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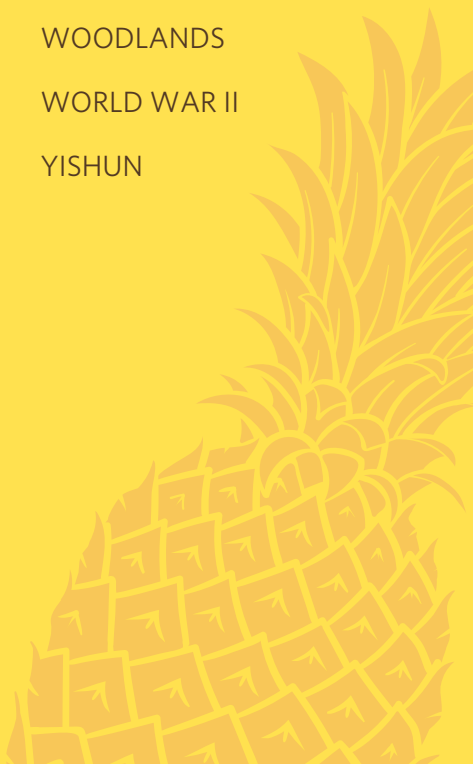
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INTRODUCTION



Golden Village Yishun, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

What does Yishun mean to you? In recent years, this neighbourhood has gained a reputation for being the most “happening” (Singlish for “exciting” or “trendy”) town in Singapore. But truth is, this is nothing new, for Yishun has long been a place that hogged the headlines, be it for its heritage or notable happenings in the area.

The Yishun area has long captured the imagination. Seletar, as Yishun was known centuries ago, oversaw the escape of Singapura’s last king in the 14th century. It was also the home of the indigenous Orang Seletar, who roamed its rivers and coast.

In the 1800s, the Orang Seletar gained new neighbours in Teochew planters who arrived to cultivate gambier in Seletar’s interior. These pioneers were mostly peaceable folk, but among them were secret society members who used Seletar’s rivers and swamps as a hideout. Seletar was also the scene of communal violence in the 1850s, when islandwide riots resulted in death and destruction at its main village of Chan Chu Kang.

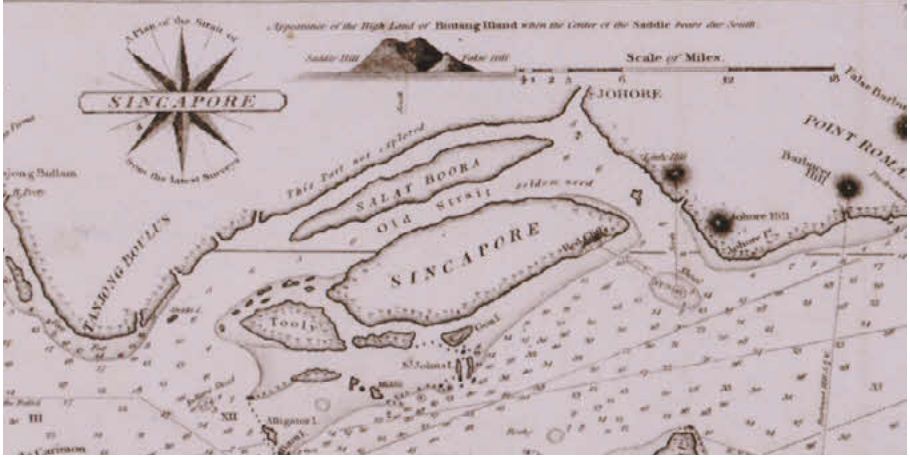
Chan Chu Kang later became associated with Teochew businessman Lim Nee Soon, who turned the area into a hub for rubber and

pineapples. Lim Nee Soon’s legacy was not just economic; he welcomed people from all over to settle on his land, which became known as the Lim Nee Soon area in his honour. He also encouraged residents to live together in harmony. Today, many of Yishun’s religious and social institutions owe their origins to these pioneers who made Nee Soon their home.

Lim Nee Soon also lent his name (in Hanyu Pinyin form) to Yishun New Town, which HDB built in the 1980s. Originally thought as far-flung, Yishun became a “happening” place from the 1990s after Yishun Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station, Northpoint mall and Yishun 10 (later known as Golden Village Yishun) multiplex opened to turn this estate into a magnet for residents and visitors alike.

Today, Yishun blends new and old as a bustling neighbourhood that brims with landmarks from its rural past. Read on to discover how Yishun evolved from rubber plantations and tropical fish farms, and learn how life was like for former villagers as well as residents who experienced Yishun’s transformation from a remote town to a mature estate that continues to embrace its cultural and natural heritage.

EARLY HISTORY OF SELETAR



Map showing the "Old Strait" (Johor Strait) marked as "seldom used", 1815
Maritime Museum (Singapore) Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Long before it was called Yishun, this northern corner of Singapore was known as Seletar. A toponym (place name) that goes back centuries, Seletar was first mentioned in the 17th century *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), which related that the last ruler of ancient Singapura fled the island via Seletar after a Javanese attack at the end of the 14th century:

"Maka Sultan Iskandar Syah pun berlepaslah dirinya turun dari Seletar lalu ke Muar."
(translation: "Sultan Iskandar Syah then fled via Seletar on to Muar.")

ORIGIN AND EARLY RECORDS

The origin of the toponym "Seletar" (also spelt "Selitar") is unclear. Some believe it came from *selat*, Malay for "strait". This word also gave rise to the Portuguese term *Celates*, which referred to the "people of the strait" or Orang Laut who once dwelled in Singapore and served the rulers of Singapura as a naval force. Given their familiarity with Singapore's rivers and coasts, they are thought to have guided Singapura's last king during his escape from the island.



Map of Singapore Island by Captain James Franklin and JF Bernard, with Sungei Seletar circled in red and Pulau Seletar circled in blue c. 1820
Courtesy of The National Archives, United Kingdom

Another theory is that the name was derived from *litar*, Malay for "surrounding", as one had to sail around Singapore in order to reach Seletar from the south. Hence, *selitar* would mean "one that forms a circuit". Related to this interpretation, it may also refer to the role of the Orang Laut as a "circuit of messengers" who delivered royal missives to various parts of ancient Singapura.

Before 1819, Seletar and the adjacent Johor Strait were unfamiliar places to Europeans, as few Europeans had explored the area and the Johor Strait was then a “seldom used” route for Western ships.

Possibly the first Western map to show Seletar was published around 1820 following surveys by Captain James Franklin and JF Bernard. It depicted Singapore’s northern coast fairly accurately and marked now-familiar places such as Serangoon (Tanjong Rangone) and Punggol (Tg Poongul), albeit at erroneous locations. The map also showed an unnamed river mouth, which would have been Sungei Seletar as well as a small island (marked as Pulau Poongul) that is now known as Pulau Seletar.

Seletar then made its toponymic debut in an 1828 map by Captain Franklin and Lieutenant Philip Jackson which depicted Singapore’s northern coast in greater detail. Sungei Seletar (R. Saleta) was named for the first time, along with Sungei Simpang (R. Sempang) and Pulau Seletar (Katib Po.).

The same 1828 map also marked the Johor Strait by its former name, Salat Tabrau (Selat Tebrau). *Tebrau* is believed to refer to a “kind of large fish” or a “large kind of grass like prairie-grass”. The toponym is fairly ancient; “Salat Tubro” was already indicated in a 1604 map by Portuguese explorer Eredia, suggesting that this name was already well-established by then.

PULAU SELETAR

This small island, which is visible from Yishun Dam, was known as Pulau Khatib Bongsu in the 19th century. In Malay, *khatib* refers to a religious preacher, while *bongsu* means “youngest-born”.

In the past, Pulau Seletar was used by the Orang Seletar as a *bente* or “temporary village”. There was also a *keramat* (Muslim holy grave) on the island. In the 1970s–1980s, the island was a popular site for picnics and marine sports such as water-skiing. Pulau Seletar is currently a military training area and not accessible to the public.



Pulau Seletar and its keramat featured on a map, 1924
Singapore Land Authority Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Map by Captain James Franklin and Lieutenant Philip Jackson showing Sungei Seletar, 1828
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Toh Siam Ker (b. 1948), a former resident of Chye Kay Village (now Yishun), recalled weekend excursions to Pulau Seletar with his family in the 1950s-1960s: "We would visit the island on a small boat and even stay overnight. We caught crabs and enjoyed the view. There was a small beach. We had a friend who stayed near the island, and they had a small boat. At night they used a light to attract prawns."

THE ORANG SELETAR

The Orang Seletar were the first known inhabitants of the Seletar area. In 1819, when modern Singapore was founded, Singapore's population of about 1,000 included 200 Orang Seletar. Unlike other Orang Laut groups who dwelled by the sea south of Singapore, the Orang Seletar were more fond of rivers, preferring to forage in the mangrove-lined creeks of Selat Tebrau.

The Orang Seletar believe their ancestors once dwelt in Pulau, a mountainous region in southwest Johor. But after a huge storm and flood broke out, their ancestors were forced

to tie their boats together to keep themselves from being separated. Despite this, their boats were swept down to the sea and the Orang Seletar were scattered across Selat Tebrau.

The Orang Seletar also have their account of how Singapore was named. Their ancestors had encountered a lion-like beast while hunting on the island. Hence, they named the island Singa Pulau or "Lion Isle". Later, when Sang Nila Utama arrived on the island, the Orang Seletar told him that it was called Singa Pulau. But over time, this name became corrupted into "Singapura".

As their name suggests, the Orang Seletar were closely associated with Sungei Seletar. This was because Pulau Seletar, which was located near the river mouth, served as a bente or "temporary village" where the community could take shelter during the stormy periods. However, they were not confined to one river. John Turnbull Thomson, who encountered the Orang Seletar in the 1840s, described them as "river nomades" who ranged across Selat Tebrau and were named after the "Sletar, a creek of the Island of Singapore ... situated nearly in the middle of their range."



Orang Seletar Wak Pusa, Bamah and Wak Gih (left to right) on their traditional pau kajang (boats with thatched roofs), 1950s

Dr Ivan Polunin Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

For more information about Dr Ivan Polunin and his work, visit www.ivanpolunin.com

The Orang Seletar did not farm. Instead, they fished, hunted and gathered edible plants, which they consumed or traded for goods such as rice, tobacco and cloth. They dwelt in long boats with thatched roofs called *pau kajang*. Like other Orang Laut groups, they saw themselves as subjects of the Temenggong (later Sultan) of Johor and received his patronage; in the past, they were invited to the palace or to go hunting with the Sultan, who also paid them for fish and crabs.

Awang bin Osman (1906–1990), who lived at Pengkalan Petai, a village at Sungei Seletar, in the 1920s, recalled visits by the Orang Seletar:

“The Orang Laut [Seletar] often came to visit. ... They would come after foraging all over the river to a place near my father-in-law’s garden at Sungei Seletar. They may remain there for weeks as the river was very big and had many tributaries. When the water was high, they would come to Pengkalan Petai.

They would ask my mother-in-law and the children to find *keledek* and *ubi* [sweet potatoes and yam]. They called *keledek* ‘*buah bertih darat*’, and *ubi* ‘*gandum kembang*’. They would exchange ‘*buah bertih laut*’ (a kind of fruit) or gong-gong snails for these produce.

When the tide was low, they would catch crabs. Each boat may have one or two dogs. When the tide was low, they would stop at a confluence, place a stake [to secure the boats] and follow the dogs in search of crabs. The dogs would bark to signal that a hole had crabs.”

In the 20th century, the Orang Seletar were affected by two major events. First, the building of British military bases in Seletar and Sembawang during the 1920s drove many of them away from the Seletar area. Next, the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) forced many Orang Seletar to move to permanent villages in Johor as they were no longer permitted to freely roam the strait.

In Singapore, a few Orang Seletar persisted at Kranji, Sungei Kadut, Pulau Sarimbun and Pulau Seletar until the 1970s, when most moved to Johor. By the 1980s, just two households remained at Pulau Seletar, living in wooden huts. The last family departed for Johor in 1986

following the completion of Yishun Dam, which separated Sungei Seletar from Selat Tebrau. Today, the Orang Seletar, numbering about 2,000, reside in nine villages in Johor.

THE LAST ORANG SELETAR IN YISHUN

The family of Temah binte Tok (b. 1939) was among the last Orang Seletar to leave Pulau Seletar in 1986. Before she left, she shared her story:

“I was born on a boat somewhere in Johor. There were three, sometimes four, of us living on the boat — my mother and siblings. When it rained, we would pull up the *kajang* for shelter. It was made from *mengkuang* leaves taken from the forest.

We hunted *kijang* (barking deer) with dogs. We also looked for *akar senyangkan* (an edible root) in the forest, which we collected and sold as medicine. I used to go hunting with the men. We caught *pelanduk* (mousedeer) and even wild pigs.”

Tema recalled that during her youth, she would collect *nyiur tuak* (coconut liquor) for sale. “With the money, we would dance *joget*. When we were tired from dancing, we would jump into the water. Then we would get out of the water and continue dancing”



An Orang Seletar family, who currently resides in Johor Bahru, at the Upper Seletar Reservoir Park boardwalk overlooking the former Sungai Seletar, 2024
Courtesy of Ilya Katrinnada

GAMBIER KANGKAR IN SELETAR

Seletar's remote location meant that the area was little known to the British during their early decades in Singapore. The first road there was only completed in 1845, when convicts supervised by John Turnbull Thomson built a track between Bukit Timah Road and the northern coast. Originally named Thomson's Road, the northern portion of this road (from its junction with Mandai Road) was later renamed Seletar Road and finally Sembawang Road in 1939.

Thomson, who also surveyed the area, discovered that Seletar's interior had already been inhabited by the 1840s. At the upper reaches of Sungei Seletar, there were two Malay woodcutter settlements and a Chinese village named Chan Chu Kang. Meanwhile, the upper reaches of Sungei Simpang housed a Chinese village called Sempang.

Chan Chu Kang and Sempang (also known as Seng Pang Kang) were not simple fishing villages. Instead, they were river ports known as *kangkar* or simply *kang*. In the Teochew

dialect, *kang* means "port" while *kar* refers to the "foot" or upper reaches of a river. The *kangkar* were Teochew settlements where gambier and pepper were grown and processed at sites called *bangsals* before these goods were shipped to town via boats that sailed down the rivers into the Johor Strait.

Gambier and pepper were then valuable cash crops. Hence, many Teochew migrants cultivated these plants and cleared so much of Singapore's original vegetation that by 1849, it was stated that "the whole of the interior is occupied by Pepper and Gambier plantations interred with primeval forest".

NEO LIANG QUAN AND CHAN CHU KANG

A more sinister side of Seletar's *kangkar* emerged in 1847, when the British were exploring a branch of Sungei Seletar. To their surprise, they stumbled upon a large *bangsals* and six large boats equipped with cannons, guns and other weapons. The owner, a man named Neo Liang Quan, could not give a satisfactory explanation for why he owned so much weaponry and was thus arrested.



Road near Selita (probably Seletar Road), 1869

National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Pepper and gambier, 1890s

Gretchen Liu Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Gambier processing site (*bangsal*), 1890s

Gretchen Liu Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Neo was formerly an inhabitant of Riau, but left due to debt for Singapore, where he became the owner of several gambier plantations. It emerged that he was not just a planter; in 1846, Neo had given refuge to many Teochews from Riau who had fled to escape rival gambier planters. He then led a massive retaliatory attack in 1847, which destroyed 28 *bangsal* and killed more than 100 people in Riau. Both Neo and the refugees at his *bangsal* were believed to be members of Tan Tae Hoe (Heaven and Earth Society), a secret society.

Following Neo's arrest, it is thought that his plantations were taken over by other planters. One of these planters was Chan Ah Lak (1813–1873), a Teochew who founded the settlement of Chan Chu Kang and obtained a lease for 44 acres of land in Seletar in 1850. Chan was an influential figure in the gambier sector; in 1855, he and fellow Teochew Seah Eu Chin submitted a petition to the British against the imposition of a levy on gambier.

Seletar was not a peaceful place in the mid-1800s. In the 1840s, Teochew Catholics took over many gambier plantations in Singapore, but faced hostility from secret society members who regarded them as rivals. This rivalry became open violence in 1851, when secret society members attacked Teochew Catholic *bangsal* all over Singapore, including two at Chan Chwee Kang, a *kangkar* in Seletar owned by local planters Tan Noh Tee and Kah Soon.

Another wave of violence broke out in 1854 during islandwide Hokkien-Teochew riots, which resulted in “wholesale murders and burning down of houses” in Chan Chu Kang. In the wake of these riots, the British sought to maintain peace and order in Seletar by building a new police station at Chan Chu Kang, which was completed in 1856.

CHAN CHU KANG IN THE LATE 1800S

With the new police station, Chan Chu Kang became a more peaceful place in the late 1800s. Being located at the upper reaches of Sungei Seletar, next to a lush forest, the area enjoyed a cooler and tranquil environment compared to the hot and bustling town. Hence, in the 1860s the British built a government



Bathing Place near Selita by Austrian naturalist Eugen von Ransonnnet who stayed at the Seletar government bungalow, 1869

National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

bungalow there, to which European officials and residents could escape the urban heat or recover from illness in pleasant surroundings.

