



COMMUNITY HERITAGE SERIES IV:

# **HERITAGE ALONG FOOTPATHS**

Book 4 of National Heritage Board's E-Books Collection

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# HERITAGE ALONG FOOTPATHS

## COMMUNITY HERITAGE SERIES IV

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# FOREWORD

Five-foot-ways are a unique feature of shop houses which were mandated by Sir Stamford Raffles in his building plans for Singapore. They served not only their original purpose of providing sheltered walk ways but subsequently became places of business where traders could ply their goods and sell their services. Given their history, five-foot-ways can be said to be a Singapore invention.

Most of these five-foot-way trades comprised portable businesses selling inexpensive commodities and services, and they operated wherever space was available. In addition to the trades covered by this e-book, other common trades included knife sharpeners, letter writers, tinsmiths, hair-bun makers, stool makers etc.

As these five-foot-way trades required little capital investment, they quickly became a source of employment for the influx of immigrants. However, with Singapore's rapid progress, many of the five-foot-way trades and traders, once common in early Singapore, have disappeared or are fast disappearing.

I am therefore very pleased that the National Heritage Board (NHB) brought back a number of five-foot-way trades in its "Heritage Along Footpaths" project



Professor Tommy Koh  
Honorary Chairman  
National Heritage Board

in December 2011. The project showcased traders such as street barbers, ice-ball sellers, kacang puteh sellers, cobblers and fortune tellers who offered their wares and services at prices of yesteryear.

The positive public feedback for the project showed that five-foot-way trades have a special place in the hearts of history-loving Singaporeans. Some members of the public also wrote in to comment that the project provided a platform for inter-generational bonding through the sharing of memories between the older and the younger generations. As Prime Minister Lee said, at his 2012 National Day Rally, it is important for Singapore to collect its memories because memories are the soul of a nation.

Through the five-foot-way trades highlighted in this e-book, I hope that readers, especially the younger ones, will not only learn about the trades featured but be encouraged to find out more about other trades.

In conclusion, I would like to congratulate NHB for the launch of its new e-books and I look forward to more such e-books in future.





▲ A cobbler operating from a pavement (1980).

*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

# VANISHING TRADE-COBBLERS

## History of Cobblers in Singapore

In Singapore, cobblers became popular during the 1950s after the majority of Singaporeans switched from wearing clogs to modern footwear. The cobblers offered shoe-repair services such as replacement of worn out soles and heels, and were frequently found at five-foot-ways along shop-house corridors.

## Key Characteristics of Cobblers

In the early days, many cobblers learnt their skills from the shoe shops where they worked and the trade was dominated by Chinese males although a few Indian and Malay cobblers could be seen.

A cobbler could typically be seen sitting on a low stool with one or more baskets, boxes or small box-like cupboards to store their tools and materials. A cobbler's tools comprised knives of different shapes and sizes, hammers, pincers, scissors, needles etc. as well as repair materials such as leather and vinyl materials, rubber pieces, adhesive, nails, threads etc..

Besides mending shoes, a cobbler could also provide shoe polishing services. These cobblers would be equipped with shoe brushes, small pieces of rags and shoe polish. Back then, cobblers could be identified by their dirty hands which were often soiled and blackened from the tasks of shoe repair and polishing.



◀ A cobbler servicing a customer outside Shaw Centre (1980).

*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*





▲  
A five-foot-way cobbler and his customer (1960).  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

Besides stationary cobblers, there were also roving cobblers. Typically, a roving cobbler would cycle around housing estates outside the city area, with a cart laden with footwear repairing tools and materials, and possibly with an umbrella fixed to his bicycle cart. They were popular with housewives and school children who wanted to mend their shoes.

Today, traditional cobblers can still be found in some parts of Singapore such as Chinatown as well as the Raffles Place vicinity. However, there are not many left now as most of the traditional cobblers from yesteryears have retired or passed on. The trade is now dominated by modern shoe repair chains such as Mister Minit and Shukey Services. Moreover, in today's society with its high living standards and fast-moving fashion trends, buying new shoes are often preferred to repairing old ones.

## Where Could Cobblers Be Found

Cobblers were once a common sight in Singapore and many could be found along five-foot-ways, at the corners of pavements along busy roads, and on sidewalks within the vicinity of bus-stops. They were often stationary and remained at a specific location for years after building up a customer base. Stationary cobblers were mostly located in or near the city, in areas such as Chinatown and the Central Business District.





