (2000), *Building Bridges, Carving Niches: An Enduring Legacy*, Oxford University Press, Singapore, p 27.

¹²⁴ Yap, *supra* note 12, at p 31.

¹²⁵ Lee Seng Gee, *OHI*, 20/98/1980, pp 15–16.

¹²⁶ Tan Kok Kheng, *OHI*, 14/12/1982, p 25.

¹²⁷ Lee Seng Gee, *OHI*, pp 11–13.

¹²⁸ Brown, *supra* note 119, at pp 112–113.

known as the 'Rubber and Pineapple King', Lee mused, 'Opportunities will fall in the way of every man but not every man will use them'.¹²⁹

Help from family members, kinsmen and friends was a crucial source of financial and emotional support in the difficult times. An examination of the coroner's inquests reveals the despair occasioned by the absence of such support. The strain of supporting a large family with young dependants can be seen in the case of Ong Kok, a respected village headman and a kind family man, who borrowed \$7,000 from a *chettiar* (Indian moneylender) to buy a rubber plantation in June 1930. As rubber prices plummeted, his partner recalled, '[a]bout a week before his death . . . he appeared to be worrying considerably about his debt, he seemed very down-hearted'. One night in September, Ong killed his wife, his 11-year-old son and four daughters, aged five months, and five, 10 and 14 years, before slitting his own throat. His 12-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter survived.¹³⁰ The suicides of Ong Chui Seng and Tan Yok Hoe, who had two young children aged five and eight years, show the anguish of lacking support from one's kin. Ong, unemployed for several years and often berated by his father about it, took caustic soda together with his wife. In his suicide note, Ong wrote, 'We are surrounded by starvation and coldness....When my boy has grown up, he must remember the kindness of his parents and repay them for it'. He survived, but she did not.¹³¹

As opposed to support not forthcoming from one's kin, individuals also became suicidal when they kept their torment to themselves, as shown in cases in which the family and friends of the deceased were ignorant of the reasons for the suicide. Narain Singh, for instance, was a watchman who also loaned money, but talked little about his problems to his family. When he cut his throat in October 1933, it was from the promissory notes and bankruptcy documents in his room that his family found the cause of his suicide: his debtors had gone bankrupt, and he himself was \$156 in debt, a large sum in those times.¹³² Another group with little local support, *sinkehs* like Yap Chow Yen, also found life daunting. Yap, whose provisions shop had failed in Deli, Sumatra, came to Singapore alone before 1931 with a sleeping mat, a change of

¹²⁹ Chew, *supra* note 121, at p 27.

¹³⁰ Ong Kok (1930), *Singapore Coroner's Inquests and Inquiries* (hereafter *SCII*), No 489/1930, 12/09/1930 (Subordinate Courts of Singapore), pp 18–41. The coroners' inquests used in this paper are from the Subordinate Courts.

¹³¹ Tan Yok Hoe, *SCII*, No 419/1934, 01/10/1934, pp 9–25.

¹³² Narain Singh, *SCII*, No 522/1933, 19/10/1933, pp 6–13.

clothes and very little money, having spent most of it on the passage. Unable to find work, Yap wrote tearfully to his son in Deli, asking him to bring money quickly to Singapore. The son did not come, and Yap hanged himself. His tragedy also highlights the (in this case) devastating importance of immigration restriction.¹³³

When mutual help was present, its impact was positive. Natesan Palanivelu, who applied to numerous companies for six months without success, finally obtained a job as a ticketing clerk with the Singapore Traction Company through a friend who worked there, after which 'life is very easy'.¹³⁴ Likewise, S. C. Somasundram, who had only just come to Singapore, felt like 'a parasite' when he was unable to find work. Fortunately, his relations 'were very cordial. I was always a bit worried because I was unemployed. My food, clothing and everything is given by my brother or my cousins or my uncles and others'.¹³⁵ When the nuclear family had young people of working age, it was an important bulwark against destitution. Many youths were saddled with the responsibility of supporting the family and sometimes had to leave school to work in the local economy. This was often a difficult but formative experience when they grew up emotionally and socially. Often more concerned about fulfilling obligations to the family, they reconciled themselves to the loss of educational opportunity. T.C. Koh, who had to abandon his ambition to enter Raffles College when his father's business failed, 'could not bear the idea of depending on him for my education when I knew that the family's financial resources were alarmingly low'. He began working in 1933 with 'fear and trembling...facing a challenge not of my seeking', as a clerk with the Land Office, a 17-year-old in charge of a team of five men, handling the issue of rubber coupons worth millions of dollars.¹³⁶

Women also became more assertive and important members of the family. The restriction of male immigration helped change women's status 'from a dependent to an independent one, from recipients of to contributors to family welfare'.¹³⁷ With men thrown out of work, many mothers, wives or daughters became the family's main or sole bread-

¹³³ Yap Chow Yen, *SCII*, No 47/1931, 21/01/1931, pp 3–18.