Describing the bungalow and Seletar Road, John Cameron, editor of the *Straits Times*, wrote: "This bungalow is about nine miles from town ... and the road leading to it passes for some distance through the thickest of the old forest. ... It is a simple building in itself, constructed of wood, and covered with attaps, the leaves of a species of palm; but it is beautifully situated, and stands fronting about a square mile of cleared ground dotted over with the huts of Malay and Chinese gardeners and planters. There is also a small native

village [Chan Chu Kang] close by, and a police *tannah*, or station. ... About fifty yards behind stands the dark impenetrable jungle, from out of which gushes a clear, sparkling brook of icy cold water that runs past the foot of the declivity at the back of the bungalow."

The Seletar bungalow was a popular site for picnics and honeymoons well into the early 1900s. It ceased operations before World War II and is no longer in existence.

Meanwhile, gambier cultivation declined after the 1850s, due to low prices which made it unprofitable, falling harvests as the soil lost its fertility, and a scarcity of firewood (needed to boil gambier) as Singapore lost most of its forests. As a result, many gambier plantations, including those at Seletar, were abandoned, and planters switched to growing food crops such as vegetables, tapioca and pineapples.



Map showing the location of Chan Chu Kang Police Station and the government bungalow at the junction of Seletar and Mandai Roads, 1873

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

As for Chan Chu Kang, Chan Ah Lek left Singapore in 1859 to open new gambier estates in Johor. After Chan died in 1873, the village came under his wife Chan Eng Neo. Chan Chu Kang was sold off in the early 1900s, and the land's eventual owner had such a vast impact on the economic and social life of Seletar that much of the area was renamed after him. This owner was the Teochew businessman Lim Nee Soon.

FROM CHAN CHU KANG TO LIM NEE SOON



Pineapple plantation, 1900s

Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Chan Chu Kang underwent a massive transformation at the turn of the 20th century, as the area's gambier estates made way for vast plantations of rubber and pineapples. Various pioneers helped to kickstart this economic boom. One man, however, rose to become not just a doyen of the rubber industry but also the leader of a community that saw him as their patron and benefactor. As a result, the area became synonymous with him and was renamed Nee Soon Village to honour his contributions and charity.

FROM PINEAPPLES TO RUBBER

By the late 1800s, the gambier estates that once dominated Seletar's landscape had all but disappeared and in their place were acres of pineapples. Originally from South America, pineapples were introduced to Southeast Asia in the 16th century and were widely cultivated in Singapore for local consumption by the early 1800s.

Singapore then became a major exporter of pineapples after canning technology was introduced locally in the 1870s. As pineapples

can grow in poor soils that had earlier been used for gambier, Seletar — with its abundance of such land — became an important pineapple-growing area by the early 1900s.

One notable pioneer in the pineapple business was Tan Tye (1839–1898) a Hokkien timber merchant who owned a large plantation in Seletar that supplied fruit for his cannery at Tan Tye Place, Clarke Quay. Tan exported canned pineapples under the Hin Choon and Istana brands to Europe, the United States of America, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Another important planter was Tan Chye Kay, a Teochew who opened pineapple plantations in an area that became known as Ong Lai Sua ("Pineapple Hill" in Hokkien). Many people later settled on Tan's land, which was officially named Chye Kay Village by the Rural Board in 1954. (see page 35 for more information about Chye Kay Village).

Despite their significance, pineapples were eventually eclipsed by rubber. Rubber became a pillar of Singapore's economy thanks to Henry Ridley, director of the Botanic Gardens.



Tan Tye, undated
Courtesy of National Library Board



Indian rubber tapper in Seletar, 1900s-1930s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Ridley developed effective ways to grow and tap rubber trees and process their latex. He tirelessly encouraged planters to grow rubber, believing that this Brazilian tree would become more valuable than other cash crops such as sugar and coffee.

Using seeds provided by Ridley, Tan Chay Yan became the first person to establish a commercially successful rubber plantation in Malaya in the 1890s at Bukit Lintang, Melaka. Seeing Tan's success, planters in Singapore also turned to rubber. Demand from tyre manufacturers and other industries then fuelled a global rubber boom that reshaped Singapore's physical and economic landscape, with Seletar as the epicentre of this transformation.



Rubber tappers in Seletar, 1900s-1930s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

In 1905, Tan Lian Boh, a son of Tan Tye who was inspired by Tan Chay Yan's success, set up Hup Choon Kek, which is believed to be the first rubber plantation in the north. This plantation was redeveloped in the 1960s as the Teachers' Housing Estate off Upper Thomson Road. Tan Chor Nam, Tan Tye's youngest son, followed his brother's example by opening Seng Pang Estate at Thomson Road's 12th milestone in 1905.

Another rubber pioneer in Seletar was Tan Kah Kee (1874-1961), an industrialist who was nicknamed the "Henry Ford of Malaya" for his business acumen. In 1904, Tan acquired Hock San, a pineapple plantation in the Seletar area. But after learning about Tan Chay Yan's large profits from rubber, Tan decided to plant 18,000 rubber seeds amid his pineapples at Hock San in 1906. He then expanded Hock San in 1909 before selling it to a London syndicate called Seletar Rubber Estates in 1910 to fund new pineapple and rubber estates in Johor.



Tan Kah Kee, c. 1910

Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

SELETAR RUBBER AND BUKIT SEMBAWANG

Set up in 1909, when the rubber boom was at its peak, Seletar Rubber Estates was “the first public company formed to acquire rubber estates in Singapore”. The company’s plantations, which were acquired from Tan Kah Kee as well as Lim Nee Soon, were located west of Seletar Road. In 1936, a portion of Seletar Rubber Estates’ land was acquired by the government for military purposes and is now Sembawang Air Base. The company, which enjoyed mixed fortunes before the war, was closed in the 1950s.

Another major rubber producer that emerged during this period was Bukit Sembawang

Rubber Company, which was incorporated in London in 1910. Bukit Sembawang owned rubber estates not just in Sembawang but also Yio Chu Kang, Serangoon, Punggol, Tampines and Seletar. After its formation, Bukit Sembawang continued to buy up land across Singapore and became the island’s largest operator of rubber estates by 1916.

Prior to World War II, Bukit Sembawang maintained extensive facilities in Seletar, including rubber factories, smokehouses, offices, bungalows for its European managers and quarters for its local workers. One of its local staff was T Kanapathipillai (1918–1976), who came to Singapore from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in the 1930s and worked as a supervisor. In an interview with NHB, his daughter Shanta Kumari Subramaniam (b. 1954), shared:

“We were staying in Yishun—it was all rubber plantations. Our house was very near where Khatib Camp is now. There was a very long road—it started from where Seletaris [Condominium] is now, and there was a long stretch of plantations. His work started at six [in the morning] and he finished at 2pm every day; he went out to supervise the rubber tappers.”

After the 1920s, Bukit Sembawang’s domain shrank as it had to sell some of its land to the government. Some of its estates were converted into military sites such as Nee Soon Camp and Sembawang Naval Base, while the company’s land around Bah Soon Pah Road became the former Sembawang Field Experimental Station, which opened in 1959.



T Kanapathipillai (right) supervising a rubber tapper, 1960s
Courtesy of Shanta Kumari Subramaniam

Bukit Sembawang continued to produce rubber until the 1970s. But after World War II, Bukit Sembawang shifted its focus to property development and converted much of its land into housing estates. Most of its pre-war bungalows have been demolished, but one surviving black-and-white bungalow located between Bah Soon Pah Road and Lorong Chencharu has been retained and will form part of Chencharu housing area.



Black-and-white bungalow between Bah Soon Pah Road and Lorong Chencharu, 2019
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Tan Poh Neo, Nee Soon's maternal grandmother, 1923
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

THE RISE OF LIM NEE SOON

Bukit Sembawang employed European managers to run its estates, but it also recognised the importance of local expertise. Hence, in its early years, the company engaged the services of a young man who was acknowledged as a leading figure in the rubber industry, Lim Nee Soon.

Born in 1879 at 287 Beach Road, Lim Nee Soon was the son of Lim Peng Nguan, a sundries trader who came to Singapore in 1860 from Maxi Village in Guangdong Province, China, and Teo Choon Lian, daughter of Teo Lee, owner of a Beach Road shop called Chop Tian Bee. Lim Nee Soon's parents died when he was a boy; he was then raised by his maternal grandmother Tan Poh Neo and her son Teo Eng Hock.

Lim Nee Soon initially attended a Chinese school, but after his father died, his grandmother enrolled him at St Joseph's Institution and Anglo-Chinese School. The young Lim Nee Soon first worked as a shop assistant at Teo Eng Hock's textile shop, Sin Tiong Bee. He then moved to Tan Chor Nam's timber business in 1902, and made such an impression that in 1905, Tan tasked Lim Nee Soon to manage his



Teo Eng Hock, 1925-1935
Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Seng Pang rubber plantation. This foray into the rubber sector likely convinced him of its potential, for Lim Nee Soon began to buy up land in Seletar to plant rubber.



Lim Nee Soon as a planter, 1905

Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Lim Nee Soon emerged as a pivotal figure during the peak of Singapore's rubber boom in 1909-1910. In 1909, he became acting manager of United Singapore Rubber Estates, a company owned by, among other businessmen, Tan Chay Yan and Lim Boon Keng. United Singapore then named him manager of Sembawang Rubber Plantations, a subsidiary formed in May 1910 to run its Seletar and Sembawang estates. Sembawang Rubber was then taken over in December 1910 by a British syndicate and renamed Bukit Sembawang Rubber Company, with Lim Nee Soon as its first and only Consultant.



Lim Nee Soon (with coat) with a lorry filled with pineapples, 1916

Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Apart from managing rubber estates, Lim Nee Soon also ran other businesses. In 1909, he acquired land at Chan Chu Kang which he developed into a row of shops in 1912. This row included Thong Aik, a shop which supplied food and other necessities to nearby workers. Lim Nee Soon opened another shop called Thong Bee at Beach Road in 1911 and bought a pineapple cannery at Payah Road in 1912.



Lim Nee Soon's rubber factory, 1900s-1930s

National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Elsewhere, Lim Nee Soon owned Yunnan Rubber Estates in Jurong, West Hill Plantation at Sembawang and several estates around Sungei Seletar. He was also the majority shareholder of Bulim Plantations in Choa Chu Kang and Han Yang Rubber in Johor. By far his most enduring investment was a plot of land near Jalan Ulu Seletar off Sembawang Road, which he acquired in 1910 and developed into the landmark Thong Aik Rubber Factory.

Lim Nee Soon also became renowned for his pineapples, which were planted as a lucrative catch crop amidst the rubber trees on his land. This gained him the nickname "Pineapple King" in the early 1910s, when surging pineapple prices earned him large profits. Over this decade, he consolidated his businesses and incorporated it as Nee Soon & Sons, Limited in 1921. In the same year, he moved his offices to Marsiling Building, a new three-storey office and warehouse at Robinson Road.



Lim Nee Soon in his office, 1918

Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

LIM NEE SOON AS A COMMUNITY LEADER

Apart from his business acumen, Lim Nee Soon was well-regarded for his contributions to the Seletar community. Following a few quiet decades since the late 1800s, Chan Chu Kang gained a new lease of life in the 1910s after Nee Soon established his factory and plantations there. Lim Nee Soon encouraged settlers on his land by providing his workers with interest-free loans to build their houses and charging them low rent. They could also bring in their relatives and clansmen, who were welcome as long as their conduct was good.

This influx of people provided Lim Nee Soon with ample manpower for his estates and factory. It also saved him the cost of clearing his land as the settlers built homes and cultivated the land. Lim Nee Soon also urged the authorities to let people settle on unused state land in Seletar; this led to the establishment of Bah Soon Pah Village and Bah Soon Pah Road (officially named in 1950). "Bah Soon" was a nickname of Lim Nee Soon that combined "Baba", a term of address for a Straits-born Chinese man, and his name "Soon". "Pah" refers to a "plantation" or "newly opened agriculture land" in Hokkien. Hence, Bah Soon Pah means "Baba (Nee) Soon's plantation."

The people in Seletar regarded Lim Nee Soon not just as an employer or landlord, but a community leader. He regularly visited his estates to inspect their developments and discuss matters with residents. The villagers also shared in his personal celebrations; for instance, in 1919, he organised *wayang* (Chinese opera) shows, *ronggeng* sessions (a Malay social dance) and other festivities to celebrate the birthday of his grandmother Tan Poh Neo.

As the population grew, Lim Nee Soon took it upon himself to address the community's needs. In 1924, he set aside land and contributed funds for Bah Soon Pah Hock Teck Temple, which was dedicated to the Taoist deity Tua Pek Kong. He also helped to establish a school and cemetery. To provide residents with a place to rest and socialise, Lim Nee Soon set up Wah Lim Association in 1933. Based in his former Thong Aik shop, the association offered a gathering place, held activities such as singing and musical performances, and served as a "community centre" for the village.

Lim Nee Soon's efforts did not go unnoticed. A 1915 press report observed that "none of the outlying districts of Singapore has made more substantial progress in the last few years than Seletar", and added, "Consequent upon the



Former Wah Lim Association (leftmost unit), 1985
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Site of Nee Soon's Thong Aik shop (later Wah Lim Association) in Nee Soon Village, 1986
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

opening up of extensive estates in the district since the dawn of the rubber era, the township nowadays assumes a busy aspect from sunrise to sunset, hundreds of coolies and local agriculturalists going thither to procure the necessities of life, to visit friends or relatives, or to while away a few hours sipping tea or coffee at the stalls and shops, and learning the news of the day from people ever and anon arriving by the motor-cars that keep up regular communication between Seletar and this city."

By the early 1920s, Lim Nee Soon was so closely associated with the village that it started to bear his name, and in 1930, the Chan Chu Kang area was formally renamed Nee Soon Village.

Acknowledging his contributions to developing Seletar, the British made him a member of the Rural Board from 1912–1921. He was also named a Justice of the Peace in 1918.

Beyond Singapore, Lim Nee Soon was a founding member of Singapore's branch of Dr Sun Yat Sen's Tong Meng Hui in 1906. After Dr Sun's forces took over China in 1911, the new Chinese government honoured Lim Nee Soon with awards and advisory positions in various government bodies.

LIM NEE SOON'S FAMILY

Lim Nee Soon had a large family. He married Wee Peck Hay in 1901 and the couple had three sons—Lim Chong Kuo, Lim Chong Pang, Lim Chong Min—and six daughters—Lim Chit Geck, Lim Kheng Geck, Lim Soo Geck, Lim Mui Geck, Lim Leck Geck and Lim Soek Geck. Lim Nee Soon also had a fourth son—Lim Chong Hsien—with Tham Yoke Chun in 1921. The Lim family resided in Marsiling Villa, a mansion at Cairnhill Circle. Marsiling, the anglicised form of Maxi Lin, Lim Nee Soon's ancestral village in China, was a name that he also gave to other properties such as Marsiling Estate in Woodlands and Marsiling Building.

Lim Nee Soon's two eldest sons, Lim Chong Kuo and Lim Chong Pang, were involved in their father's business, helping to run the firm when Lim Nee Soon was travelling or ill. Among his sons, Lim Chong Pang (1904–1956) was the most prominent businessman and community leader. Like his father, Lim Chong Pang served on the Rural Board (1929–1938). In 1938, the Rural Board gave the name Chong



Wee Peck Hay, Lim Nee Soon's wife, early 20th century
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of
National Heritage Board



Lim Nee Soon, his wife and family at Marsiling Villa, 1934
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Pang Village to a village opposite Sembawang Aerodrome (now Sembawang Air Base) to honour his contributions and also because the village was closely associated with Lim Chong Pang and his family.

In the 1930s, Lim Chong Pang converted his father's West Hill rubber estate into a residential area called West Hill Village, which provided homes for locals working in the nearby British military bases. He also

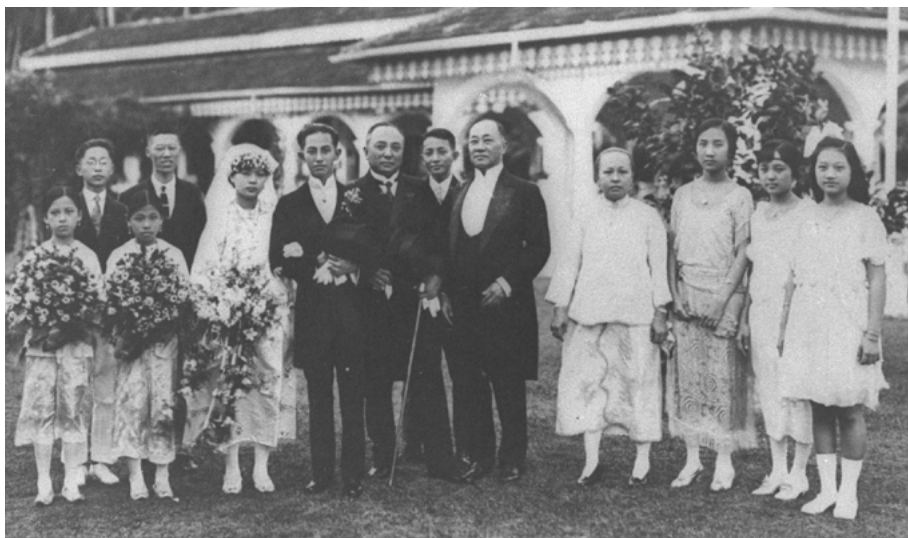
ventured into movie theatres, opening Seletar Talkies at Nee Soon Village and Sultan Theatre in West Hill Village in 1939. After his death in 1956, the Rural Board renamed West Hill Village as Chong Pang Village to recognise his contributions to the community (the pre-war Chong Pang Village opposite the aerodrome had been renamed Chye Kay Village in 1954).