▲ A Chinese fortune teller at Queen Street (1994).  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

# VANISHING TRADE-FORTUNE TELLERS

## History of Fortune Tellers in Singapore

With the tradition of fortune telling deeply rooted in many parts of Asia, this trade entered Singapore when large numbers of Chinese immigrants arrived on the island during the 1800s. Fortune telling was once a thriving business because many people, particularly those with little or no education, relied on fortune tellers for advice on matters such as marriage, business, the selection of auspicious dates etc..

## Key Characteristics of Fortune Tellers

The set-up for fortune tellers typically included a small table with an additional couple of

chairs or low stools for customers. The items laid on the table would vary from one fortune teller to another, and depended on the choice of fortune-telling method.

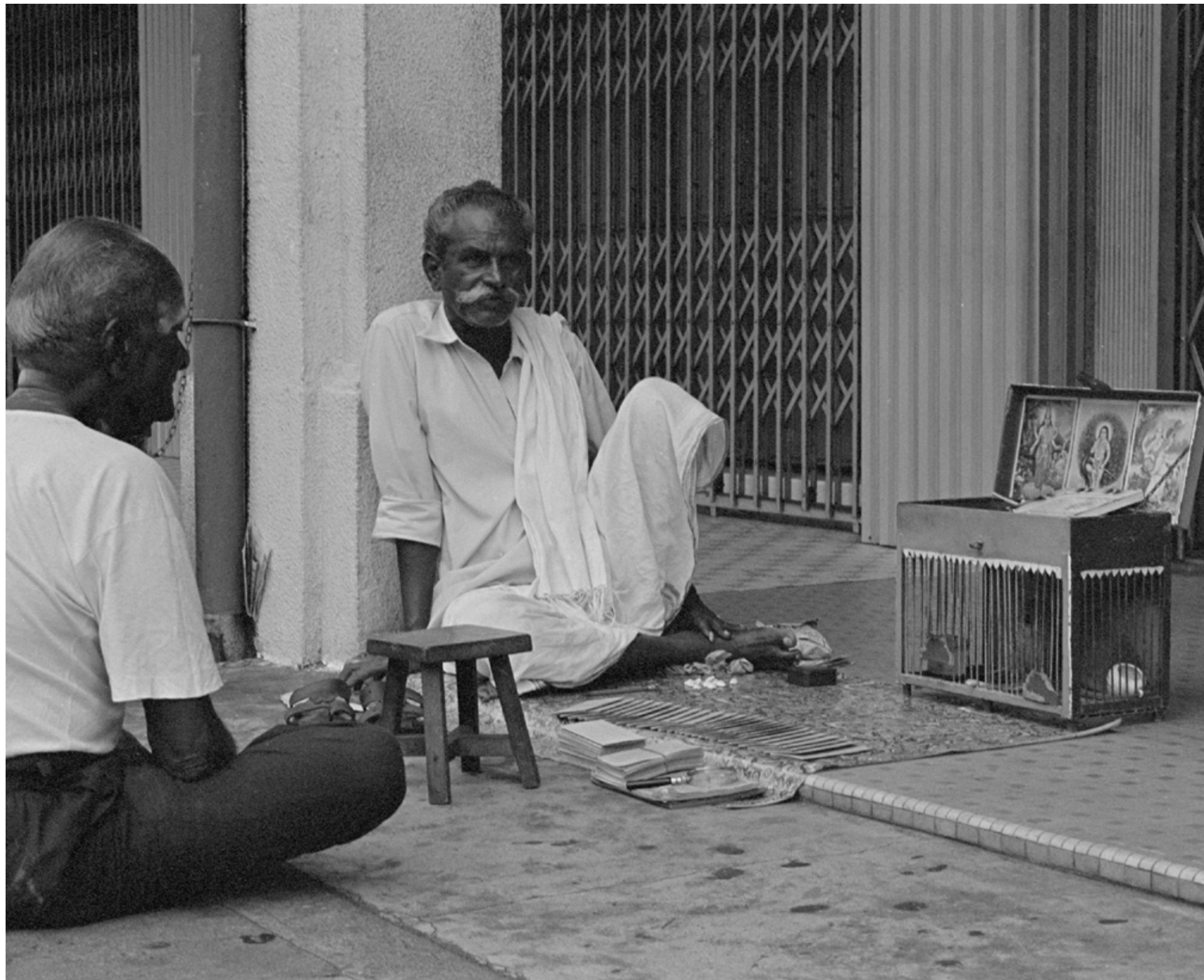
For Chinese fortune tellers, the more frequently displayed items would include small statues/pictures of Buddha or other gods, lighted incense or joss sticks, pictures of palms or faces filled with lines and tiny Chinese characters, as well as tools such as books to consult from, carved bamboo sticks, cards etc..