¹³⁴ Natesan Palanivelu, *OHI*, 02/08/1985, pp 64–67.

¹³⁵ Somasundram, S. C., *OHI*, 15/03/1982, pp 134–135.

¹³⁶ Koh, T. C. (1993), *Memories of a Golden Era: Autobiography of T. C. Koh*, Singapore Methodist Church, Singapore, pp 16–17.

¹³⁷ Chiang, C. (1994), 'Female migrants in Singapore: towards a strategy of pragmatism and coping', in Jaschok, M., and Miers, S., eds, *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape*, Hong Kong University, Hong Kong, p 259.

winners.¹³⁸ Some worked as ‘sly prostitutes’ (brothels had been outlawed in 1927); many waitresses and cashiers in restaurants and coffee-shops were in fact prostitutes. Most women worked in other trades: they were saleswomen working in shops and female barbers ‘commanding fair wages’ in Malaya and Singapore.¹³⁹ Others sewed, mended clothes, washed laundry, did domestic work, and worked in factories. When Gerald de Cruz’s unemployed father refused to accept a lower-paying job, his mother, a teacher, took on a second teaching job, making \$90 a month and providing for a family of eight, including four children. According to de Cruz, his mother was a ‘raft’ to which his father clung.¹⁴⁰ Another strong lady was the mother of Lee Khoon Choy and 14 other children. When Lee’s father, a coolie *kepala* (headman) died in 1932, ‘[g]one were the “good friends” and “relatives” who had frequented our home in pursuit of good food, good wine and Father’s favours’. His mother sold sarongs and jewellery and later became a mistress of ceremony for Peranakan weddings. Lee observed:

My widowed mother took her circumstances in her stride and displayed an enterprising side to her character which had lain dormant throughout her severely sheltered existence as a wife. She had never stepped out of the house during Father’s lifetime.¹⁴¹

Bonds within the nuclear family were frequently resilient. Victor Seah’s father, who had to provide for four girls and a boy, lost his business during the slump. He sold his youngest daughter but took her back at the eldest daughter’s insistence. In March 1932, when Victor was born,

[t]he joyful birth was celebrated in the midst of poverty. Times were really bad. The Depression was at its peak. Nonetheless, the proud mother had the best nourishment available, steamed chicken soup from the last bird in the backyard.¹⁴²

Conclusion

Life in Singapore during the Depression was considerably varied, depending on where people stood in relation to the international economy, their profession, gender, age and health, and their ties with

¹³⁸ *MT*, 29/06/1932, p 7.

¹³⁹ *The China Critic*, 26/07/1934, cited in *MRCA August 1934*, p 70.

¹⁴⁰ de Cruz, G. (1993), *Rojak Rebel: Memoirs of a Singapore Maverick*, Times Books International, Singapore, pp 12–13, 68–71.

¹⁴¹ Lee Khoon Choy (1988), *On the Beat to the Hustings: An Autobiography*, Times Books International, Singapore, pp 5–6.

¹⁴² Seah Tiong Hin, *supra* note 42, at pp 10–12.

family, kin and friends. The year 1930 was the grimmest, after which immigration controls prevented overcrowding, and the falling cost of living brought relief to those who remained in work. Estate workers, clerks and labourers in the international economy suffered more than those in the local economy, such as government employees. For people with stable employment, the early 1930s were plentiful years amid the low cost of living, although they were a minority. Those who took up non-salaried work in the local economy, such as hawking, farming or tutoring, could get by if they could survive the increased competition.

At the individual level, self-reliance, mutual help and family bonds helped people find work or obtain living expenses, food and lodging from family members, kinsmen and friends. The slump was difficult for large families with young and old dependants, while life was also painful for *sinkehs* with few local contacts and lone elderly persons, but their numbers were small due to emigration. More established families with members of working age could usually make ends meet. Although Singapore's population had no land entitlements, mutual help and family bonds were arguably a form of social security that enabled people to grapple with unemployment collectively, and provided assistance not forthcoming from government and social institutions. These responses were rooted in Singapore's long history of mutual help and its evolution to a settled society during the late colonial period. The colonial government believed that people 'simply had to tighten up their belts' during the Depression.¹⁴³ An understanding of life at the individual level shows they did much more than that.

¹⁴³ Health Department, *SMAR 1932*, p 38-D.