Lim Nee Soon with Chinese politician Hu Han Min (seated right), his sons Lim Chong Min (standing, right) and Lim Chong Pang (centre) and Hu's daughter, 1936
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Lim Chong Pang's wedding, 1924
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Wedding of Lim Chong Kuo and Tan Lay Ho at Garden Club, Tanah Merah, 1923
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

LIM NEE SOON'S DAUGHTER WAS "MY GRANNY"



Lim Chit Geck (left) with a friend from Armenia, Mary, 1930
Courtesy of Joanna Tan

Little is known about Lim Nee Soon's daughters, as most of them were married off to sons of other businessmen. Lim Nee Soon's oldest daughter, however, broke this mould by choosing a path of her own and embracing the life of an independent woman.

Photographs of Lim Chit Geck (1909–1992) show a stylish lady bedecked in 1920s



Wedding of Lim Chit Geck and Oei Tjong Tiong, 1923
Courtesy of Joanna Tan



Lim Chit Geck, 1920s
Courtesy of Joanna Tan

Charleston-style attire, a far cry from the dressing of most local women then. "My granny was a party animal!" shared Joanna Tan (b. 1960), Lim Chit Geck's granddaughter. "She told me, "When I go to parties, I would climb out of the bedroom window." She would sneak out but being Nee Soon's favourite daughter, she got away with it!"



Lim Chit Geck and her granddaughter Joanna Tan, 1960s
Courtesy of Joanna Tan

Lim Chit Geck had married Oei Tjong Tiong in 1923. The couple later separated and Lim Chit Geck (aka Mrs. Chichi Oei) did not remarry. As Lim Chit Geck did not have children of her own, she adopted Eva See, eldest daughter of her younger sister Lim Kheng Geck, who was Tan's mother. "Nee Soon had six daughters," recalled Tan, "The youngest [Lim Soek Gek] died during the war. She was on board the SS Kuala with the wife of Nee Soon, Wee Peck Hay, but the ship was bombed. My mother, who was about four years old then, was supposed to have gone too, but she didn't."

Tan has fond memories of visiting her granny as a child. "She rented a house at 68 Cairnhill Road. She and a friend—a schoolteacher—stayed there. My granny used to work at Veerasamy Clinic as a pharmacist in McKenzie Road."

Tan recalled car rides with her grandparents, See Bong Him and Lim Kheng Geck: "Ah Gong [See] drove his own car, I think it was a Vauxhall. They used to bring me out to places like Katong Beach. Last time at Roxy Square, there was a Wonderland Café, an ice cream and makan place. My grandfather would say, "Come, let's

go for ice cream", and we would all sit in the car and we'd say, "Ah Gong *chia*, Ah Ma *heng*."

Chit Geck was also an avid traveller. "She went to Penang and England by ship as there were no planes during that time," said Tan. "She even had a horse at the Singapore Turf Club. She used to spoil my brother and I rotten. She would buy us chocolates, give us pocket money, and she used to drive us to the Botanic Gardens—last time you could drive through the Holland Road gate and we used to go there for picnics, until the monkeys started coming and we got scared."

LIM NEE SOON'S BUSINESS DECLINE AND DEATH

Lim Nee Soon's fortunes took a turn for the worse in the 1920s. He was overly reliant on the pineapple and rubber sectors. As a result, when prices of these commodities, especially rubber, plunged in the 1920s, he could not earn enough to cover his costs and accumulated debts.

Ultimately, Lim Nee Soon had to mortgage his factory in 1928. In the same year, he mortgaged land in Mandai, Sembawang and Seletar as well as properties in town. Marsiling Building was also sold off (it later became Shaw's Chambers and is now 112 Robinson Road).

Lim Nee Soon had hoped to recover his properties when rubber prices recovered, but this failed to happen. In the end, he had to close his firm in 1928 and eventually sold his factory to businessman Lee Kong Chian. By the end of his life, Nee Soon had sold off most of his land and property, although he was still able to bestow some property to his sons and grandchildren.

Lee Seng Gee (1921–2016), Lee Kong Chian's son, shared how Nee Soon's factory came into his father's ownership following a global economic crash:

"By October 1929, the American stock exchange crashed and the world went into a big depression. That caused rubber as a commodity to drop in price. There was a boom before that and it started to go down. So many companies in Singapore were in difficulties.

“My father was a good friend of Lim Nee Soon who had a very big factory in Seletar, in Upper Thomson Road where now it’s called Nee Soon Village. Mr Lim Nee Soon was indebted to the bank and the bank was pressing him, so my father helped to arrange matters with the bank. Nee Soon’s business had to fold up. But because my father helped him to arrange the settlement with the bank, he insisted on leasing that factory to my father—he was quite grateful to my father and he insisted my father should lease the factory from him. That’s how my father started in the rubber refining business in Singapore.”

In 1936, Lim Nee Soon travelled to China on a mission to persuade various Chinese factions to form a united front against Japanese militarism. Unfortunately, he fell ill and died in Shanghai on 19 March 1936, aged 57. His eldest son Lim Chong Kuo sought to bring his body back to Singapore. But the Chinese government wanted to give Lim Nee Soon a state funeral and his family agreed to have him buried in Nanjing near Dr Sun Yat Sen’s Mausoleum.

Lim Nee Soon’s widow survived him by six years. Tragically, Wee Peck Hay, along with Chua Chit Neo (Lim Chong Min’s wife) and her youngest daughter Lim Soek Geck, died in 1942 when their ship SS Kuala was bombed and sunk by Japanese warplanes while trying to flee Singapore. Peck Hay Road, a lane near Marsiling Villa, was named after her in 1951. Marsiling Villa was sold after the war and the site is now a condominium.

REMEMBERING LIM NEE SOON

After his death, Lim Nee Soon’s name lived on in the village that was the base of his rubber empire. A number of roads in the area were later named after Lim Nee Soon and his family members, due to their close association with the village. Nee Soon Road and Bah Soon Pah Road were both named in 1950 by the Rural Board. Then in 1955, Chong Kuo Road was named after Lim Nee Soon’s eldest son, while Thong Soon Road, Thong Bee Road and Thong Aik Road (these roads are now expunged) were named after Lim Nee Soon’s shops and businesses.

Lim Nee Soon continued to be honoured when HDB developed a new estate in the area north

in the 1980s, which was named Yishun (the Hanyu Pinyin form of his name). Then in 1992, two bronze statues of Lim Nee Soon, each 2.3m high and weighing 700kg, were installed in Yishun — one at Yishun Central and the other at Yishun Neighbourhood 8 Park. This was because Yishun then had two town councils — one managed by the People’s Action Party and the other by the opposition Singapore Democratic Party — both of which wanted to acknowledge Lim Nee Soon’s role in the area’s development.



Joanna Tan (left) and her granny Lim Chit Gek (second from left) at the unveiling of Lim Nee Soon’s statue at Yishun Neighbourhood Park 8 (the statue is now at Yishun Central), 1992
Courtesy of Joanna Tan

Both statues were created by Chinese sculptors Chen Gu Kui, Wang Zhi Qiang and Wu Hui Ming of the Shanghai Oil Painting and Sculpture Research Institute. In 2009, the statue at Nee Soon Central was moved to Hwa Chong Institution (which counts Lim Nee Soon as one of its founders). The statue at Yishun Neighbourhood 8 Park was then reinstalled at Yishun Central as part of a new Heritage Garden@Yishun, which was completed in 2010.

NEE SOON VILLAGE



Former Nee Soon Police Station, undated

A pictorial history of Nee Soon Community. The grassroots organisations of Nee Soon Constituency, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1987

By the time Lim Nee Soon died, the village that bore his name had grown into a busy rural hub with a life of its own. Nee Soon Village was such an important node that even before the war, it warranted the provision of amenities such as a police station and post office. This chapter traces the growth of Nee Soon Village from its early landmarks to the post-war developments that added new socio-economic, recreational, educational and military dimensions to the area.

NEE SOON VILLAGE BEFORE THE WAR

The village's centre and major landmarks were located near the intersection of Upper Thomson, Sembawang and Mandai Roads. This junction was where the oldest building in Nee Soon once stood: a two-storey house built by gambier planter Soh Tye Whay in 1883. Soh later sold the house to another planter, Soh Tiang Hoo, whose son Chee Kim occupied the house until 1976, when the building was demolished to widen Sembawang Road.

The 1976 road widening also saw the demolition of the former Nee Soon Police Station, which was built in the 1930s to replace an earlier police post. The only historical landmark at this junction to have survived is the former Nee Soon Post Office, which first opened in



Former Nee Soon Post Office, undated

A pictorial history of Nee Soon Community.

The grassroots organisations of Nee Soon Constituency, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1987

1918. The original building was rebuilt in 1939 and remained opened until the 1990s. It was later refurbished and occupied by Mandai Pets Sanctuary in 2012.

This former post office is a two-storey colonial style building with a pitched roof and wide overhanging eaves. The upper storey served as quarters for the postmaster and his family. The building still retains its wall-mounted white-and-orange letterbox bearing the logo of the former Telecommunication Authority of Singapore. In 2022, it was announced that the former Nee Soon Post Office would be conserved and integrated into future developments.



Maternity clinic at 9 Mandai Road, undated

A pictorial history of Nee Soon Community. The grassroots organisations of Nee Soon Constituency, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1987

Another pre-war public amenity was a government clinic that opened at Mandai Road in 1940. In 1952, the pre-war clinic was rebuilt as a Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic, and also had a dental clinic and ambulance service. The former clinic building, which closed in 1998.

Meanwhile, Lim Nee Soon's rubber factory continued to employ many residents, albeit under the ownership of Lee Kong Chian, who operated it as Lee Rubber Factory. The factory became a subsidiary of Lee Rubber Factory called Kota Trading in 1959. In the early 1990s, the factory site and surrounding area were redeveloped into the Springside housing estate.



Former Nee Soon rubber factory, 1985

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Former Nee Soon rubber factory, with the subsidiary name Kota Trading, 1980s

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Near the former factory, there was a row of six shophouses built by Lim Nee Soon in 1912. The leftmost unit initially housed Lim Nee Soon's Thong Aik shop, but was later converted into Wah Lim Association. The three units on the right were used to house factory employees. This row was demolished in the late 1980s or early 1990s and the site is now a condominium complex called The Brooks II.

Apart from providing quarters for his staff, Lim Nee Soon also donated a plot of land further up Sembawang Road to a church that was established in 1908 as the Chinese Christian Church. Originally located next to Lim Nee Soon's factory, the church moved to its present site in 1924 due to a factory expansion. Today, it is known as Spiritual Grace Presbyterian Church.



Three shophouses built by Nee Soon, 1918

Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Congregation in front of Chinese Christian Church (later Spiritual Grace Presbyterian Church), 1963
A pictorial history of Nee Soon Community. The grassroots organisations of Nee Soon Constituency, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1987



Chinese Christian Church building, 1986
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Nee Soon Village also had a number of Chinese temples. The oldest temple there was Chan Chwee Kang Toh Peh Kong Temple, which dates its origins to the 19th century. This temple moved to Yishun in 1996 and became part of the present Chong Pang Combined Temple at Yishun Ring Road. Two other village temples — Tian Gong Tan at Nee Soon Road and Dou Mu Gong at Upper Thomson Road — also moved to form Chong Pang Combined Temple in 1996.



Chan Chwee Kang Toh Peh Kong Temple , 1986
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Festival celebration at Tian Gong Tan Temple, 1986
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Before the war, the village had two community-funded schools: Qi Zhi School and Fa Chu School (later renamed Zang Hua School). In 1941, these schools merged to form Poi Eng Public School, which was located near the junction of Upper Thomson Road and Lorong Banir (currently Springleaf MRT station). Poi Eng remained at Nee Soon Village until 1987, when it moved to Yishun and was renamed Peiying Primary School. The former Poi Eng building was later used to film the popular Mandarin TV drama series *Good Morning, Sir!* starring Chen Li Ping as a teacher during the 1950s.

Another pre-war school was Seletar School, which was founded by Lee Geok Lin, Lee Kong Chian's elder brother, in 1937. Initially located within Lee Rubber's factory premises to educate the workers' children, Seletar School moved to Nee Soon Road after the war and expanded with a two-storey building in the 1950s. Over at the Bah Soon Pah area, residents set up Chian Nan, a Teochew-medium school, and Hua Soon, a Hokkien school, in the 1930s. These schools later merged to form Hua Nan Chinese School at Lorong Mayang off Bah Soon Pah Road.

Beyond the schools, public buildings and places of worship, life for most villagers meant humble dwellings amid a close-knit community. Koo Ah Lek (b. 1940) shared how his family survived in Nee Soon Village during the 1940s:

"I was born in Nee Soon Village. My family was staying in a small attap hut and we were really poor. During that time when I was born, around 1940, there was war and my father passed away. I don't even know what sickness he got and how he died."



Poi Eng Public School, 1952

Pei Ying Public School Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Hua Nan School, 1967

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

To earn a living, Koo's mother worked as a washerwoman. "I even helped her to iron the clothes," he said. "Then I started to sell bread and *you char kway* (dough fritters)." He explained that children would compete to sell food obtained from village bakeries early in the morning: "Each of these companies had runners, because once you get the bread, you quickly run to reach the homes; those people who are working, they need to buy bread every

morning, so we go and sell to them. Whoever comes first gets the sale. So we had to run."

Despite the poverty, Koo recalled living in a community that took care of one another. "In those days, we don't have tap water. We have wells, and some wells provide more water than others. So during the dry season, we share water—your well got no water? Come to my place, we help each other."

Conversely, the wet season also presented challenges. Former resident Dr Sushilan Vasoo (b. 1941) shared: "I remember very clearly as a child how the neighbourhood got affected by floods. Because of the torrential monsoon rains, the area gets flooded. Farmers lose their poultry and animals, fisheries and ponds."

Floods aside, the river that ran past the village was still a source of life and joy. "A lot of people called it Chia Chwee Kang ("clear water stream" in Teochew) because it's a small river which joins Seletar River," explained Dr Vasoo.



Nee Soon Village, c. 1942

Courtesy of The National Archives, United Kingdom

"People go there because the water is fresh and clean, and people bathe there. As a young child I remember playing there and learning how to swim. We used to swim upstream to get as near as possible to the reservoir."

Dr Vasoo also recalled witnessing the annual Nine Emperor God celebrations, which were organised by Dou Mu Gong Temple: "I was fascinated because I could participate with my friends in this activity. During that period they normally have *wayang* shows and nine days of prayers, so it's nine days of celebration punctuated with a big procession of this god on a sedan chair carried by many people."

WORLD WAR II AT NEE SOON VILLAGE

In 1937, the British acquired land north of Nee Soon Village for Nee Soon Barracks, which housed soldiers charged with defending Sembawang Naval Base. The camp's presence, however, made the village a target for Japanese bombers during World War II. As a result, some villagers built air-raid shelters to protect themselves and Nee Soon Village was designated a "no light" area at night to prevent detection by enemy planes.

Dr Sushilan Vasoo has vivid memories of this period: "My father used to carry me into the air-raid shelter as a child. I was a very young child then, probably less than a year old. My father used to carry me, running into this air-raid shelter built by my neighbours, which could accommodate 15-20 people in a very cramped space."

Those who failed to heed warnings paid the ultimate price. Dr Vasoo recalled how one neighbour caused much damage by smoking in an open-air toilet at night: "The Japanese pilots are quite sharp if they are flying very low. They could see from a distance this glowing tinder light. He was smoking away furiously. The Japanese bombers then released the bombs and everything went off, including the toilet. It was a really tragic event that left a lot of people dead. And it was a lesson, for the kampong folk learnt never to light a cigarette in the night or have any lights because you would be spotted. The kampong was devastated by this event."

After the Japanese occupied Singapore in 1942, a climate of fear fell on the village as the nearby Nee Soon Barracks was converted into a Japanese garrison. Dr Vasoo noted, "The neighbourhood was under shivers because you never know when they could come and then take you away. And once you are taken away, you never return. Quite a few neighbours disappeared because they were seen as a threat or they want to silence some of the community."