The more popular Chinese fortune telling methods would include palmistry, face reading, "Bazi" (i.e. use of one's birth data to foretell one's destiny) and "Kau Cim" (i.e. a set of 78 fortune sticks to predict one's short term future). In addition, there were



▲ A five-foot-way fortune teller (1962).  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore





▲  
An Indian parrot astrologer (1970).  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

## Where Could Fortune Tellers Be Found

Fortune tellers used to be a common sight along five-foot-ways and at temple grounds. Some fortune tellers also made house calls. The Indian parrot astrologers were found primarily in Serangoon Road, where they first plied their trade to serve the Indian community.

Today, the number of Chinese fortune tellers in Singapore has dwindled significantly. However, they can still be spotted in areas such as Chinatown, the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple at Waterloo Street and its vicinity, as well as old housing estates such as Ang Mo Kio. As for the Indian parrot astrologers, less than five were left in Little India by the early 2000s.

also “tung shu” (i.e. almanac) tellers who used the almanac as a guide to pick auspicious dates for important occasions such as moving house, spring cleaning, wedding etc..

Indian fortune tellers in Singapore, on the other hand, were primarily parrot astrologers. At the start of each session, the parrot astrologer would lay a deck of 27 fortune cards on the table. Once the parrot has been “provided” with the customer’s name and birthday, it would walk out of the cage, pick a card from the stack with its beak and return to its cage. The parrot astrologer would then interpret the card and advise the customer accordingly.





▲ An Indian ice-ball seller shaping an ice-ball (1978).  
*Courtesy of Singapore Press Holding*

## VANISHING TRADE-ICE-BALL SELLERS

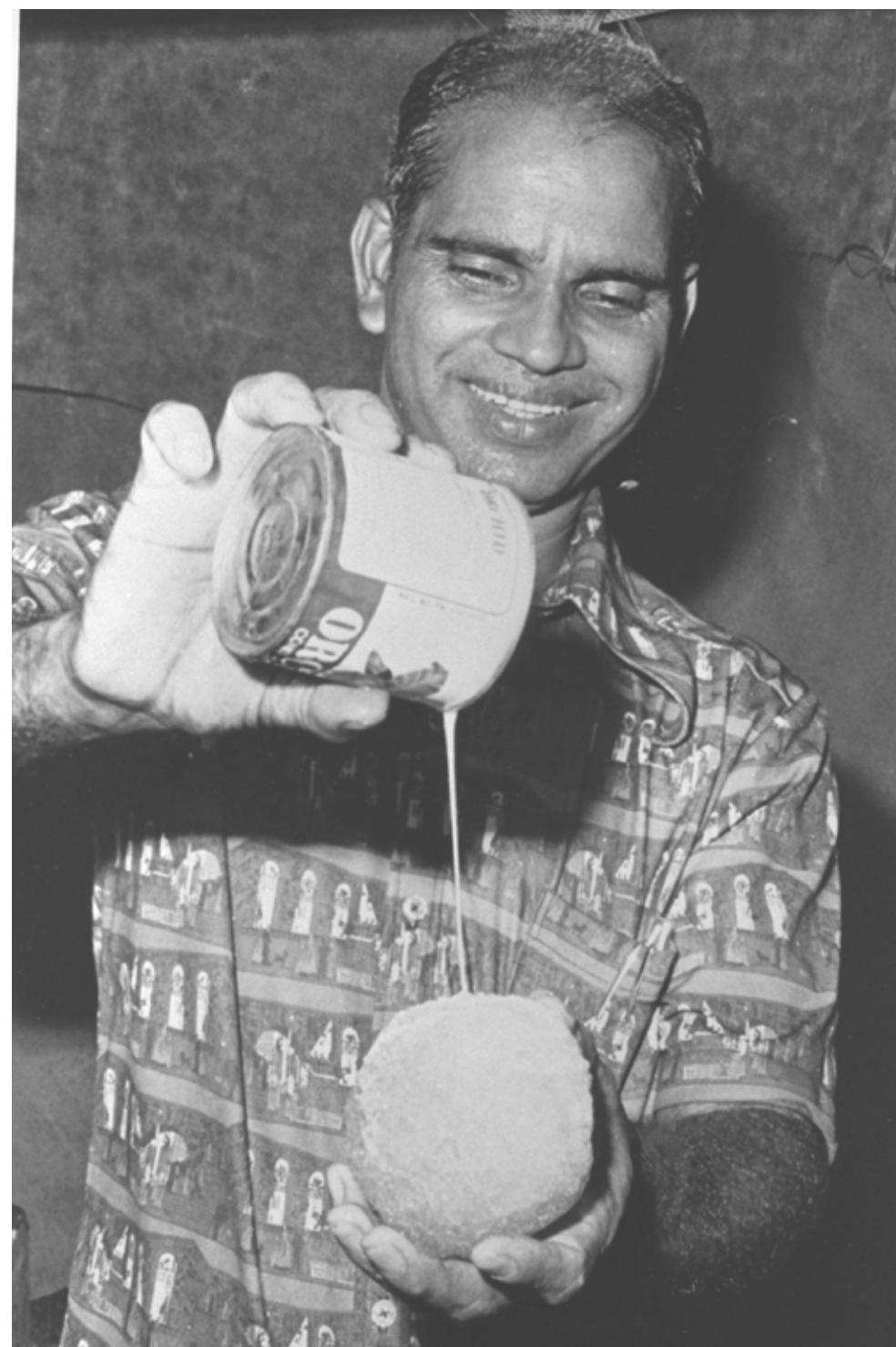
### History of Ice-Ball Sellers in Singapore

Once a common sight in Singapore, ice-ball sellers were primarily Indian vendors who sold drinks and ice-balls at the same time. Ice-balls, each costing about five to ten cents, were immensely popular in the 1950s to the 1960s, particularly among young children and teenagers. Eaten with bare hands, ice-balls provided relief in Singapore's sweltering heat.

### Key Characteristics of Ice-Ball Sellers

The ice-ball sellers typically operated pushcarts laden with bottles of soft drinks, a plastic container for a drink made from pink or red syrup, glasses for the drinks, ingredients for ice-balls as well as a wooden ice shaver.

To make an ice-ball, the ice-ball seller would place a block of ice on the ice shaver. A piece of folded towel would then be placed



◀ An Indian ice-ball seller pouring syrup on an ice-ball (1978).

*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*





An Indian ice-ball seller and his customers (1952).  
*Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings*

## Where Could Ice-Ball Sellers Be Found

In the past, ice-ball sellers were frequently found near schools and/or at many five-foot-ways along shop-house corridors. However, as they operated pushcarts, ice-ball sellers could easily move from one location to another within a day. Today, ice kachang have replaced ice-balls, and are sold primarily by Chinese hawkers at food centres.

In early 2011, ice-balls, however, have been brought back by the Singapore Food Trail. Officially opened in February 2011 and located next to the Singapore Flyer, the Singapore Food Trail is a dining attraction featuring food from the 1960s, and ice-balls have been included in the menu of the Food Trail's dessert stall.

on the ice block for better grip. With one hand on the towel, the ice-ball seller would move the ice block back and forth on the ice shaver. His other hand would be cupped under the bladed shaver to catch the ice shavings.

Halfway through the process, the seller would shape the shaved ice into a semi-circular ball and fill the centre with ingredients, following which he would continue shaving the ice to cover up the fillings. He would then shape the ball with both hands into a compact sphere and add concentrated syrup of different colours (usually red, green and brown) as well as evaporated or condensed milk.

There are usually two types of ice-balls available: ice-balls with colourful syrup toppings only or ice-balls with colourful syrup and milk toppings, plus sweet cooked red beans and possibly other fillings (such as small agar-agar (jelly) cubes and "attap-chee" (i.e. mangrove palm seeds cooked in sugar)) added to their centres.





▲ A kachang puteh seller at Bussorah Street (1972).  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

# VANISHING TRADE-KACHANG PUTEH SELLERS

## History of Kachang Puteh Sellers in Singapore

Kachang puteh sellers used to be a very common sight throughout Singapore. The term “kachang puteh” is a Malay phrase with “kachang” referring to nuts, beans or peas. Although “puteh” means white, kachang puteh sellers offered kachang in variety of colours and prepared in a variety of ways including steamed, fried, roasted or dipped in sugar. Until the 1990s, kachang puteh was a popular snack among children and adults of all races.