NEE SOON TRANSIT CAMP AND TRANSIT ROAD

The end of World War II brought peace back to Nee Soon Village. But the military maintained, and in fact, increased its presence. Nee Soon Barracks was enlarged and part of it was converted into Nee Soon Transit Camp, which housed troops who were in transit between postings to other places.

Nee Soon Barracks also became a Malayan Basic Training Centre for local recruits to the British Army in 1949. It also operated an Army Boys' Trade School from 1951-1963, which trained local youth as soldiers equipped with technical skills that would be useful in civilian life. The barracks also witnessed a milestone in Singapore's own military capabilities, when it took in the first 41 recruits of the 1st Battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment in 1957. This was Singapore's first infantry regiment, which formed the nucleus of a local defence force as Singapore prepared for internal self-government in 1959.



Army Boys Trade School, 1956
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Passing out parade of 1st Battalion, Singapore Regiment, 1957

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

From 1971–1975, Nee Soon Barracks housed troops from ANZUK (Australian, New Zealand and the United Kingdom), a joint defence force. The barracks was then transferred to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), which renamed it Nee Soon Camp. It housed SAF's School of Signals from 1975–1983 and a Basic Military Training Centre from 1976–1999. Currently, Nee Soon Camp is home to various units including the 22nd Singapore Infantry Brigade, Singapore Combat Engineers, SAF Medical Corps, SAF Music and Drama Company, and SAF Band.

The post-war military presence brought economic dividends to Nee Soon's Residents who found employment as civilian workers and earned income by selling food and other goods to the soldiers. By the late 1940s, Transit Road, which led to Nee Soon Transit Camp (hence the name), had become a hub of shops, eateries and bars that catered to the soldiers there. These establishments included Nee Soon Bar, Karachi Silk Store, Bombay Silk Store, Paris Silk, Modern Tailor, Gurkha Store, Cheap John's and Lucky Store.

Kishore J Daryanani (b. 1951) came to Singapore in 1953 from Mumbai and grew up in Nee Soon. "My father had a business in Singapore in the early 50s," he recounted. "It was set up in No.

19 Transit Road. We were staying in 36 Thong Bee Road. The place we lived in was a wooden house with a zinc roof—it had a river just opposite it."

"From the age of seven upwards, I used to go to my father's shop which was just 10 minutes away and bring him lunch. I used to serve the British soldiers there and very soon, I became the top salesman in the area. The goods that we sell there were mainly novelties, cutlery, crockery. We had lacquer coffee sets, musical boxes, jewellery boxes. The name of my father's business was Karachi Silk Store because he was in Karachi before the partition."

Kishore and his brothers later took over the store and started selling electronic goods. "We saw that radio cassette recorders were coming on the market. The first one was Sanyo. So we brought in Sanyo and started selling it. It became a hit because the British and New Zealand soldiers in Dieppe Barracks were really interested in these things. Very soon, everybody along the street was selling electronic goods, but we were the pioneers."

Another popular shop was Hussainni Store at 16 Transit Road, which was well-known for selling toys. According to former owner



Standpipe at Nee Soon Village, undated

A pictorial history of Nee Soon Community. The grassroots organisations of Nee Soon Constituency, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1987

Hussainni bin Tahir (b. 1951), the shop was started by his parents Shirin and Tahir Zakir as Burhani Store: "My father came to Singapore in 1955 when I was five years old. He used to sell knives, pens and Quink ink in the old Geylang Serai market. Then he moved to Transit Road and sold pens, books and novels."

Hussainni, who set up Hussainni Store within his father's shop, described Transit Road in the 1960s: "It was a slope. From the camp gate to the main Sembawang Road, there were about 50 shops. For 40 years we sold toys. Later, we went into porcelain for about 10 years. We

stayed at the back of the shop. Half the unit was the shop and half was the house. Every morning, I never used an alarm. The Scottish people [in the camp] would play the bagpipe. Once they play, I will wake up!"

Hussainni's son Muhammad bin Hussainni (b. 1977) explained that the shop added popular toys to its shelves to keep up with the times, from Legos and Barbie dolls to Cabbage Patch dolls, Star Wars and Hasbro action figures: "We catered to the Aussies and New Zealanders. Some stayed here for a long time, so they buy toys for their kids. They also like porcelain and Chinese wares, because these were very hard for them to get back home. And also tattoos and tailoring, very cheap for them. They called Transit Road the 'Change Alley of Nee Soon' and the 'Mini Orchard Road.'"



Well at Nee Soon Village house, 1985

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Next door was a Chinese family who ran Shanghai Dhoby. Hussainni recalled, "I know how to play mahjong, because their children would come over and say, 'Let's play mahjong!'" They taught me - it's an easy game if you play it every day." Having neighbours who ran a laundry had its advantages. Hussainni added, "Last time, my school uniform, my mother washed it and passed to them. They ironed for me very fast!"

Hussaini closed his shop in the 1980s. Transit Road was then still a popular spot for foreign troops as well as locals, due to its low prices and more pleasant shopping environment compared to malls downtown. After the last New Zealand forces left in 1989, the area became quieter. Most of its shops were then demolished and redeveloped into condominiums, and the last Transit Road retailers moved out in 2015.

NEE SOON VILLAGE IN THE 1950S–1970S

In the immediate post-war decades, Nee Soon Village continued to grow and became one of the most densely populated rural centres in Singapore. By the 1960s, the village had about 350 houses and about 3,500 residents, most of whom were farmers and shopkeepers.

Modern developments and amenities made inroads after the war. In the 1950s, residents enjoyed open-air film screenings organised by the government, which also installed street lights, electricity and telephone services by the 1960s. Standpipes were also installed in the 1960s so that villagers did not have to rely on wells for drinking water.



Nee Soon Community Centre and mobile library service, 1965

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

After Singapore gained self-rule in 1959, the government began to open community centres in rural areas to provide social, recreational and welfare services. In Nee Soon, community centres opened at Bah Soon Pah Road and Jalan Ulu Seletar in 1963, following by Nee Soon Community Centre in 1964. A highlight of the community centre was a mobile library

that visited every week. This community centre closed in 1988 and the site is now part of Springleaf Nature Park.

During this period, farming remained the main source of livelihood for most residents, who raised pigs and poultry, and also cultivated fruit trees and vegetables on their land. Those who dwelled closer to Sungei Seletar grew coconuts, as their land was sandier, and also built prawn and fish ponds. To help improve the farmers' productivity and income, the government opened the Sembawang Research Station at Bah Soon Pah Road in 1959. This facility included a veterinary section which taught farmers how to produce more eggs, fish, livestock and vegetables using modern techniques. It also supplied disease-free chicks and piglets to farmers.



Central Veterinary Station, 1962

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Pigs at the Central Veterinary Station, 1962

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Then President Benjamin Sheares' visit to the Sembawang Research Station, 1971
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,
courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

In the 1960-1980s, the station expanded its capabilities to include orchids and other horticultural plants, a Farm School that taught modern techniques to young farmers, and supplying fry to local fish farmers. The station, along with nearby farms and plant nurseries, closed in the early 2020s, and the area was redeveloped into Yishun's Chencharu estate.

Meanwhile, the village centre was a thriving neighbourhood of sundry and coffee shops, bakeries, spice mills, laundries, barbers, clinics and even goldsmiths. One well-known establishment that later moved to Yishun is Nee Soon Clinic, which was founded in 1960 by Dr B.R. Mukherjee at 81 Sembawang Road. This clinic moved to Yishun in the 1980s and is still operating today.

Another shop that began in Nee Soon Village is Teck Lee Goldsmith, which was founded in 1968 by Woo Seng Inn (1927-1997) near the junction of Sembawang and Thong Aik Roads. "My father used to work in a pawnshop," said Woo Boon Tong (b. 1967), Teck Lee's current proprietor. "Then the business collapsed, so he started his own shop. He learnt the trade by doing repairs."

Home for the family was just across the road. "We were staying at Chong Kuo Road," shared Woo. "Last time, there used to be a row of shophouses, also old houses and furniture shops there. Chong Kuo Road is now redeveloped into a condo."

Woo recalled that gangsters were not uncommon: "Last time, there were a lot of people asking for protection money. You also have people trying to break in. Our place was once broken in, and they took almost everything. My father was working very late, so he never kept the things in the safe; they gave him something to make him sleep, and then everything was gone. We had to rebuild from there."

Another risk was fire, which frequently broke out in the village. "There was a big fire in 1978," recalled Woo. "The whole block burnt down. My father didn't have business for a whole year." In the mid-1980s, the Woo family moved their shop and home to Yishun New Town when Nee Soon Village was resettled.

A major development in the area that took place in the 1960s was the expansion of Seletar Reservoir and the building of a landmark 18-metre-high tower next to it, which opened in 1969. For Aziyah Janis (b. 1972), the reservoir was her childhood playground. "We called it Apollo as the shape looked like a rocket", she said of the tower, which suggested the Apollo rockets of the 1960s. "We always played around there."

Home for Aziyah was a house at 9-H Mandai Track 3. "My dad's family were staying in Nee Soon Camp after the war, because my step-grandfather was a gardener there," she recalled. But once he got married, he shifted to a rental house behind the maternity clinic. My grandparents were still living in Nee Soon Camp, so my parents would ride a scooter to visit them there."

According to Aziyah, there was a row of barracks-like quarters next to the reservoir, in what is now a golf course. A friend of hers lived there; hence, she often visited the reservoir area and played there. "It was a long barracks, probably around eight houses," she said.



Upper Seletar Reservoir Park rocket tower, c. 1970s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Aziyah's family moved to Sembawang in the mid-1970s, but she continued to visit Nee Soon frequently. "During my primary school time until I was a teenager, my aunt was living in Nee Soon kampong, so I would always visit her house," she stated. "It's a Chinese kampong house and she rented one room and she had her own makeshift kitchen. My parents' house belonged to an Indian-Muslim family, so the kitchen there was shared. But my aunt's house was a Chinese house, so they needed their own kitchen."

Another childhood memory of Aziyah's was visiting Masjid Ahmad Ibrahim at Jalan Ulu Seletar. "It was a kampong area around the

mosque," she recalled. "Even though it's a small mosque, many people from the nearby camps came to pray there." This mosque was established in 1958 and named after Ahmad Ibrahim, Assemblyman for Sembawang from 1955-1962, who had supported the villagers' efforts to build it.

Near Aziyah's childhood home, there was another post-war religious landmark, the Sree Maha Mariamman Temple, which was built in 1947 at Mandai Road. Shanta Kumari Subramaniam (b. 1954), whose family resided in Sembawang Place from 1959, recalled visiting this temple as a child:



Masjid Ahmad Ibrahim, 1986
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Sree Maha Mariamman temple at Mandai Road, undated
A pictorial history of Nee Soon Community. The grassroots organisations of Nee Soon Constituency, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1987

"My dad drove and he used to take us to Mandai Road. There was a temple there, the Sree Mariamman Temple—he was in the committee. That was our outing. The temple was a very small building, but the land was huge, now it is Meng Suan Road. My father used to drive us to prayers there on Tuesdays and Fridays. Around that corner there used to be a big canal, Ramu's Clinic and the post office, which is now a vet. Opposite was a row of shops at Thong Bee Road. There was also a big [rubber] factory, opposite the army camp, near the mosque."



Sembawang School, undated

A pictorial history of Nee Soon Community. The grassroots organisations of Nee Soon Constituency, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1987

Meanwhile, Aziyah recalled that her father studied at Sembawang School near Jalan Mata Ayer. The first English-medium school in the area, Sembawang School opened in 1952. In 1966, it was converted into a multi-purpose school (with integrated and technical classes). It closed in 1994 and its pupils moved to Ahmad Ibrahim Primary School in Yishun. The school site is now a condominium (Euphony Gardens).

A second English-medium school, Nee Soon School, opened in 1954 at Nee Soon Road. This school became popular as it was the only one within the village with English classes. It closed in 1986 when the village was resettled and its pupils moved to Peixin Primary in Yishun.

The only surviving school building in the area is Upper Thomson Secondary School (UTSS) which opened in 1966 as a co-educational school that provided Chinese and English education. UTSS was known for its ping-pong and badminton teams, which won numerous national competitions. In 1988, UTSS moved to Yishun Ring Road and was renamed North View Secondary. Its former premises then housed Seletar Institute, a pre-university



Upper Thomson Secondary School, 1966

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

institute offering three-year A-level courses, from 1989–1997. The site is being redeveloped, but parts of the former school will be conserved and integrated into future developments.

Behind the former UTSS was a long lane called Lorong Banir, at the end of which stood the home of former resident Ng Soh Bee (b. 1964). “My home was a wooden, zinc-roofed house at the end of Lorong Banir,” she shared. “The house had four rooms, one kitchen and one toilet in the kitchen — last time the toilet was outside.”

As her siblings were much older, Ng often played on her own in the lush forest behind her home. “I was always alone,” she said. “I would go into the jungle when I was free, accompanied by the dog. I would go to a small river to catch fish. The back of my house is already jungle.”

Unlike many other villagers, the Ng family did not farm their land. Ng explained that her mother was too busy to do so: “My mother had six children—early morning she got up at five, cooked porridge for breakfast, then sent us to school, did cooking, washing, sometimes ironing, the whole day kept her occupied already—because of that she didn’t have a chance to make use of the land.”

The family’s livelihood came from Ng’s father, who was a freelancer driver. His clients included troops in the Nee Soon area who needed a ride to town. “Sometimes he even sent people to Malaysia,” Ng added. “He would bring us to eat *gu bak mee* (beef noodles) at Bugis Street, then to Mount Faber, and when I finished my O-levels, he drove us all the way to Penang!”

Recalling her schooldays, Ng said: “I had to walk at least half-an-hour and cross the road to go to Poi Eng School. It was all jungle and big fruit trees—jackfruit, rambutans—along the way.” She added: “Because the back of my house was jungle, and we had a few rambutan trees, monkeys will come and disturb us because they want the fruits—they are not scared of humans.”

Ng’s niece Debby Ng (b.1982) has fond memories of exploring the jungle behind the house with her father, who showed her a hidden pond deep in the forest. “That stream where my dad brought me, there were crocodiles,”

she said. “My dad was a rebel so he was like, “children, come!”. It was actually so dangerous, it’s crazy to think that he brought us kids there to play. But we went there to catch fish, and one day I caught a small lizard in my fishing net. I showed it to my dad and he said, “That’s a baby crocodile!”. He told me to put it back, and we immediately got out of the water.”

Debby also recalled an encounter with a python: “There was a chicken coop, then one day a snake got into the coop and ate the chicken. Then it got too big to get out, so they ate the snake.”

The Ng family left Lorong Banir for Yishun New Town in the 1980s. Ng explained: “Because of the resettlement, all my siblings had their own HDB. At that time, even though I was young, I had started to *pak tor* (date) already, and we got our flat very fast, Block 715 near Khatib Camp. They had built these flats already and then reserved them for all these resettlements.”

By the mid-1980s, most residents of Nee Soon Village had been resettled and the area was later converted into housing and commercial developments such as Springleaf Garden, Springside and Hong Heng Mansions. By then, the name “Nee Soon” had also become associated with a new HDB estate to the north, Yishun, which was built on the site of a rural community with its own stories and identity called Chye Kay Village.

CHYE KAY VILLAGE



Map showing Chye Kay Village, Chye Kay Road and other roads and schools in the Chye Kay area, 1973
Ministry of Defence Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Nee Soon Village lent its name to present-day Yishun. But this HDB estate was actually built on another settlement called Chye Kay Village. From its early days as pineapple and rubber plantations, Chye Kay Village emerged in the post-war era to become a thriving rural community and a leading producer of tropical fish before it made way for Yishun New Town in the late 1970s.

ORIGINS AND VILLAGE LANDMARKS

Located north of Nee Soon Village, between Sembawang Road and the Khatib Bongsu coast, Chye Kay Village traces its origins to Teochew planter Tan Chye Kay, who came to Singapore in the 1890s and worked at a gambier plantation in Mandai. He then sold alcohol at Seletar before saving enough to open pineapple estates in Ong Lye Sua (Pineapple Hill) and rubber estates in Seng Pang Hng (Simpang).

Little is known about Tan Chye Kay, but he was known for being unbiased and ready to do what was good for the community. Hence, he was well-respected and the Rural Board agreed to name the village after him in 1954.

Chye Kay Village's population grew in the 1920s as people from Jalan Kayu, which was being developed into an air base, were resettled there. Then in the 1930s, a forest reserve in

Seletar was degazetted and opened up for settlement, which drew more people to Chye Kay Village, where they grew crops and fruit trees and raised livestock and fish. Before the war, the village had about 30 households.

World War II led to a further influx, as people from other parts of Singapore sought refuge in the Chye Kay area. During this period of food shortages, they converted rubber plantations into farms for tapioca, sweet potatoes, beans and other edible crops. Chye Kay Village's population grew to about 160 families, many of whom remained even after the war ended.

Chye Kay Village was originally located along Bah Soon Pah Road, but in the mid-1950s, this land was acquired by the government for the Sembawang Research Station. As a result, the villagers were resettled further north, near the present junction of Sembawang Road and Yishun Avenue 3. The relocated village was linked to its interior by Chye Kay Road, which ran eastwards towards the Khatib Bongsu and Simpang areas.

Other roads in the village's interior included: Lorong Achara (after the Malay term for "a rule of conduct"; Lorong Peluang (Malay for "opportunity" in Malay); Lorong Batu Giling (a stone for grinding food ingredients); and Lorong Kumara (after an Indian epic hero).



Map showing Chye Kay Resettlement Area and Chye Kay Road, 1961

Courtesy of The National Archives, United Kingdom

The “entrance” of Chye Kay Village, according to former resident Sunny Ng (b. 1960), was the junction of Sembawang and Chye Kay Roads. Writing in his book *Retracing Footsteps Home... Chye Kay Village, A Dream Fulfilled*, Ng recalled that this area was formerly a rubber plantation: “The land used to belong to Bukit

Sembawang ... the area where Block 101 in Chong Pang City stands today used to be a hill filled with rubber plantations. During the Japanese Occupation, the area was a well-known gambling district, consisting of various nightlife activities and a casino with over a hundred gambling dens.” This gambling area was torn down after the war.

In the post-war decades, this junction continued to serve as a village hub, with amenities such as a cinema, provision shops, coffee shops, barbers and laundries. Chye Kay Community Centre, which opened in 1967, was also located near the junction. As the village grew, Chye Kay Road was metalled in 1968 to improve access to the village's interior. By 1975, Chye Kay Village had about 400 households and 3,000 inhabitants, along with two community centres and three schools.

Chye Kay had three Chinese-medium schools. The oldest was Kwang Teck School, which was established by Teochew villager Lim Sioh in the 1930s at Lorong Achara. This school was built on land that belonged to the Teochew Ngee Ann Kongs, which also supported the school.



Sembawang Legislative Assembly member Teong Eng Siong officiating at a street lamp opening ceremony at 12 1/2 milestone, Sembawang Road (junction with Chye Kay Road), 1965

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Minister of State for Defence Wee Toon Boon opens the Chye Kay Community Centre, 1967
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The village's second school was Lee Cheng School, which was established by Tan Soo Chuan, a Hokkien villager, in 1939. The school initially used the wayang stage of the village's Ho Peck San Temple as its classroom. Classes halted during the war as the principal Ng Lian Hong fell ill and died. After the war, Ng's brother Ng Lian Chong, who was a teacher there, persuaded the villagers to re-open the school and along with other teachers, taught classes without charge, accepting payment in kind instead.

Lee Cheng School finally moved into its own premises at Lorong Peluang in 1948, when a villager named Bai Song Chun donated land for the school. During the 1960s–1970s, the school produced more than 10 national table-tennis players, due to the efforts of principal Tan Tuan Kiong who set up a training room for the pupils.

Tan was also instrumental in shaping Chye Kay Village's livelihoods. He pioneered the breeding of guppies in the village and developed ways to raise new attractive breeds. Sharing his results and methods with fellow villagers, Tan encouraged them to take up tropical fish farming as an alternate source of income to raising pigs and poultry. As a result, Chye Kay Village became one of Singapore's largest tropical fish exporters in the 1960–1970s.

The third school, Lee Teck School, opened in 1948 along Chye Kay Road, on . It occupied land donated by a descendant of Tan Chye Kay. Chye Kay's schools closed in the late 1970s when their land was acquired for the development of Yishun. In 2017, a mural depicting Lee Teck Public School was painted at Block 776 Yishun Avenue 2, the site of the former school.



Class conducted in Lee Teck School, 1960s
Ho Chin Geok Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Lee Teck School, 1960s
Ho Chin Geok Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Original Ho Peck San Temple, undated
Courtesy of Ho Peck San Temple

Chye Kay Village had two major temples, which are now in Yishun. The older temple is Ho Peck San, which was established in the early 1900s.

Former villager Oh Ghim Ho (b. 1956) has frequented the temple since his childhood days in the Bah Soon Pah area: "The Orchid Country Club area — this was where my family was. My parents had a farm — we reared fish, chicken, pigs, ducks, and also grew orchids."

"The temple was at the edge of Wan Quo (Ban Kok) rubber plantation. My grandparents

would visit the temple often. My father and I would follow them. Staying next to the temple with an old man named Han Pek, who was the medium. People would consult him for occasions such as weddings, building a house or starting a business. I would cycle to him to let him know that someone is planning to consult him. He stayed next to the temple, he was also a farmer."

Oh's family also consulted the medium for important decisions: "We consulted Han Pek about expanding our farms and fish ponds, for



Chu Siang Tong Temple, undated

A pictorial history of Nee Soon Community. The grassroots organisations of Nee Soon Constituency, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1987

instance, when to start work, what rituals to perform, also whenever children were unwell. He would prescribe herbs and a scribe would write down the prescription. We even asked him about overseas trips, whether the travel period and length were alright."

Oh, who attended Hua Nan Chinese School, described his boyhood routine: "School was from 8am to 1pm. We walked to school. It took about 20 minutes, so we had to leave the house at 7-plus. After school, we helped our parents fetch water and firewood, and took care of the pigs and poultry. We did not have gas, so we used wood from a nearby rubber estate for cooking and heating. We had to gather the branches quickly or others would collect them, or cut mangrove wood from the Lower Seletar area. We had to get firewood once or twice a week. We grew most of our own vegetables, except for rice, sugar, oil, *tau kua* (dried beancurd) and *tau pok* (beancurd puffs)."

Recalling how a dry spell affected the village, Oh shared: "Our home had a well. My father had dug a well, which was about 10 metres deep—it took him about a month to dig it. There was a period when Bah Soon Pah had a drought, with no rain for six–seven months. The whole kampong had no water, but we still had water thanks to the well. Neighbours would come and get water from us. Even the rubber trees all dried up and the estate even caught fire—this was in the 1970s. The kids had to use gunny sacks to help put out the fire."

Oh's family moved to Block 127 Yishun Street 11 in the early 1980s. "We had to move because they were building Lower Seletar reservoir," he said. "It was a river then. Our fish ponds were at the site of the reservoir now. The high tide would reach the edge of our ponds."

Oh is presently chairman of Ho Peck San. Explaining how he became involved with the temple in the 1980s, Oh shared: "My family were regulars at the temple. Then one of the elders encouraged me to help at the temple. I was then a running a provision shop at Block 156. It was originally rented, but I later bought it and rented it out. That's why I have more time to help out. I have been involved with the temple for more than 20 years now."

The other village temple, Chu Siang Tong, was founded in 1950. Originally located at the Bah Soon Pah area, the temple moved to Lorong Kumala off Sembawang Road in 1961. It then moved to Yishun Ring Road in the 1980s.

LIFE IN CHYE KAY VILLAGE: BREEDING GUPPIES AND GROWING DURIANS

Unlike many other rural settlements which relied on agriculture, Chye Kay Village was renown as a producer of guppies and other tropical fish, which provided an alternative source of income to traditional activities such as rearing pigs and poultry.

According to Toh Siam Ker (b. 1948), nearly 80% of villagers reared tropical fish for export in the 1970s: "My old house is now around Block 243 Yishun Ring Road—it was next to Lee Cheng School at Lorong Peluang. Most people there reared fish. We used to have two large ponds for edible fish such as grass carp; later, we switched to tropical fish. We exported to the USA, Europe and Japan."

"It started in the 1960s. The principal of Lee Cheng School began to rear tropical fish and introduced it to the other villagers, because he saw that the villagers were growing vegetables and had to toil very hard."

"The whole kampong reared guppies. Chye Kay accounted for about 25% of Singapore's tropical fish exports. We had hundreds of cement tanks, and also nets in the larger ponds. I focused on guppies and moonfish (mollies)."

The Toh family's home faced Sungei Khatib Bongsu, which often burst its banks. As a result, they had to keep watch over their ponds. "Every once in a while, there would be a huge flood and we had to release the water using a floodgate," explained Toh. "At times, we were late and the fish would escape."

The Toh family also cultivated durian trees: "My father's specialty was durian. When he started, it was 20–30 trees. By the time we were resettled, we had more than 100 trees. We had the most durian trees in the kampong. Why did my father grow durians? Because the land was very large and durians needed less labour."

Toh recalled how his family became well-known for their durians: “My second brother, who is now 88, knew how to select and breed better quality trees. Many other villagers sought his help to grow durians.” During the durian season, villagers would wait by the Toh family’s trees as early as five in the morning. “Sometimes people would quarrel, as they were seeking the best durians,” said Toh.

The income from their durians and tropical fish allowed the Toh family to convert their home from a leaky attap house to a wood-and-zinc building with five rooms. “Behind the house were our fish ponds, and durian and rambutan trees,” recalled Toh. “In the front, we reared pigs. By the 1970s, we focused entirely on rearing fish.”

The family’s rambutans were sought after not just by people. “My elder brother had a rifle,” said Toh. “The Flying foxes (a type of bat) would come and eat the rambutans. They came in huge groups, so at 6–7pm, people would be waiting to shoot them. Last time, people sold these at Chinatown as medicine.”

After finishing school, Toh found work at the Sembawang Research Station: “I worked at the PPD [Primary Production Department] at Sembawang, growing grass mushrooms. I heard they were looking for staff, so I applied. We grew the mushrooms on banana leaves, which were arranged in layers. We placed the spores in the layers and kept them in shade. Then we added water every day. It was a three-week cycle, then we started again with fresh banana leaves.”

LIFE IN CHYE KAY: KHATIB BONGSU AND KHATIB CAMP

Another former villager, Yeo Siak Cheaw (b. 1949), also turned to tropical fish to support his family. “Originally we only grew vegetables and reared chicken,” he said. “We had to take care of the chickens before going to school. We grew *chye sim* (Chinese mustard), *eng chyeai* (water spinach), lady’s fingers, French beans, also melons and cucumbers. This was when I was 17. We also reared *song yu* (big head carp), *chao yu* (grass carp) and pigs.”

“Then in 1967–68, we started rearing guppies. At Nee Soon, there was an elder who was doing this. We got the females from him. The principal of Lee Cheng School also encouraged the village to do so. So from 1970, I started selling guppies. My elder brother was still rearing pigs and growing vegetables, while I focused on guppies. My younger brother was going to university then, and my guppies helped to support his studies.”

Home for the Yeo family was 682 Jalan Kuala Simpang, which is now Block 293 Yishun Street 22. “We stayed near the Teochew cemetery, Kwong Teck Suah,” he shared. “But it wasn’t scary, we were used to it. There were coffin sellers at what is Yishun Avenue 8 now.”

Just outside his house, there was a small creek that flowed into Sungei Khatib Bongsu. Yeo recounted what he and his friends did there during their boyhood: “We would catch birds like doves and rear them, or go to the seaside and catch crabs at Khatib Bongsu among the mangroves. Once, we tried to use kerosene to get the crab out [of its hole]. But it exploded and we were all covered with mud, which we realised when we ran home.”

Beyond the fun and games, Yeo worked hard to support his family after finishing primary school. “I didn’t have money for secondary school,” he said, “When I was 12 or 13, my first job was to sell *otah* (grilled fish cake) from Bah Soon Pah, one for 5 cents. I sold to the whole kampong, that’s why I know the kampong so well. I did that for two years.”

Yeo also recalled his wedding in 1978, which was a grand affair. “Back then the wedding reception was more complicated than today,” he said. “People would come a day earlier to give angpaos (red packets with money) and chat. Then on the actual day, we had the main reception. The whole celebration took three days! We engaged good cooks from the village, roving caterers, and invited fellow villagers from Chye Kay and Simpang, 200–300 people.”

“The people who cooked were our neighbours—they were well-known cooks and knew my father well. We paid for their labour and provided the ingredients. Back then, we usually had 12 dishes. They would go with us to the

market to get the ingredients, prepare and plan a month or two in advance.”

Yeo also recalled that before Khatib Camp was established, it was a racing circuit. “There was no Khatib Camp then, it was a place where the angmos (Westerners) raced motorcars,” he said.

Fellow villager Sunny Ng also recalled such scenes, writing in his book: “Where Khatib Camp stands today, there used to be a looped asphalt road, which the British troops used to train their soldiers to drive. The track was also often used to hold mini car races organised by British military families, where obstacles were built for races between all-terrain jeeps, sidecar motorcycles as well as dirt bikes. Showgirls were also present during the races, attracting large audiences of both British troops and villagers alike.”

Khatib Camp was formed in 1964 by the Malaysian armed forces (Singapore was part of Malaysia from 1963-1965), which used it as a training ground and later a school for Malaysian naval recruits. Khatib Camp was transferred to Singapore in 1982 and became the headquarters of Singapore Artillery from 1983. In 2025, it was announced that Khatib Camp will make way for housing in the future and its military units transferred to Amoy Queen Camp in Ang Mo Kio.



Khatib Camp, 1991

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

went to Old Tampines Road. About 80% of the fish farmers there were from Chye Kay. I moved out in 1981.”

Other villagers such as Yeo were resettled at Ang Mo Kio. “We moved to Block 438 Ang Mo Kio Avenue 3 in 1979,” he recalled. But in 1991, he returned to the site of his childhood home. “I moved back to Yishun, because Yishun is my old home,” said Yeo. “My current unit is close to my old home in the village and I am familiar with many of the people here.”

Chye Kay Village may have disappeared, but its community still lives on. Chye Kay Cheng Teck Association, a mutual aid organisation formed in the 1950s and registered in 1968, is still active today at Block 101 Yishun Avenue 5. This association was established to provide aid to villagers who could not afford important events such as weddings and funerals. For instance, it sent volunteers to help bereaved villagers manage a funeral. Later, it expanded its activities to include charitable services for the community. Today, the association organises activities such as an annual bursary award and overseas tours for its members.

The story of Chye Kay Village continues to be told in Yishun. In 2022, a Chye Kay Heritage Garden opened between Blocks 293 and 264 Yishun Street 22. Based on illustrations and stories from Sunny Ng’s book *Retracing Footsteps Home... Chye Kay Village, A Dream Fulfilled*, the Heritage Garden is located near the site of the former Lee Cheng School and was a joint project between Nee Soon Town Council and former Chye Kay Village residents.

FROM CHYE KAY TO YISHUN

Chye Kay Village’s residents were resettled from the late 1970s as the area had been earmarked for the future Yishun New Town. Toh recalled: “After we were resettled, many of us

YISHUN NEW TOWN



Yishun HDB flats, 1983

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Built on the site of the former Chye Kay Village, Yishun New Town is the only Housing & Development Board (HDB) estate to be named after a local community leader. Once regarded as a remote housing estate, Yishun became a thriving northern town as new amenities and attractions such as the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station, Yishun 10, Northpoint and Chong Pang City emerged to draw new residents as well as visitors from other parts of Singapore.

PLANNING AND NAMING YISHUN

In 1977, HDB announced plans for a new housing estate in the north, which was then called Nee Soon New Town. Located east of Sembawang Road, this new satellite town would be built on the sites of Chye Kay Village and the Bah Soon Pah area, whose residents were resettled in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The first HDB unit in this estate was a U-shaped four-storey block with shops and eateries on the ground floor and flats on the upper storeys. Constructed by HDB in 1976–1977 to rehouse shopkeepers and households who had to make way for a widening of Sembawang Road, this building is Block 101 Yishun Avenue 5, which is now part of Chong Pang City.



Construction of Yishun HDB flats, 1983

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

In 1980, HDB adopted the use of Hanyu Pinyin for Chinese names of its new estates as part of the government's efforts to promote the Mandarin language. Hence, Nee Soon New Town was renamed Yishun New Town. Yishun was then planned as HDB's fifth largest housing estate (after Woodlands, Ang Mo Kio, Bedok and Tampines), with a projected population of 200,000 and scheduled to be completed by 1990.

HDB's approach in planning Yishun New Town and its street layout made use of the area's natural topography, which included existing hills and waterbodies. For instance, Yishun Neighbourhood Park (opened in 1989) and

Yishun Park (opened 1995) were established on hills with existing trees to provide green spaces and recreational sites for residents. Meanwhile, old fish ponds around Sungei Khatib Bongsu were converted into Yishun Pond, a catchment area for rainwater next to the town centre.

In its urban design, Yishun featured a system of concentric ring roads that encircled the town centre. The most prominent of these is Yishun Ring Road, which connect different parts of the estate with each other, the town centre and major roads such as Yishun Avenue 2. Many of the estate's schools, neighbourhood centres and other amenities were also built along Yishun Ring Road.

YISHUN IN THE 1980s

Yishun's first residents, who moved there from 1984, had mixed feelings about the brand new estate. One reason was because neighbourhood amenities such as markets were not ready, so residents had to commute all the way to Block 101 at Sembawang Road to buy groceries and other goods. Noise and dust pollution from ongoing flat construction was another concern, as was crime, due to the estate's then remote location.