## Key Characteristics of Kachang Puteh Sellers

Kachang puteh sellers in Singapore were primarily Indians as kachang puteh originated from a snack in India known as “chevdo”. A typical kachang puteh seller in the early days would be an Indian man dressed in a white sarong. He would pack his kachang into paper bags or bottles which were then placed on a rack or tray balanced on his head.



▲ A kachang puteh man with bags of peanuts waiting for customers at Hill Street (1980).  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore





A kacang puteh seller with a tray of bottled assorted peanuts balanced on his head walking down River Valley Road (1976).  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

These early kacang puteh sellers were travelling vendors who moved from one location to another within a day. In the later years, the roving kacang puteh sellers began to sell their kacang using push carts or bicycles. Some kacang puteh sellers, however, preferred to conduct their trade at specific locations.

Many kacang puteh sellers purchased raw ingredients from suppliers and prepared the kacang at home. The kacang puteh sellers, however, did not always prepare their own kacang. Instead, they could also purchase ready-made kacang from suppliers, as preparing the different types of kacang could be a time-consuming and arduous task.

The variety of kacang sold by a typical kacang puteh seller would usually range from about five to twenty different types of kacang. The kacang would be served in long, thin paper cones, usually made from old newspapers, magazines, exercise books etc..

## Where Could Kachang Puteh Sellers Be Found

In the past, kacang puteh sellers could be found at places such as cinema lobbies, schools, public swimming pools, shopping centres as well as areas in the city with high human traffic. By the 1980s, most kacang puteh sellers could be found only at cinema lobbies and schools.

Today, kacang puteh sellers are an extremely rare sight in Singapore. Besides the kacang puteh stall at the Singapore Food Trail (a dining attraction featuring food from the 1960s), one traditional kacang puteh seller, Mr Nagappan Arumugam, could still be found outside Peace Centre, Selegie Road hawking different types of kacang. Featured by *The Straits Times* in 2005, he is one of the better known “kacang puteh men” in Singapore, and one of the last few left on this island.

A kacang puteh seller outside the former Odeon Cinema at Victoria Street (1980).  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*







▲ A five-foot-way barber at work (1955).  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

## VANISHING TRADE-STREET BARBERS

### History of Street Barbers in Singapore

Following the 1911 Chinese Revolution, the majority of Chinese immigrants in Singapore chopped off their “pigtails” and started patronising street barbers for haircuts. In the early days, street barbers in Singapore were predominantly Chinese males although there were also Malay and Indian street barbers. Many of these street barbers were self-taught although some of them worked as apprentices under established barbers.

### Key Characteristics of Street Barbers

Street barbers in Singapore required only a small space for their operations – just enough for one to three chairs for their customers. The toolkit of a street barber would typically include scissors, combs, brushes, razors, powder puffs, barber cloth as well as a mirror.

A barber at work along a five-foot-way at Robertson Quay (1985).  
*Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*







▲ The "Alley of Barbers" in the Jalan Sultan area (1982).  
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings

For street barbers who offered ear cleaning services, they would be equipped with a long metal ear cleaner which had a hook at one end to be inserted into the ear to dig out the ear wax. Apart from cleaning ears, a Chinese barber could also perform a shave, trim a customer's nose hair as well as clean his eyes and tongue. The Malay and Indian barbers would massage their customers' scalps, faces and shoulders.

During the Chinese New Year festive period when it was customary for the Chinese to begin their new year with a new haircut, street barbers would usually raise their prices due to the increased demand for haircuts.

## Where Could Street Barbers Be Found

Street barbers usually operated along the five-foot-ways of shop-houses in areas such as Chinatown, Serangoon Road and its vicinity, Tanjong Pagar. These street barbers also operated in alleys and used makeshift shelters as protection against the weather. Besides operating from fixed locations, street barbers were sometimes called to homes to cut the hair of babies, old men and invalids.

Following the mass development of public housing by Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB) in the 1960s, barbers were also seen and heard along the corridors of HDB flats, alerting residents to their haircut services by crying out "Cut Hair!" in various languages, including Chinese dialects, Malay and even English.

However, with increased urbanisation and higher standards of living, street barbers no longer appealed to the younger generation. In 2002, a reporter from *The Straits Times* found seven street barbers in Singapore: four in the Alwal Street and Arab Street area, and the other three in Kelantan Lane, Lavender Street and Katong. These street barbers were elderly men in their fifties to seventies and catered mainly to elderly male customers. Today, street barbers are even harder to find as the remaining elderly street barbers retire over time.



◀ A street barber at Tras Street (1988).  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore





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