Woo Boon Tong of Teck Lee Goldsmith, who moved from Nee Soon Village to Yishun

Street 22 in the mid-1980s, recalled how the town was like then: "Our block was then just developed. There were only shops here, the housing block wasn't built yet. Opposite our shop, it was just an empty plot of land, we could see JB (Johor Bahru) from here! During schooling time, we needed to walk all the way to Yishun Central to the old bus terminal. It was not even an interchange, just a row of buses, a standing terminal."

The situation improved from 1985 as new facilities and amenities such as schools, banks, a post office, clinic, eateries and shops opened in Yishun. However, despite these developments, Yishun was not a very popular choice for flat applicants in the 1980s due to its distance from the city.

Sofea Abdul Rahman (b. 1965) recalled moving to Yishun in 1988. "After we moved out of Jalan Ulu Sembawang, they allocated Block 403, Yishun Avenue 6 to us. It was a 4-room corner flat—so huge! We choose a corner as it was not too noisy and not too low—it was a good decision."

Sofea's family found themselves living in a nearly empty block, however. "There was almost nobody staying here," she recalled. "We were one of the first few residents to move in. The market was not ready yet so we had to go



Flats under construction at Yishun, late 1980s
Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman



Sofea Abdul Rahman outside her flat at Yishun Avenue 6, late 1980s

Courtesy of Sofea Abdul Rahman

to Yishun Street 22, near the church, which was a few bus stops away. It was only later that the wet market at Block 416 was built. There was still a lot of jungle around then. The vegetation was very thick. We were on the sixth floor. We could take the lift up to the 12th floor and see the Khatib Bongsu River."

Sofea's niece Aziyah Janis (b. 1972) was also an early resident. "My family was the first to move to Block 124 Yishun Street 11 in 1984," she shared. "Because my mother was going to give birth to my youngest brother, we had to move in fast. We had no neighbours, so in the day you would see people who had just got their keys, while downstairs there were posters of contractors. But at night, it was so scary, as there was only us."

Aziyah's father had chosen their block as it was close to Masjid Darul Makmur, which opened in 1987. She shared that in the 1980s, the mosque stood next to a large field. "It was an open area, so during Hari Raya, when there was not enough space, people would pray over there," she said. "The flats next to the mosque only came up around 1995."

Aziyah shared that Yishun Central was vastly different in the 1980s. "What is now Northpoint was then a long stretch of HDB shops, two-storey buildings like the shops in Chong Pang City," she said. "And before the bus interchange came up, it was at Blocks 202 and 203, at the roadside just outside the present Golden Village cinema. The whole stretch of road was a makeshift bus interchange with the buses in rows."

In the early years, Aziyah recalled that residents had to first take a bus to Ang Mo Kio to get to other parts of Singapore. "The MRT then started in 1987, but at first it only reached Yio Chu Kang," she recalled. "We would take the bus to Yio Chu Kang and then take the MRT."

Another early resident was Bal Singh (b. 1960), who moved to Yishun in 1986. The estate was then still not in high demand, as he shared: "When I applied for a HDB flat, I had applied for Bukit Batok. HDB said, 'You have to wait for very long—if you want fast, take Yishun, just walk in. I discussed with my wife, and they gave me a list. The first unit I asked, I got it and we got the keys within two weeks.'"

"I was the third person in the block. In the night it was very quiet like a haunted area. There were no shops, nothing. Luckily I had a bicycle to cycle all the way to Chong Pang to buy things. Then later the schools came up and I could send my son to Northland Primary School. Now my granddaughter is there."

After nearly 40 years in Yishun, Singh is struck by how far the estate has come: "There's so much change now. Once upon a time, nobody wanted a flat. Now everyone wants one here."

Like Singh, Crispin Rodrigues's parents moved to Yishun in 1986, where they occupied a five-room flat at Yishun Ring Road. Rodrigues (b. 1988) recalls growing up in an estate that was quiet and filled with greenery in the 1980s.

"I have stayed in Yishun for my entire [life] and in the same block. Growing up in Yishun, it felt like a kampong experience even though there was Northpoint. It was big enough to explore. As a child, I really liked walking around. The older parts of Yishun really felt like there was a lot of space."



Yishun HDB blocks overlooking Lower Seletar Reservoir, 1980
 Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Rodrigues' childhood explorations brought him to once wooded corners of Yishun. "There used to be a lot of forests around," he recalled. "The area around Yishun Park, near the Yishun Park Hawker Centre, Yishun Mall—these are the old parts and beyond that there were a lot of forests, spaces with one tiny road that went in, tiny pathways, dirt-paths and you would see people fishing around a little pond. These disappeared in the 1990s."

These walks brought Rodrigues all the way to Yishun Dam, which was already known as a scenic spot then. "It was very nice at night and a popular dating spot," he said. "It was very quiet, and at night, a lot of motorcyclists would stop along the road, sit there and enjoy the breeze."

In contrast to the pioneer residents, Rodrigues grew up in a neighbourhood where everything was within convenient reach. "As a child, I went to Khatib Central a lot, because there were a lot of amenities: there's the McDonald's which has two floors, and a KFC, which has disappeared."

Rodrigues often tagged along with his grandaunt on a shopping circuit across the estate. "I would accompany her to Chong Pang Market, Khatib Central and all the way to Blocks 276 and 272, opposite the Lady Star of our Sea—that's the church that we still go to this day. I was baptised in the original Star of

the Sea in Sembawang. Then it moved here and we kept going to it."

Schools were also nearby. "My primary school was Chong Fu (Yishun Avenue 6)," shared Rodrigues. "Later I studied in Yishun Junior College. It has a factory aesthetic but was a nice school. As a student it was great because it was near my house—I remember during my "A" levels I forgot my IC and I had to run back to get it."

The turning point for Yishun was probably the opening of Yishun and Khatib MRT stations on 20 December 1988. This helped Yishun to shed its reputation as an "ulu" (remote) estate, as the MRT offered direct access to workplaces in the city and other parts of Singapore.



MRT running through Yishun, 1989
 Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,
 courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Inaugural ride on the MRT to Yishun MRT station, 1988

Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Apart from the MRT, new roads helped to improve Yishun's connectivity to neighbouring estates. Lentor Avenue (from *lentur*, meaning "flexible" or "graceful" in Malay) opened in 1982 to link Yishun to Ang Mo Kio. Mandai Avenue, which linked Yishun Avenue 1 to Sembawang Road, opened in 1990. Then, Gambas Avenue (named after a kind of gourd) opened in 1993, connecting Yishun to Woodlands.

NORTHPOINT, YISHUN 10 AND CHONG PANG CITY

Yishun's transformation from a remote satellite town to a thriving northern hub continued in the 1990s as new and notable landmarks appeared. First, Yishun 10 opened at the town centre in May 1992. A joint venture between Hong Kong's Golden Harvest and Australia's Cinema Developments, Yishun 10 was Asia's first multiplex, boasting 10 cinema halls with a total of 2,552 seats, restaurants, specialty shops and other recreational facilities. It was also Singapore's first cinema to have handicapped-friendly facilities and a computerised ticketing system.

Beyond the screens, Yishun 10 was also notable for its high-tech and futuristic "Ultraman-like façade". The building was designed by Australian architect Geoff Malone (1943–2022) who was tasked to create something

resembling "a rocket ship which had landed in Yishun from outer space". Yishun 10 was originally clad in metal and red, with strips of red, orange and blue neon lights that lit up at night to make the building appear like a spaceship.

As it was located close to the MRT station, Yishun 10 drew crowds from Yishun and all over Singapore from its opening day and well into the 2000s. In 2010, the building was renovated and its exterior changed to a silver-grey colour scheme. It was also renamed Golden Village Yishun and continues to screen movies in its ten cinema halls.

Yishun 10 was a familiar landmark for Crispin Rodrigues (b. 1988), who grew up with the cinema. "I spent a lot of childhood there, watching trilogies—Lord of the Rings, Star Wars—it had a sense of exclusiveness, because not many places had a cineplex then. I remember a lot of people going to Northpoint and Golden Village just to watch a film—it was very hard to find such a place in the heartlands in those days."

Shortly after the establishment of in Yishun 10's wake, Northpoint opened in November 1992 as the first private shopping complex in a HDB estate and the first suburban mall in northern Singapore. Designed by SAA

Architects and modelled after Orchard Road's Centrepoint, the four-storey Northpoint introduced retailers and brands from Orchard Road (Singapore's main shopping belt) to the heartlands. For instance, it had the first Cold Storage supermarket in a HDB estate. A new pedestrian underpass was also built to link Northpoint to Yishun MRT station.

Apart from bringing in the crowds to Yishun, Northpoint also paved the way for the trend of suburban malls in other housing estates such as Bishan, Tampines and Jurong. Beyond shopping, Northpoint also served the community as the home of Yishun Public Library, which opened there in 2008 as part of the National Library Board's efforts to bring its libraries closer to people.

Apart from Northpoint City, there are two other shopping centres in Yishun. Junction Nine opened at Yishun Avenue 9 opened in 2016, while Wisteria Mall opened at Yishun Ring Road in 2018.

For existing neighbourhood retailers in Yishun, Northpoint's opening in 1991 posed a challenge as it offered residents a sophisticated yet convenient destination to shop and dine. In response, shopkeepers and tradesmen at Yishun Neighbourhood 1, which was also known as Chong Pang (after Nee Soon's second son), pooled their resources to upgrade their neighbourhood into a distinctive shopping belt with eye-catching gateways and an attractively landscaped pedestrian mall that leads to more than 120 shops, a food centre and wet market.

Unveiled as Chong Pang City in 1993, this initiative saw the installation of two Chinese-style marble-and-granite gateways at each end of the pedestrian mall, and an amphitheatre near the food centre for concerts and festival events. Chong Pang City was jointly developed by the Chong Pang City Merchants and Hawker's Association, Sembawang Town Council and Ministry of National Development, and modelled on shopping streets in Japan and Taiwan.

Chong Pang City also has two prominent artworks located in front of Block 101. Mother and her Baby Panda is a 1.3m-high sculpture made in 1995 after Chong Pang City became

a "sister town" with Xindu in China's Chengdu province. The other artwork is a bronze statue of a toiling farmer created by local artist Lai Kui Fang in 2003. The farmer is depicted bearing watering cans and reflect the perseverance and courage of Yishun's pioneer farmers.



*Bronze statue by Lai Kui Fang, 2006
Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL LANDMARKS OF YISHUN

Yishun may be famous for shopping, leisure and dining attractions such as Northpoint City, Golden Village Yishun and Chong Pang City, but this northern town also brims with cultural and community sites with stories of their own. From temples, mosques and churches to parks, reservoirs and sports complexes, Yishun's landmarks add to the estate's landscape and serve the community as places of devotion, recreation and natural heritage.

CHURCH OF OUR LADY STAR OF THE SEA 10 YISHUN STREET 22

The only Roman Catholic church in Yishun, the Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea originated from Sembawang Naval Base, where masses were first held for Catholic Tamil and Malayalee dockyard workers in 1926. After the war, the congregation gathered at a building at Jalan Kedai off Canberra Road before a proper church building was completed and dedicated in 1953. Its name comes from Stella Maris ("Star of the Sea" in Latin), a title of the Virgin Mary who is a guiding light for sailors.

After the Sembawang site was acquired for redevelopment in the 1980s, the church

moved to Yishun, where the current building was officially opened on 30 May 1992. With architecture that recalls the hull of a ship or ark and bearing maritime motifs on its façade, the church continues to recall its naval legacy. The church holds masses in English, Mandarin, Tamil, Malayalam and Indonesian, and also hosts interfaith learning journeys for schools in Yishun.



Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

SEMBAWANG TAMIL METHODIST CHURCH AND LIFE CENTRE 3 YISHUN STREET 11

Two separate Christian congregations share this building. Sembawang Tamil Methodist Church began as a house church for Tamils in Sembawang Naval Base in 1928 before it was formally established in 1934. After the war, the congregation gathered at a school building at

Jalan Sembawang Kechil (now Sembawang Walk) off Sembawang Road. The other congregation, Life Centre, was founded as Smyrna Assembly in 1980 by Reverend Dr John Sam Stephen (1940–2008), who ministered to migrant workers working in construction and shipyards in the north.



Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea at Sembawang Naval Base, undated
Courtesy of Henry Martin Cordeiro

Smyrna Assembly later joined Sembawang Tamil Methodist Church to acquire their present site in Yishun in 1992. The new shared church building was completed and opened in 1999. Smyrna Assembly, which changed its name to Life Centre in 2020, has a particular focus on tackling problems faced by migrant and domestic workers and equipping them with new skills.

SPIRITUAL GRACE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 109 SEMBAWANG ROAD

The first church in Nee Soon, this congregation was formed in 1908 by missionary Tay Sek Tin (1872-1944) as the Chinese Christian Church. Initially located next to Lim Nee Soon's rubber factory, the church moved in 1924 to the present site, which was provided by Lim Nee Soon, who also contributed to its building costs.

In the 1960s, the old church building, which had become dilapidated and flood-prone, was replaced by a new structure that was completed in 1967 and supported by Ang Oon Hue (1910-1998), a Sembawang-based land developer and philanthropist. The church compound also had seven houses which were leased to private occupants; these houses were demolished in the 1990s.

Spiritual Grace Presbyterian Church underwent major redevelopments in 1990, 2004 and the early 2020s. Today, the church complex consists of a modern worship hall, a columbarium and other facilities.



Old Spiritual Grace Presbyterian Church building from 1967, 2026

Courtesy of National Heritage Board

YISHUN CHRISTIAN CHURCH 10 YISHUN AVENUE 5

This church is shared by congregations from two denominations: Anglican and Lutheran. Yishun Christian Church (Anglican) has its origins in St Peter's Dockyard Church, which was built in 1939 at the junction of Admiralty Road East and King's Avenue for Anglicans residing in Sembawang Naval Base.

After the British left Singapore in the 1970s, St Peter's Church became a part of the Singapore Anglican Diocese. The original church building was acquired by the government in 1984 for a road-widening project. The congregation then gathered at a former cinema at Jalan Kedai, off Canberra Road before moving to Yishun.



Spiritual Grace Presbyterian Church, 2026

Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Together with the Lutheran Church in Singapore, which had established Yishun Christian Church (Lutheran) in 1985, the Anglican congregation formed Yishun Christian Church, which was officially dedicated on 29 May 1987. Yishun Christian Church (Anglican) holds services in English, Tamil and Mandarin, while Yishun Christian Church (Lutheran) has services in English, Mandarin and Chinese dialects. The latter also operates Lutheran Child Care Centre at Yishun and is a partner of St Luke's Eldercare in Chong Pang.

SREE MAHA MARIAMMAN TEMPLE 253 YISHUN AVENUE 3

This Hindu temple traces its origins to a pre-war shrine built by rubber estate workers at Sembawang Road's 12th milestone, which housed a statue of the deity Sree Maha Mariamman (a Hindu goddess of compassion, protection and rain). During the war, the shrine moved to Sembawang Hill Estate. In 1947, a new temple was built at Mandai Road in Nee Soon Village. New granite statues of its deities Sree Maha Mariamman, Sree Sivan, Sree Krishnar, Sree Vinayagar and Sree Murugan were then carved in South India and installed in the 1950s.

Until the early 1990s, the temple provided a religious and social space for about 3,000 Hindus residing in the Nee Soon and Sembawang areas. After its land was acquired for redevelopment, the temple moved to Yishun. Its management committee, under president Mrs Kalyani Ramasamy, then raised \$3.2 million to build a new temple, which was completed in 1996 and consecrated on 18 May 1997.

Key festivals celebrated at this temple include Deepavali, Pongal, Thaipusam and Navarathiri (the Nine Nights). A festival unique to the temple locally is Kambam, during which devotees perform prayers and offer *milagu* (salt and pepper) to the goddess Vembu Amman to seek protection from evil and illness. The temple also holds an annual silver chariot procession through Yishun, which visits other religious sites such as Yishun Combined Temple and Yishun Sikh Temple to bless residents and receive offerings. The temple is currently being reconstructed and will feature a grander *Rajagupuram* (entrance gateway) and larger worship space when it is completed in 2026.

MASJID AHMAD IBRAHIM 15 JALAN ULU SELETAR

The first mosque in the Nee Soon area, Masjid Ahmad Ibrahim was originally known as Surau Nee Soon Jalan Ulu Seletar in the 1950s, when Muslim residents worked together to build a surau (prayer hall) on land provided by Bukit Sembawang. The site was said to have been chosen by a resident who had heard the sound of a *kentong* (slit-drum used to sound the call to prayer) there.



Masjid Ahmad Ibrahim, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

In 1961, the original surau was enlarged into a mosque and renamed Masjid Ahmad Ibrahim after Sembawang assemblyman and cabinet member Ahmad Ibrahim (1927-1962), who had encouraged and supported the villagers to upgrade the building. Apart from serving residents of Nee Soon and Mandai, the mosque is frequented by Muslims working in the nearby military camps.

The mosque underwent a major renovation in the late 1980s to repair its main hall and add a new building for its madrasah and kindergarten classes. Today, it continues to be a popular religious and social space for Muslims in Yishun. It also organises regular visits to other religious sites in the area, as well as hosts non-Muslim groups to promote interracial harmony. Masjid Ahmad Ibrahim also enjoys cordial relations with the neighbouring Spiritual Grace Presbyterian Church, which allows congregants to use its car park during Friday prayers. Both organisations also work together to manage traffic around the area during busy worship periods and religious festivals.

MASJID DARUL MAKMUR

950 YISHUN AVENUE 2

Built to serve Yishun's growing Muslim population in the 1980s, Masjid Darul Makmur traces its origins to a meeting organised by Yishun's Muslim community with the support of MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) on 29 August 1982, which agreed to form a building committee for a mosque in the then-new HDB estate.

To raise funds for the mosque, the committee held religious talks, collected monthly contributions from residents, organised charity sales and walks, and sought *wakaf* (endowment) contributions for mosque facilities. They also receive compensation from the acquisition of suraus in the north (Tanjong Irau, Jalan Mata Ayer and Jalan Kemuning) that were affected by redevelopment projects.

Costing \$2.8 million, the three-storey Masjid Darul Makmur ("House of Prosperity" in Arabic) was officially opened on 25 July 1987. The only mosque in Yishun estate, it was also the first mosque in Singapore to have facilities

such as toilets for the handicapped. Next to the main hall is a 12-storey-high minaret with an onion dome on top. The mosque closed for major upgrading works in 2023 and used the premises of the former North View Secondary School as a temporary prayer site. Completed in early 2025, the works increased its capacity from 3,000 to 4,000 congregants and included a new *mimbar* (pulpit) and barrier-free amenities such as a lift and wheelchair ramps.

GURDWARA SAHIB YISHUN

(YISHUN SIKH TEMPLE)

601 YISHUN RING ROAD

This Gurdwara, the only Sikh temple in the north of Singapore, traces its origins to the former British Naval Base, where a Gurdwara was established by Sikh policemen in 1925 near Bermuda Road. This Gurdwara later moved to Canberra Road, Khalsa Crescent (Woodlands) and View Road. When the British withdrew in 1971, this Gurdwara merged with Sembawang Sikh Gurdwara, a sister Gurdwara established in 1936 by civilian Sikh workers outside of the Naval Base.



Masjid Darul Makmur, 2026

Courtesy of National Heritage Board

When its land was redeveloped in the 1990s, the Sembawang Gurdwara merged with another Gurdwara from Jalan Kayu to form Gurdwara Sahib Yishun, which held its opening ceremony on 27 August 1995. A modest two-storey building modelled after the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India (a holy site in Sikhism), this Gurdwara serves the Sikh community as a site for prayers and religious events as well as personal celebrations such as thanksgivings, weddings and birthdays.

In the Gurdwara compound, there is a saffron yellow *Nishan Sahib* (Sikh flag) which indicates the place's identity as a Gurdwara and a place of refuge and shelter. As part of this role, the Gurdwara operates a *langar* (community kitchen) that serves vegetarian food to all visitors. The *langar* also provides food to charitable organisations such as Sree Narayana Mission, the Ashram and Willing Hearts (a soup kitchen charity). Visitors are welcome but need to remove their shoes and cover their heads (with a cloth) before entering the building.



Gurdwara Sahib Yishun, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

CHEE HOON SUN KONG AND CHEOW LENG BEO 525 YISHUN INDUSTRIAL PARK A

Collectively known as Chee Leng Lian He Miao, this combined temple was completed in 1997 and consists of temples from Bukit Timah and Jalan Besar. Chee Hoon Sun Kong began in 1963 at Dairy Farm Road, where there were granite quarries. As a result, stone is used extensively in this temple, which has an altar carved from a single granite block weighing 17 tonnes. The temple is dedicated to the three schools of teaching in Chinese culture—

Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism—which are represented in the three granite pillars at the entrance.

Cheow Leng Beo traces its origins to an altar in a coolie quarters for Henghua migrants from China's Jiangdou Village. Originally located at Weld Road off Jalan Besar, the altar was dedicated to Liu Jin Shen Hou, a deity to whom people from Jiangdou prayed for protection. This temple is also known as the Ong temple as many people from Jiangdou share this surname. The roof carvings of the temple feature leaping carp and two dragons, which refer to the belief that carp transform into dragons when they leap over the Dragon's Gate (a term for temple gates).

CHONG PANG COMBINED TEMPLE 561 YISHUN RING ROAD

Completed in 1996, this combined temple consists of four temples. Kwang Tee Temple (on the right side) was originally established at Or Kio ("Black Bridge"), an area off Thomson Road, in 1975, and is dedicated to Guan Di, the God of War. The second temple, Hwa Poh Siang Tng (left side), was founded in 1960 at Chong Pang Village by Teochew followers of Song Da Feng (a Song dynasty monk known for his charitable acts). It served as a village gathering place and also contributed to the community by providing funeral services to needy families.

The third temple, Chin Kong Religion Fook Poon Tong (left side rear), was established in 1955. Chin Kong Religion, which started in China in 1862, was known for its efforts to treat opium addicts. The temple was originally located in Chong Pang Village and used charcoal-and-sand beds to treat addicts. The five patriarchs of the Ching Kong Religion are enshrined in this temple. Opium treatment is no longer carried out, but the temple continues to celebrate the birthdays of its patriarchs and organises meditation and scripture-reading classes.

The fourth temples (middle section) is often referred to as Jia Zhui Kang Dou Mu Gong Feng Shan Si Temple, as it actually consists of four combined temples: Chan Chwee Kang Toh Pek Kong, Tian Gong Tan, Dou Mu Gong (Kew Ong Yah) and Feng Shan Si (Hong San See). These temples were originally located in Nee Soon



Dragon boat at Sembawang Beach during the Nine Emperor Gods festival, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Village, but later moved to Chong Pang Village before relocating to Yishun after Chong Pang Village was resettled in the late 1980s.

Its main deities are the Nine Emperor Gods, along with the Jade Emperor, Tua Pek Kong and Tiger Lord. During the annual Nine Emperor Gods festival (the 1st–9th days of the ninth lunar month), a major street procession is held whereby devotees bear the gods on sedan chairs and visit other temples (Chinese, Hindu and Sikh) in Yishun. The festival then culminates in a grand procession to Sembawang Beach, where the gods are “sent off” in a dragon boat that is set ablaze.

CHU SIANG TONG TEMPLE 8 YISHUN RING ROAD

This temple was founded in 1950 in the Bah Soon Pah area, and moved to Lorong Kumala in Chye Kay Village in 1961. It was originally known as Wu Hu or “Five Tigers” Temple, as its deities are the five tiger generals (Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Ma Chao and Huang Zhong) of China’s Three Kingdoms era, but changed its name in the 1950s. “Chu Siang Tong” means a “place where friends gather to do charity” in Teochew and the temple’s principal activities included teaching Confucianism and helping the elderly and poor in the village.

After Chye Kay Village was redeveloped in the 1970s, the temple found a new site in Yishun and built the present complex, which opened in 1987. Known for the sculptures of five tigers at its entrance, this temple is dedicated to



Chu Siang Tong Temple, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Five tiger sculptures at Chu Siang Tong Temple, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Guan Yu (also known as Guan Di Gong), the mightiest of the five tiger generals and Taoist God of War. Today, it continues its mission of charitable works through contributions to partner organisations such as Chong Pang Community Centre, Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital and Thong Chai Medical Institution. The temple also donates funds collected from devotees to old-age homes in Sembawang and Woodlands, and runs a bursary scheme for students in Yishun and Sembawang.

**HOCK HUAT KENG AND
VEERAMUTHU MUNESWARAR TEMPLE**
523 YISHUN INDUSTRIAL PARK A

This temple combines Taoist and Hindu shrines under one roof. It originated in Hup Choon Kek, a village at Yio Chu Kang Road, where there was a temple to Tua Pek Kong dating from the mid-1800s. In the early 20th century, the British built quarters nearby for Indian workers, who worshipped the deity Veeramuthu Muneeswaran in the form of an unusual stone and trident located under a tree by the Tua Pek Kong temple. Both deities are regarded as protectors and guardians, and the Chinese devotees also venerated the Hindu deity.

In the 1980s, when Hup Choon Kek faced redevelopment, the Tua Pek Kong temple and Muneeswaran shrine moved to Yishun. As the devotees regarded these deities as “brothers” and “friends”, the new combined temple, which opened in 1998, consists of two sections, a Taoist worship hall for Tua Pek Kong and other Taoist deities, and separate section for Muneeswaran and other Hindu deities such as Murugan, Ganesh and Amman. Regular devotees also take part in Taoist as well as Hindu rituals, and celebrate the festivals of both faiths. The temple also contributes to needy residents in the north through annual food distributions.

HWEE SAN TEMPLE
527 YISHUN INDUSTRIAL PARK A

This temple originated in Heng Leh Pah, a settlement at Lorong Handalan (off Upper Thomson Road) established by migrants from Lu Nei Village in Lam Ann county, Fujian province. The settlement was also known as Phua Village, as many people from the village shared this surname.

The temple is dedicated to Pan Ji Xun or the Lord of the Phuas, a Ming Dynasty official who improved the drainage of the Yellow River. It is also known as Heng Shan Temple (“temple on a horizontal mountain”) after the Phuas’ parent temple in China. It served as a religious site as well as a place for villagers to socialise and resolve disputes. Temple funds were also used to help the old and needy. After Phua Village was resettled in the late 1980s, the temple moved to Yishun in 1997.

**NAM HONG SIANG THEON TEMPLE,
SENG PANG TUA PEK KONG TEMPLE AND
HO PECK SAN TEMPLE**
475 YISHUN RING ROAD

These three temples formed Yishun’s first combined temple when they opened there on 20 November 1984. Nam Hong Siang Theon is a Buddhist temple that traces its origins to a village shrine established in the 1950s in the Seng Pang area for the deity Shan Cai Tong Zi. In 1958, a group of Teochew devotees established a Siang Theon (Teochew for “charitable centre” in Teochew) at this temple, which moved to Jalan Hikayat in Sembawang in 1968. After the area was redeveloped in the 1980s, the temple moved to Yishun.

From 2013–2015, the temple was rebuilt into the present structure, which houses a shrine to Song Da Feng a Song Dynasty monk known for his benevolence and charity. There is also a columbarium and ancestral hall. In 2001, the temple opened Nam Hong Siang Theon Medical Centre at 111 Yishun Ring Road, which



Nam Hong Siang Theon Temple, Seng Pang Tua Pek Kong Temple and Ho Peck San Temple combined temple, 2026

Courtesy of National Heritage Board

provides free Traditional Chinese Medicine consultations. Its philanthropic arm, Nam Hong Welfare Service Society, was formed in 2007 and provides bursaries to children from needy families.

Seng Pang Tua Pek Kong Temple is a shrine to the Taoist deity Tua Pek Kong and his partner Tua Pek Ma, as well as the Tiger Lord. It was established in the early 20th century by Teochews residing in the Seng Pang (now Jalan Hikayat) area. Apart from its religious functions, the temple operates a free legal clinic on the 1st Friday of every month; this service provides consultations to people who need legal advice.



Nam Hong Siang Theon Medical Centre, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Ho Peck San Temple, an important community institution in the former Chye Kay Village, was established in the early 1900s by two brothers, Tan Kang and Tan Song, who prayed to San Guan Da Di Gong for success in their business. In gratitude, they built a temple to these deities. San Guan Da Di Gong refers to the Three Emperor Lords of the Three Realms (Heaven, Earth and Water). Originally an attap hut, the original shrine was replaced in 1950 by a brick structure with a nearby wayang stage that doubled as a classroom for Lee Cheng School.

The temple, which underwent a major renovation in 2010, features a pagoda-shaped brick furnace for offerings as well as light grey roof tiles with cherry blossom-shaped ends, which evoke springtime and were based on Tang Dynasty designs. Ho Peck San continues to serve the Yishun community and has raised funds for partners such as Children's Society and Swami Home.

TEONG SIEW WEI LING DONG SHAN COMBINED TEMPLE 358 – 362 YISHUN AVENUE 3

This combined temple, which opened on 11 November 1990, consists of Teong Siew Kuan Temple, Wei Ling Keng and Dong Shan Temple. Teong Siew Kuan (located on the left side of the building) was established in 1913 by members of the Toh clan from Futing Village in Nan An county, Fujian Province in China. Located at Jalan Hwi Yoh (near Ang Mo Kio), the temple was originally called Yun Quan Kuan and expanded in the 1960s. Its principal deities are Toh Fu San Wei Da Ren (three ancestral deities of the Toh clan), Guanyin, Buddha, the God of Fortune and Shen Nong (God of Five Grains).

Wei Ling Keng (located in the centre of the building) was founded in 1938 at Ban Kok Sua at Upper Thomson Road by migrants from Anxi county in Fujian province who had fled Japanese forces and settled in Singapore. It then moved to Hup Choon Kek Village (now Jalan Chempedak) in 1957 and remained there until the late 1980s when the area was redeveloped. Its main deities are the Seven Lords of the original Wei Ling Keng temple in An Xi. Today, the temple holds weekly divination sessions whereby devotees seek the advice of its deities through the intercession of temple mediums and volunteers. It also organises an annual charity drive during the 2nd lunar month, which provides food and vouchers to welfare homes.

Dong Shan Temple (right side) originated in Mandai Tekong, a village that is now Woodlands South. It was said that during the 1930s, a man



Teong Siew Wei Ling Dong Shan Combined Temple, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

named Wang had chopped down three trees and fell into a coma as a result. He was only cured after a ritual that invoked the deity San Hu Da Ren, to which a temple was then built in his village. This temple is often visited by devotees who consult the deity for matters such as curing illness or success in studies and life. As part of the deity's annual birthday celebrations, it also provides aid to the elderly and needy in Nee Soon South.

YISHUN COMBINED TEMPLE

19 YISHUN AVENUE 9

Opened in 1988, this combined temple consists of three temples. The first, Guan Loong Sheng, is itself made up of three other temples: Fu Wu Chun which was located at Ong Lye Sua (Pineapple Hill) in the Bah Soon Pah area in the 1950s; Long Xia Guan, which was founded in the 1930s at Yio Chu Kang by migrants from An Xi; and Xin Sheng Tan, a temple to Guan Di Gong founded at Ong Lye Sua in the 1970s. These three temples merged in 1983 to form Guan Loong Sheng after their land was acquired by the government.

The second constituent temple, Chern Nam Kong Siew Temple, is made up of two temples: Chern Nam Temple and Kong Siew Tun. Both these temples were established at Thomson Road in the early 20th century by migrants from An Xi with the surname Fu. Their principal deities are Guan Di Gong (the God of War) and Bao Sheng Da Di (a god of medicine), and the temple is known for its medical divination consultations.

Shun Xi Gong Shui Chi Lin, the third temple, was formed by the merger of two other temples: Shun Xi Gong from Yio Chu Kang; and Shui Chi Lin from Lornie Road. Yishun Combined Temple also holds an annual procession for its deities, who are borne on sedan chairs by devotees around Yishun and Ang Mo Kio.

SREE NARAYANA MISSION

12 YISHUN AVENUE 5

This non-religious charitable organisation was established in 1948 by Malayalee migrants who sought to promote and carry out the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928), a social reformer and saint from Kerala, India. Originally

based in Chong Pang Village (now Sembawang HDB estate), the Mission initiated welfare programmes to help the needy regardless of race or religion. This included a nursing home at Canberra Road, which opened in 1979 and took in the elderly who were sick or destitute.

On 12 September 1965, the Mission's former headquarters at Chong Pang Village became the site of a landmark speech by then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. As Singapore had recently become independent and faced an uncertain future, Lee sought to encourage and inspire the people by delivering his seminal "Mudflats to Metropolis" speech, which included the lines: "Over 100 years ago, this was a mud-flat, swamp. Today, this is a modern city. Ten years from now, this will be a metropolis. Never fear."

After Chong Pang Village was earmarked for redevelopment in the 1980s, the Mission found a new site for its nursing home in Yishun and opened the present facility in 1994. Apart from taking care of its residents, this 224-bed facility serves the community in Yishun through a Senior Care Centre where seniors can socialise, interact and join activities that boost their physical and social well-being. Sree Narayana Mission is also planning to build a second nursing home in Yishun's Chencharu estate, which will open in 2028.



Sree Narayanan Mission, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

TEOCHEW MEMORIAL PARK

569 YISHUN RING ROAD

This Memorial Park was established by the Teochew Ngee Ann Kongsi to house unclaimed remains from its cemeteries across Singapore that were redeveloped in the 1950s. These cemeteries included Tai Shan Ting at Orchard Road (now Ngee Ann City), Guang En Shan at Thomson Road and Guang De Shan (Kwong Teck Suah) in Chye Kay Village. The exhumed remains were cremated before being placed in earthen urns that were reinterred in the memorial park.

Ngee Ann Kongsi then erected a memorial on the site, which was part of the former Guang De Shan cemetery, to commemorate the deceased in 1953. A new structure was then installed in 1962, which was designed by local architect Ng Keng Siang (1908–1967). Featuring a two storey-high pagoda-like tower, the memorial bears a stone plaque that commemorates Singapore's Teochew pioneers. The entrance to the Memorial Park has a gateway with the Chinese characters for "Singapore Teochew Cemetery" and "Remember Ancestors". Ngee Ann Kongsi and other Teochew organisations hold annual prayers and rituals at the Memorial Park to honour their ancestors.



Teochew Memorial Park, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

YISHUN COLUMBARIUM

YISHUN RING ROAD,
BETWEEN CHU SIANG TONG TEMPLE
AND TEOCHEW MEMORIAL PARK

Run by the National Environment Agency, this columbarium was built in 1979 by HDB. It has more than 16,000 niches which house exhumed

and cremated remains from former burial grounds in Yishun and Tampines. These burial grounds were affected by HDB redevelopment and clearance projects in the 1970s.

Yishun Columbarium consists of two double-storey buildings in the style of a traditional Chinese temple with yellow roof tiles and upper floor balconies. Niches are also held in rows of outdoor "blocks" in the compound. The columbarium is open to the public but has no more available niches.

UPPER SELETAR RESERVOIR

This vast waterbody located off Mandai Road was Singapore's third permanent reservoir when it opened as Seletar Reservoir in 1940. Seletar Reservoir was then enlarged in the 1960s to meet Singapore's growing water needs, and reopened as Singapore's then-largest reservoir (after MacRitchie and Peirce Reservoirs) on 19 August 1969 by Princess Alexandra of the United Kingdom. It was renamed Upper Seletar Reservoir in 1992.



Rocket-shaped viewing tower at Upper Seletar Reservoir Park, 2026

Courtesy of National Heritage Board



*Map showing Seletar Reservoir
(now Upper Seletar Reservoir), 1945*
Singapore Land Authority collection, courtesy of
National Archives of Singapore

At the reopening in 1969, a public park was built next to Seletar Reservoir, which featured a playground and an 18-metre-high viewing tower with a rocket-like design, reflecting the era's fascination with space exploration and mankind's landing on the moon in 1969. This "rocket tower" was designated a conserved structure by Urban Redevelopment Authority in 2009, while Upper Seletar Reservoir was marked as a historic site by the National Heritage Board in 1999. Today, visitors can ascend to the top of the tower for a panoramic view of the reservoir and Nee Soon area.

LOWER SELETAR RESERVOIR

Lower Seletar Reservoir was created in the early 1980s when a dam and sluice gate were built at the mouth of Sungei Seletar. The dam, now known as Yishun Dam, also supports a 975-metre road that links Yishun to Seletar East. Completed in 1985, Lower Seletar Reservoir was originally named Sungei Seletar Reservoir. However, this resulted in confusion with Seletar Reservoir (off Mandai Road). Hence, in 1992, Sungei Seletar Reservoir was renamed Lower Seletar Reservoir, while Seletar Reservoir was renamed Upper Seletar Reservoir.



Lower Seletar Reservoir Park, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Upper Seletar Reservoir Park, c. 1970s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

In 1991, a 65-metre T-shaped fishing jetty was erected at Lower Seletar Reservoir to provide a spot for anglers. Lower Seletar Reservoir Park was then enlarged in size by 14 times with new jogging and tracks, a playground and connectors to other parts of Yishun in 1996. The reservoir was then opened for water activities such as kayaking in 2004.

A curious artefact that is located by Lower Seletar Reservoir is the gravestone of Jane Buyers (d. 1867), wife of John Craig Buyers, a Scottish shipwright (ship builder) who was based in Singapore from 1863-1885. The gravestone is believed to have originated in the former Bukit Timah Christian Cemetery. It was discovered by the reservoir in the 1970s and placed at its present position near Rowers' Bay Park as a mark of respect.

YISHUN POND AND YISHUN PARK

Created from fish ponds in the former Chye Kay Village, Yishun Pond at Yishun Central was built in 1986 as a catchment area for the estate. Formerly a plain waterbody, the pond was given a makeover in the 2000s and became part of Yishun Pond Park, which

opened in 2011 as a waterfront park that provides community and green spaces for Yishun residents as well as patients of the adjacent Khoo Teck Puat Hospital.

Yishun Pond is also connected to Yishun Park across the road via an overhead pedestrian bridge and 14.5-metre-high spiral lookout tower with a cocoon-like shape and butterfly-like canopy. Yishun Park, which opened in 1995, is a wooded hill that was formerly part of Chye Kay Village. Many of the former village's rubber and fruit trees were retained in the making of the park, which also has playgrounds, an allotment garden for residents and community amphitheatre.

Yishun Park also contains Yishun Arboretum, which opened in 2008. "Arboretum" refers to a garden dedicated to trees and their study; Yishun Arboretum contains more than 800 trees representing 73 species of Dipterocarps, a family of tropical hardwood trees. Native to this region, these trees are known for massive buttress roots and reaching heights of more than 80 metres (16 storeys). They also have seeds with two or more wings, which spin as they disperse from the parent tree.



Yishun Pond, 2026

Courtesy of National Heritage Board

YISHUN SWIMMING COMPLEX AND YISHUN SPORTS COMPLEX

351 YISHUN AVENUE 3
AND 101 YISHUN AVENUE 1

Yishun Swimming Complex was the first sports facility in Yishun. It opened in 1988 with three pools (competition, teaching and wading), plus a viewing gallery for 350 spectators.

Yishun Sports Complex, which opened in 1992, is a distinctive landmark with mast-like structures and tensile cables that suggest a ship-like silhouette. Designed by HDB

architect Tan King Bing, the stadium was the first building in Southeast Asia to have a roof that is suspended by cables rather than columns. This created a more spacious and “weightless” feel to the structure.

The sports complex houses an outdoor football stadium with a covered gallery as well as an indoor multipurpose sports hall with badminton courts and gyms. It was awarded an Honourable Mention in the Singapore Institute of Architects’ Architectural Design Award 1991. Both these complexes are managed by Sport Singapore as Yishun Sport Centre.



Yishun Swimming Complex, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

YISHUN TODAY AND TOMORROW

By the mid-2000s, Yishun had more than 160,000 residents, who had established strong links with their neighbours and community. As a “middle-aged estate” from the 1980s, Yishun was then facing the challenge of ensuring that its neighbourhoods and facilities continue to be vibrant, sustainable and accessible to residents of all ages and abilities.

Yishun was then selected by Housing & Development Board (HDB) as one of three towns, along with Punggol and Dawson, to undergo the first Remaking our Heartland (ROH) programme in 2007. ROH was launched to upgrade the living environments of old and middle-aged HDB estates so that residents of all ages can enjoy new and accessible amenities and attractions without having to move out of their familiar neighbourhoods.

REMAKING YISHUN'S TOWN CENTRE

The ROH programme for Yishun, envisioned the town as “A Vibrant Hub and Great Outdoors”. This included revitalising the town centre with new spaces for community events and a heritage garden.

The existing Northpoint was expanded by nearly 2.5 times and integrated with a new complex consisting of twelve 10-storey apartment blocks (North Park Residences) and an integrated transport hub and community club. This expanded complex opened in 2017 as Northpoint City, Singapore's largest mall in the north with more than 500 shops and eateries, and a rooftop garden and playground.

Next, Nee Soon Central Community Club became the first community club to be located in a mall, when it opened its doors at Northpoint City in 2019. Earlier, it was located at Block 749 Yishun Street 72. This move was intended to make it more convenient for residents to access its facilities and services and to optimise land usage by co-locating the community club with other amenities in the town centre. The air-conditioned Yishun Integrated Transport Hub also opened in 2019, replacing the older Yishun bus interchange.

Other enhancements to the town centre included Heritage Garden@Yishun, which was launched in 2010 as Singapore's first outdoor heritage corner. This garden features a bronze statue of Lim Nee Soon and panels that relate



Northpoint City, 2026

Courtesy of National Heritage board

the area's history. Nearby, Yishun Town Square was unveiled in 2018 between Northpoint City and Yishun Town Garden. Planned as a "super void deck" for residents to gather, perform and enjoy each other's company, this town square also features an installation called Heritage Markers@Yishun Town Square, which consists of 11 floor markers charting historical milestones in Yishun.



Heritage Garden@Yishun, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

REMAKING YISHUN'S PARKS AND OUTDOOR SPACES

The ROH programme also included enhancements to Yishun Pond and Yishun Park, which made them better connected to each other as well as to nearby areas. Meanwhile, Lower Seletar Reservoir Park was revamped with family-friendly features and new park connectors to improve access to Yishun and other areas.

Khoo Teck Puat Hospital opened in 2010, followed by Yishun Community Hospital in 2016. This northern healthcare hub is located next to Yishun Pond, which was given an extensive makeover under the ROH programme and PUB's Active, Beautiful, Clean (ABC) Waters programme. The result was Yishun Pond Park, which features a barrier-free waterside promenade that is connected to Khoo Teck Puat Hospital's central courtyard, offering new community spaces for both Yishun residents as well as patients of the nearby healthcare facilities.

Also next to Yishun Park is Tzu Chi Humanistic Youth Centre, which opened in 2019 on the former site of Yishun Polyclinic from 2012-2018. Offering a peaceful, pond-side environment,

this centre serves as a community hub for youths, with facilities such as cafés, a wellness studio, multi-purpose hall, co-working spaces, study area, classrooms and counselling rooms.

At Lower Seletar Reservoir Park, a People's Association Water Venture facility opened in 2007, offering activities such as dragon-boating and kayaking. In 2010, a new Family Bay was unveiled at Lower Seletar Reservoir Park, featuring an outdoor stage and water play area, and a 170-metre-long Heritage Bridge with heritage panels and a platform that resembles a *kelong* (traditional fish trap). At the northern end of the reservoir, an area near Yishun Dam called Rowers' Bay was created for competitive rowing events. Rowers' Bay Park then opened next to it in 2019 with a boardwalk and wetland along the reservoir edge.

A new walking and cycling link from Lower Seletar Reservoir to the former Nee Soon Village area was also created via the Springleaf Park Connector, which leads to Springleaf Nature Park. Opened in 2014, Springleaf Nature Park is located on part of the former Nee Soon Village around Sungei Seletar. The area is now a rich secondary forest filled with birdlife and serves as a green corridor for both residents and wildlife.

Other new parks for Yishun, which will open in the future, were announced in 2022. These include Khatib Bongsu Nature Park along Sungei Khatib Bongsu, Miltonia Nature Park between Yishun Avenue 1 and Lower Seletar Reservoir, and Nee Soon Nature Park in the Springleaf area.

COMBINING THE FUTURE AND PAST IN YISHUN

The remaking of Yishun also acknowledges the changing demographics of the town, which is being transformed into Singapore's first dementia-friendly town. For instance, 21 HDB blocks in Khatib Central and Chong Pang were repainted with colours and icons (such as pineapples and red blocks) that make them easier to identify for elderly residents. This pilot project also introduced features such as clearer signages, more resting places, and bigger and more visible block numbers. There



Chong Pang City, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

are also “Dementia Go-To Points”, for instance Sree Narayanan Mission and selected merchants, with trained staff and volunteers who provide aid to elderly residents in need of guidance.

The oldest part of Yishun, Chong Pang City, is also undergoing a transformation that acknowledges its identity and status as a vibrant neighbourhood for shopping and dining. In 2023, it was announced that Chong Pang Market and Food Centre, as well as the adjoining Chong Pang Community Club and Block 102 Yishun Avenue 5, would be redeveloped into a seven-storey integrated development. Targeting to open in 2028, this facility will house a new market and food centre as well as shops and sports amenities such as swimming pools, gyms and fitness studios. The old market and food centre will then be replaced by a new community plaza.

The past and the will also meet in Yishun’s Chencharu estate, which was announced in 2024. Located between Sembawang Road and Yishun Avenue 2, this neighbourhood occupies the Lorong Chencharu and Bah Soon Pah Road area, as well as the site of the former

Bottle Tree Park (later rebranded as ORTO, a recreational park with fishing ponds and eateries).

Envisioned as a “Vibrant Village, Connecting Communities and Heritage”, Chencharu estate will have about 10,000 new homes, mostly public flats, by 2040, as well as spaces that celebrate the area’s rich history as a former rural community that prospered during the time of pioneers such as Lim Nee Soon. The historical centrepiece of Chencharu estate will feature a circa century-old plantation bungalow at a hilltop off Bah Soon Pah Road, which will be restored and adapted for community use as part of a new park with a heritage trail that will present the legacy of Lim Nee Soon, both the man and the town that was named after him.

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Today

2002, 2006, 2007, 2014, 2017, 2020

>> PROJECT TEAM

ECO Outreach Team

>> RESEARCHERS

Marcus Ng

Alicia Tan

>> WRITER

Marcus Ng

>> DESIGNER

Fellow Design

>> PHOTOGRAPHER

Alex Heng

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For queries or feedback on the contents of this trail booklet, kindly contact us at NHB_HeritageTrails@nhb.gov.sg.

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Rockets & Reservoirs

1 to 5

1 hour, 6km

Yishun Ring Route

1 to 12

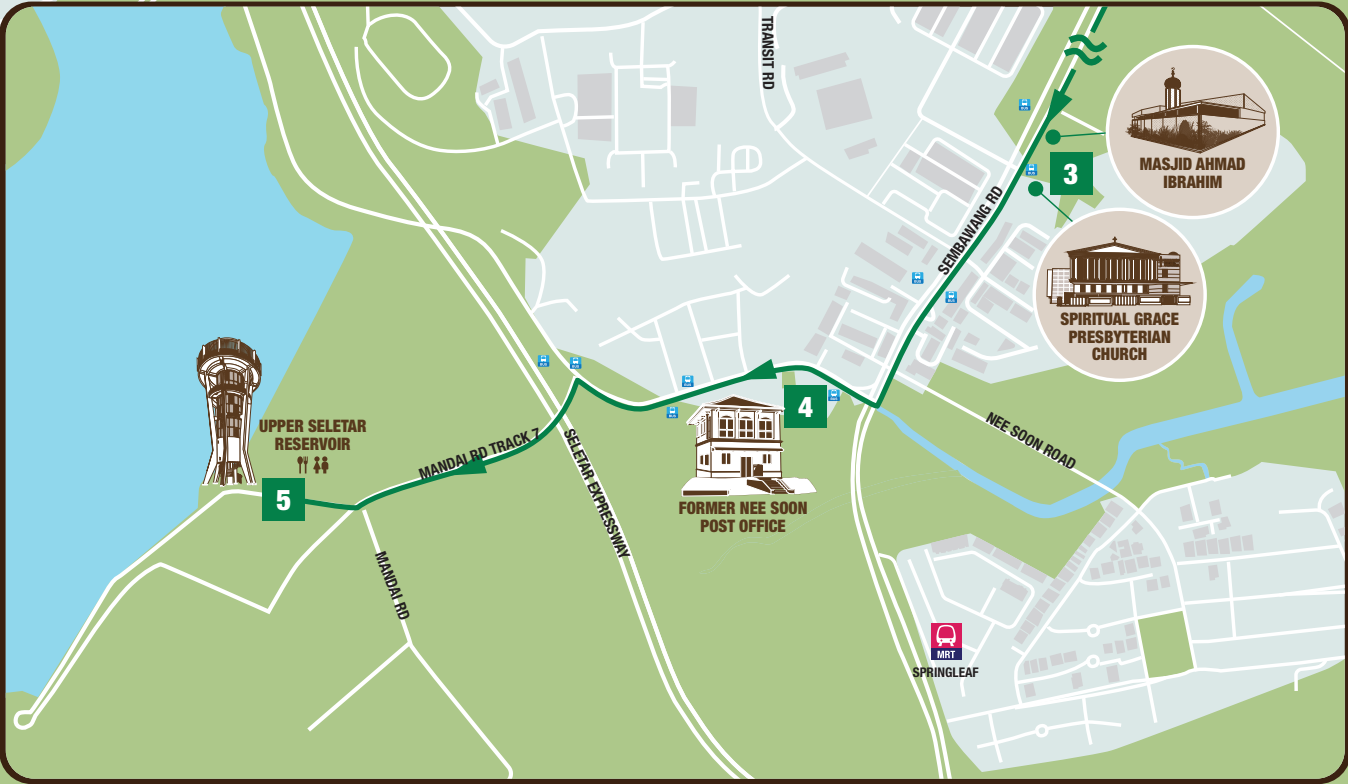
2.5 hour, 7.1km

Continue Route

Water Point

Food & Beverage

Toilet





Northpoint City, 2026
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

The Yishun Heritage Trail is part of the National Heritage Board's ongoing efforts to document and present the history and social memories of places in Singapore. We hope this trail will bring back fond memories for those who have worked, lived or played in the area, and serve as a useful source of information for visitors and new residents.

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Lim Nee Soon (with coat) with a lorry filled with pineapples, 1916
Lim Chong Hsien Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore