

# HOUGANG HERITAGE TRAIL

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# » CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Serving Communities</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Early History</b>	<b>3</b>	Ramakrishna Mission	
The name “Hougang”		The <i>shantangs</i> of Au Kang	
Plantations and fruit orchards		Phoh Kiu Siang T’ng (普救善堂)	
<b>Au Kang’s Milestones in the Pre-War Years</b>	<b>8</b>	Nam Ann Siang Theon (南安善堂)	
The 5th milestone: Enclaves		Poh Teck Siang Tng (报德善堂)	
The 6th milestone: Stories of pioneer settlers		Nanyang Neo Clan Association (南洋梁氏公会)	
The 7th milestone: The Catholic community		The Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association (新加坡后港海南同乡会)	
<b>Memories of Au Kang During the Japanese Occupation</b>	<b>14</b>	Sai Ho Piat Su (西河别墅)	
<b>Life in Rural Au Kang</b>	<b>17</b>	All Saints Memorial Chapel	
Kampong life		<b>Heritage Businesses: from Generation to Generation</b>	<b>53</b>
Going to the market		Ah Seah Teochew Porridge	
Recreation in Au Kang		Neo Kian Guan Confectionary & Cakes	
Going to school		Cheong Ann Watch Maker	
<b>From Kampongs to Hougang Town</b>	<b>30</b>	Ho Tit Coffee Powder Factory	
New town, new identity, new stories		Just Anthony	
<b>A Place of Many Faiths</b>	<b>34</b>	Serangoon Lian Hin Tailor	
Hougang Tou Mu Kung (后港斗母宫)		<b>Selected Bibliography</b>	<b>59</b>
Zi Yun Kai Ji Gong (紫云开吉宫)		<b>Credits</b>	<b>63</b>
Tian Kong & Kancanarama Buddhist Temple		<b>Suggested Short Trail Routes</b>	<b>64</b>
Chee Tong Temple (慈忠坛)		<b>Heritage Trail Map</b>	<b>69</b>
Masjid Haji Yusoff			
Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary			
St. Paul’s Church			
Paya Lebar Methodist Church and Paya Lebar Methodist Chinese Church			
Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary			
Harvester Baptist Church			

# INTRODUCTION



*Tua Jia Kar well replica to commemorate the former common well that served the villagers of the Hougang area, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

Mention “Hougang” and its Teochew enclave would probably come to mind and for a good reason. Today, Hougang’s Teochew legacy can still be seen, from road names to institutions and landmarks that were established to serve the Teochew community.

However, before its transformation to the present-day residential town, Hougang was first covered with gambier and pepper plantations during the 19th century. These later gave way to coconut plantations and fruit orchards by the pre-war years. Besides the Teochew settlements, there were also other communities in the area, such as the Hokkien and Hainanese dialect groups and a sizeable Eurasian community.

Religious institutions began to establish their footholds in different parts of Hougang to serve the spiritual and welfare needs of these diverse communities such as the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (founded in 1853), St. Paul’s Church (founded in 1936) and Paya Lebar Methodist Church (founded in 1932). Over at the 5th milestone (around the junction of Bukit Arang Road and Upper Serangoon Road), Hougang Tou Mu Kung, Singapore’s oldest temple dedicated to Taoist deities known as Nine Emperor Gods was

set up in 1921. In the same year, Masjid Haji Yusoff was established to serve the Muslim community living in the vicinity as well.

Schools were also set up by the various communities and churches to educate the youths of Hougang. For instance, Montfort School, originally named Holy Innocents’ English School, was established at the very end of Upper Serangoon Road in 1916, Sing Hua School that was set up in 1930 along Lim Tua Tow Road, and Kalaimagal Tamil School was founded in 1946 on the grounds of the former Woodbridge Hospital.

Besides these amenities, Hougang was also known for its bustling markets that served the population living in Singapore’s north-eastern region, namely Lim Tua Tow market at the 5th milestone, Simon Road market at 6th milestone and Kangkar fish market at the 7½ milestone.

In the late 1970s, the Housing & Development Board (HDB) redeveloped Hougang to become the present-day residential town we know today. Amid the housing estates and new facilities, traces of its past can still be found, whether in its old landmarks or traditional businesses.

Join us on this self-guided trail to explore the rich heritage and lesser-known stories of Hougang!

# EARLY HISTORY

## THE NAME “HOUGANG”

The name “Hougang” that we know today is the Mandarin pronunciation of *au kang*, which means “at the back of the river” in both Teochew and Hokkien. The river in this case refers to Sungei Serangoon at the end of Upper Serangoon Road. Many long-time residents who lived in the area before the residential town was built still fondly use the name Au Kang, rather than Hougang.

Before the 1980s, Au Kang was, to locals, a distinct area that radiated from Upper Serangoon Road, spanning from the foot of Sungei Serangoon (present-day junction of

Hougang Avenue 8 and Upper Serangoon Road), to the junction of Bukit Arang Road (now expunged, present-day Wolskel Road area) and Upper Serangoon Road. Many of Au Kang’s early landmarks, settlements and communities were formed along Upper Serangoon Road, the arterial road running through the area. The road is one of the oldest built in Singapore. By the late 1830s, it had extended all the way from town to the foot of Sungei Serangoon, facilitating in the transport of goods and produce such as gambier, pepper and rubber, not only from the interior of north-eastern Singapore, but also from Johor to Singapore town.



*Detail of the earliest known map showing the Seranggong (Serangoon) district, marked milestones and a police station at the 7½ milestone, 1885  
Survey Department, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*





A postcard depicting a coconut plantation in Singapore, c. 1900s  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Sungei Serangoon, located at the end of Upper Serangoon Road, also played an important role in the early development of Au Kang. The river and its tributaries were lined with mangroves and tidal swamps and served as key waterways for transport of people and goods to and from Malaya, and along the coastal areas of Singapore. Its importance was such that by the late 1800s, a police station was located right at the foot of Sungei Serangoon, to keep track of shipping activities in the waterways there. In 1861, with increased illicit opium trafficking from Malaya, the British declared that there were only four legal landing places for boats at the northern and eastern coasts of Singapore—Serangoon being one of them, besides Changi, Seletar and Kranji.

Less clear, however, is when the colloquial name Au Kang came into use. One of the earliest mentions of Au Kang was in 1856, when the police reported in *The Singapore Free Press* article that “the jungle inhabitants of Howkang

and Lowe Chukang Baru Districts convey their produce to Town by the Serangoon Road”. In 1891, an article on the native names of streets in Singapore noted that the Chinese would refer to Serangoon Road as Au Kang Lo (“Au Kang Road” in Teochew) and the settlement at the foot of Sungei Serangoon as Kangkar (“foot of the river” in Teochew).

In maps from the colonial era, however, this area was officially referred to as Serangoon. The different areas of Serangoon were simply named by the milestones, which marked the distance in miles from Singapore town. The name “Hougang” was officially announced in 1980 for the new residential town developed in this area, which is the Mandarin pronunciation of Au Kang.

#### PLANTATIONS AND FRUIT ORCHARDS

Like much of rural Singapore then, Au Kang in the 19th century was covered in gambier

and pepper plantations. As Singapore’s gambier and pepper plantations were known to be largely established by Chinese settlers, especially the Teochews, it is likely that many of Hougang’s early settlers were Chinese plantation owners and farmers, who gave the area its local name Au Kang.

By the late 19th century, as more people began to reside in Au Kang, the gambier and pepper plantations were steadily replaced by fruit orchards, vegetable farms and other crops. An 1883 article in *The Straits Times* described a coconut and fruit plantation at the 5th milestone, giving us a glimpse into what orchards in the area must have been like then:

*“The Freehold Property is almost all planted with Fruit Trees, in bearing, and consists of between 8,000 & 10,000 Coconut trees, between 3,000 & 4,000 Mangosteen trees, and a large number of Rambutan, Orange, Rambai, Pulaan,*

*Breadfruit, Mata Kuching, Nam-nam, Romania, Jamboo of various kinds, Bombay, Siam and Manila Mangoes, Chicus, Roccum, Kondondong, Blimbing, Carambola, Sour-Sop, Cushen nut, Bachang, Langsat, Betel nut, Tampang, and Pumaloos. The Avenue (¾ of a mile long) is in excellent order and lined with large Durian, Mangonsteen, and other fruit trees. Throughout the plantation there are a great many Durian Trees in full bearing.”*

The early 20th century survey maps of Singapore showed that the Serangoon district was covered with coconut and rubber plantations, as well as fruit orchards. Towards the area around the present-day Chuan Hoe Avenue, the land was planted with rubber trees, managed by the Singapore United Plantation. Elsewhere in the area, coconut plantations and clusters of villages covered the land.

#### HAZARDS OF LIVING IN AU KANG

In the early years, plantation owners and workers in Au Kang faced hazards like tigers and robbers. Meanwhile, at Kangkar, it was crocodiles and piracy that plagued plantation owners, workers and fishermen. An 1866 article in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* revealed that by the mid-19th century, Kangkar was already bustling with Chinese and Malay dwellers who were terrorised by regular crocodile sightings:

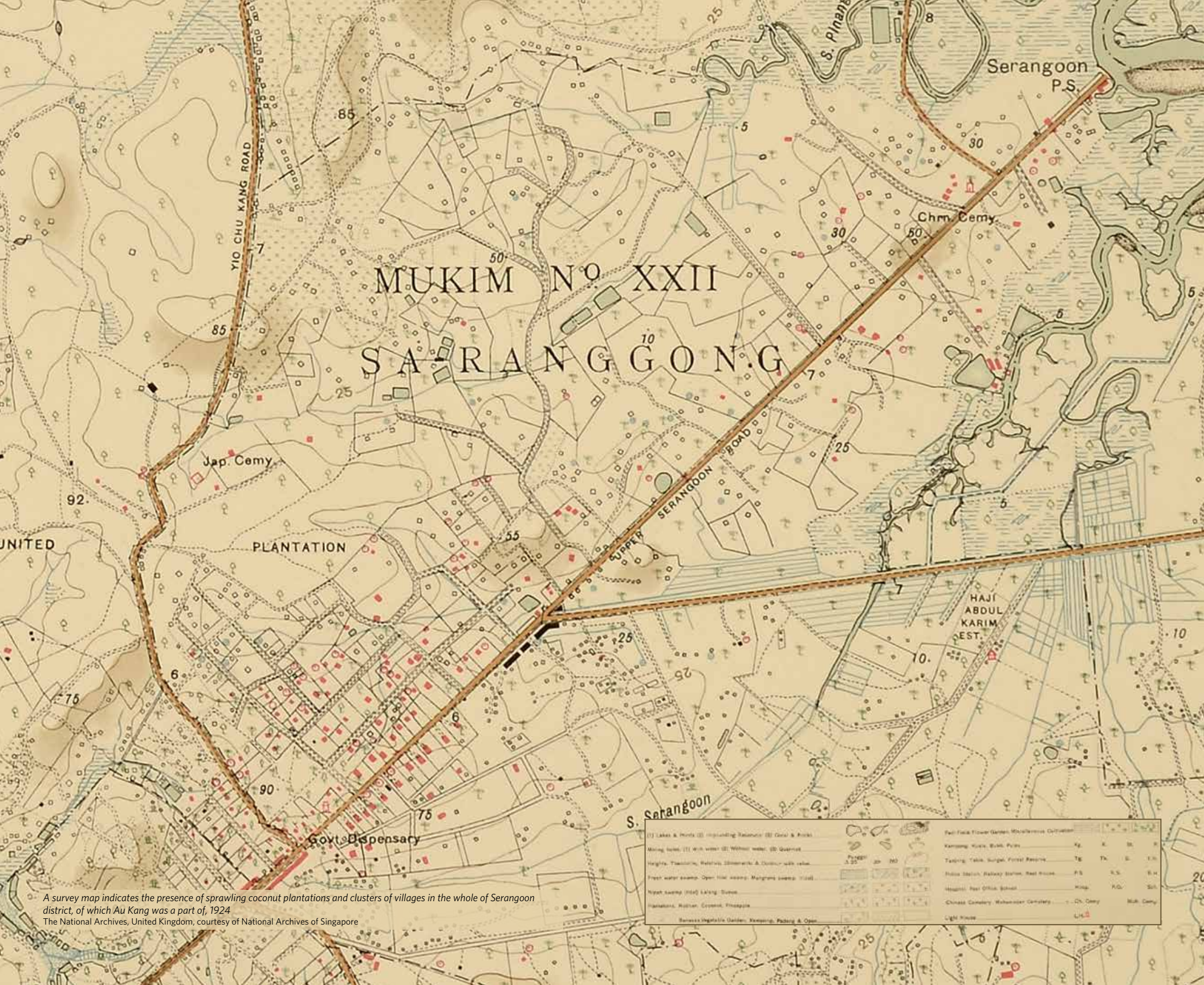
*“A large alligator (sic) has been seen constantly in the Sirangoon river making his appearance in different parts looking for prey and causing great terror amongst the natives and fishermen in that quarter. About 5 days ago he seized a Chinaman, who fortunately escaped, his clutches. The Malays have been on the watch for him some time, and about 3 o’clock yesterday morning put an end to his career. He was brought to the Court house in a bullock cart. He appears to belong to the old school, and measures about 11 feet long and 3½*

*feet in circumference. The Malay who caught the alligator received \$5 for his trouble.”*

In the 19th century, reports of pirate attacks around Sungei Serangoon on boats ferrying passengers to and from Malaya were not uncommon. In 1855, a survivor of a pirate raid described his experience to *The Straits Times*:

*“... I was coming from Johore in a sampan kota (boat with an engine), in company with two Chinese ... as we neared the mouth of the Serangoon River, I saw a sampan, waiting apparently for some boat; we approached the sampan and as we did so the men in it, rose up; they were eight in number, they were all Malay, they were armed with spears, which they threw at us. I was wounded across the right breast and in the arm, cutting through part of it and entering my side. I saw both of my companions wounded with the spears, we all jumped overboard. I have not seen either of my companions since and cannot tell if they are alive or not.”*





A survey map indicates the presence of sprawling coconut plantations and clusters of villages in the whole of Serangoon district, of which Au Kang was a part of, 1924  
The National Archives, United Kingdom, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



# AU KANG'S MILESTONES IN THE PRE-WAR YEARS

During the mid-19th century, before addresses were regularised, "milestones" were used as reliable location markers along Singapore's main roads. These milestones were originally installed by the colonial government during the 1840s after the Singapore Municipal Committee started developing roads beyond the town centre.

The milestones along Upper Serangoon Road were also used as place markers. Stretching

over three kilometres, Au Kang's historical boundary starts from around the 5th milestone to the 7½ milestone of Upper Serangoon Road. Each of Au Kang's three milestones had its own distinctive characteristics, communities and landmarks by the early 20th century. Many long-time residents still refer to these areas today by their milestones, and sometimes added a "½" milestone if they wanted to be precise. For example, the area around Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

## FROM SERANGOON ROAD TO UPPER SERANGOON ROAD

Serangoon Road is one of the oldest roads to be built in Singapore. While it is unclear how the road got its name, it is likely to be derived from the name of a marsh bird in Malay, *rangsong*. To the Chinese, the road was Au Kang Lo as it led to the back of Sungei Serangoon. The entire stretch of road continued to be known as Serangoon Road until 1906, when approval was given to rename the section from the junction with MacPherson Road onwards as "Upper Serangoon Road".



A bullock cart and a electric tramcar on Upper Serangoon Road, c. 1910  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



A bus passing by the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary along Upper Serangoon Road, 1955  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Up till the early 1900s, people would travel on foot or by bullock cart to go between town and the various settlements in Serangoon. In 1905, the Singapore Electric Tramways launched a line from town to the junction of Serangoon Road and Upper Paya Lebar Road. The service was replaced by trolleybuses by 1927, which ran to the junction with Yio Chu Kang Road. For the residents of the 6th and 7th milestones, it was only with the introduction of "mosquito buses" in the late 1920s, which were modified American cars run by Chinese bus companies, that they finally had access to motorised transport.



Chia Keng village at Hillside Drive, 1957-58  
Derek Lehrle Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

was referred to interchangeably as the 7th milestone and the 7½ milestone.

## THE 5TH MILESTONE: ENCLAVES

By the first half of the 20th century, the 5th milestone area, often referred to as Gor Kok Cheok ("5th milestone" in Teochew and Hokkien) had transformed from swathes of plantations into a bustling neighbourhood with vibrant Eurasian, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese and Malay communities.

Chiang Boon Lim (b. 1915), a Teochew who immigrated from Shantou prefecture in China in 1936, lived at the 5th milestone when he first arrived. He recounted of the neighbourhood then:

*"There were many Caucasians and serani (Eurasians) ... There were also many who worked in Western merchant houses and government workers. These people were English-educated, and held high positions in managing book-keeping and sales ... Before the Japanese invasion, when I first arrived in Singapore and lived in Hougang, there were more Hokkiens than Teochews. The Hokkiens then had more presence. Gradually, there were more and more Teochews."*

In the early 1900s, the Eurasians began moving out of their enclave in the Queen Street and Waterloo Street precinct as the town area



Masjid Haji Yusoff in the kampong days prior to its renovation, undated  
Courtesy of Masjid Haji Yusoff

was becoming congested. Katong and Upper Serangoon were two neighbourhoods popular with the Eurasians. In Upper Serangoon, the Eurasian community resettled in areas between the 5th and 6½ milestones. One prominent Eurasian family, the Surin family, after whom Surin Avenue and Road were named, owned estates in Upper Serangoon. They also co-owned two silent movie theatres in the town with the Aroozoo family in the 1920s (more details on some prominent members of the Aroozoo family and their legacy in Au Kang can be found on p. 11).

Over at Yio Chu Kang road at the end of Hillside Drive, there used to be a village called Chia Keng ("vehicle zone" in Teochew) where most of the villagers were Hokkien

or Teochew. Chiang shared that the village used to be called Seah Keng (“Seah view” in Teochew, probably after the surname of a landlord) which later became Chia Keng after the bullock carts parked there.

Between Hillside Drive and Paya Lebar, there were also Malay and Muslim communities. One such village was Kampong Haji Sirat at Jansen Road, a kampong of some 50 Malay families. Towards the mid-20th century, the municipal government even set up Serangoon Malay School in 1940 at Aroozoo Avenue to provide education for the large number of Malay children living in this area. The Malay families living in Au Kang and Paya Lebar would congregate at Masjid Haji Yusoff, which sits at the junction of Hillside Drive and Upper Serangoon Road (more details on the mosque can be found on p. 38). It became such a landmark for the Muslim community that local Chinese called the section of the road near it as Sembahyang Tng, combining the Malay word for “prayers” and the Teochew and Hokkien word for “pavilion”.

Past the 5th milestone towards Paya Lebar, Lorong Ah Soo, also known locally as Hai Lam Hng (“Hainanese Garden” in Teochew and Hokkien), was a Hainanese enclave. Ong Chye Hock (b. 1921), who grew up in Paya Lebar, shared:

*“About 80% of the residents in Hai Lam Hng were Hainanese ... The people from Qiongzhou (former name for Hainan) liked living together with their own people ... so if they were staying in other places and did not get along with their neighbours, they would go to Lorong Ah Soo and see if they could find a place to rent.”*

### THE 6TH MILESTONE: STORIES OF PIONEER SETTLERS

Long-time residents often refer to the junction of Flower Road and Upper Serangoon Road as Lak Gor Cheok, or “6th milestone” in Teochew and Hokkien. Much of the area was covered by coconut plantations, wooden and attap buildings and a few brick buildings. Later, many



Detailed map with of the roads and kampongs with the pioneers' names at 6th milestone, 1972  
Courtesy of onemap.sg

pioneers who bought land and contributed to the development of Au Kang around the 6th milestone now have their names immortalised in the street names around the area.

### Goh Low Tee: Owner Of 100 Acres Of Plantation

One of the few early Teochew planters whose story was documented was Goh Low Tee, who arrived from China in the late 1800s. He was said to own some 100 acres of land in Au Kang. Goh started clearing the forest in Au Kang and began with growing chillies and coconut trees and later moved into rearing livestock. Goh's descendants also went on to make their fortunes in farming, most of them rearing poultry.

His granddaughter, Rosa Lee (b. 1925) recalled that her first uncle owned land from Jalan Payoh Lai until Lim Ah Pin Road while her second uncle owned most of the land around Lorong Low Koon and her third uncle owned the land around the former Hai Sing Road. The land was subsequently further divided among their descendants and later acquired for urban redevelopment by the government. She recalled:

*“I still remember my grandfather had a duck pond ... The feed for ducks enabled the coconut trees to grow well, and coconuts could make money. Ducks needed a pond to swim in, and I remember it was pretty. The land in Hougang was owned by my grandparents and their descendants. My uncles made their money from keeping poultry too ... When my uncles had their birthdays, they would invite opera troupes, and the opera actors would come to feast, many of them. They would hire coolies to cook big buckets of rice for these actors.”*

### Peter Lim Ah Pin: Au Kang's “Beehoon King”

At the 6th milestone, there is a road named after Au Kang's former “beehoan (vermicelli) king”, Peter Lim Ah Pin (1890-1943). Lim came to Singapore as a child with his parents in the late 1800s from Fujian, China. Coming from a humble background without formal education, Lim took on work as a grocer, fruit seller and even a bus conductor before becoming a successful businessman. He ventured into film distribution, tin mining, property development in the Serangoon and



Portraits of Peter Lim Ah Pin and Florence Yeo, c. early 1900s  
Gift of Angelina, Stephen, Josephine and Clement Lim in memory of their parents Lim Keng Teck Moses (4th Son) & Alice Tan Choo Neo

Yio Chu Kang areas, and built two private markets, one at Lim Tua Tow Road, and the other at Yio Chu Kang Road.

In the 1920s, Lim started a business in manufacturing *beehoan*, which gave rise to the moniker “beehoan king”. The factory was located at Paya Lebar Road, next to the family home of the Lims. Though the family stayed in Paya Lebar, they also owned property along Upper Serangoon Road, where Lim Ah Pin and Florence Roads are now located.

Known to be a philanthropist, Lim contributed to the building of churches and schools, such as the former Kong Yiong High School at Yio Chu Kang Road. Florence Road was named after his wife, Florence Yeo Ah Chik (1887-1962), a Catholic from Malacca who grew up in a convent. Lim's son, James Lim Keng Hoe (b. 1916) remembered his father:

*“My father was a very thrifty man but he's also generous in other respects ... helping the church, the schools, helping to build the school at Kampong Bahru...”*

### Simon Joaquim Aroozoo: A well-known member of the Eurasian community

Of Malaccan-Portuguese descent, Simon Joaquim Aroozoo (1849-1931) was described as a “well-known member of the Eurasian community” in the news when he passed away in 1931. Simon Road, Simon Walk and Aroozoo Avenue at 6th milestone were named after him. The name “Aroozoo” was said to be a corruption of the spelling of the Portuguese surname “d'Araujo”.

Aroozoo joined Messrs. Guthrie and Company, a pioneer British trading company, when he graduated from Raffles Institution in 1865, and retired only in 1922. Though Aroozoo grew up in the Eurasian enclave in town, centred around Waterloo Street, Queen Street and Middle Road, he eventually moved with his family to 345 Serangoon Road. He was buried at the former Bidadari cemetery. Aroozoo's great-granddaughter, Hedwig Elizabeth Anuar nee Aroozoo (b. 1928) says:





Portrait of Hunmah Somapah, undated  
Courtesy of Lawrence Basapa

*"... my great-grandfather was Simon Aroozoo who worked for Guthrie for 50 years (sic), also was a contemporary of Gan Eng Seng, who also worked for Guthrie for a while. Then he also worked for Gan Eng Seng, helping with his estates. And he bought land which Gan Eng Seng owned in Serangoon Road."*

#### **Hunmah Somapah: The biggest local Indian property owner**

At the junction of Tampines Road and Upper Serangoon Road, there used to be Somapah (Serangoon) village. The village was named after its landowner, Hunmah Somapah, though the Somapah family lived at Owen Road. After completing his studies at St. Joseph's Institution, Somapah worked as a cashier with the Municipality till 1906. At the same time, he also built his family business in house brokerage and land ownership.

When Somapah passed away in 1919, the news reported that he was the largest property owner among Indians in Singapore at the time. His property included land and houses in Changi, Tampines, Upper Serangoon, Serangoon, Punggol and even

Jurong. Besides the Somapah village at the 6th milestone, there was another Somapah village at Changi, and Somapah Road, both named after him. Lorong Basapah, which used to run adjacent to Somapah (Serangoon) village, was named after his son William Lawrence Soma Basapa (1893-1943). Basapa was best known for starting Singapore's first public zoo, first located at his family home at Upper Serangoon Road.

#### **THE 7TH MILESTONE: THE TEOCHEW CATHOLIC COMMUNITY**

One of the most striking characteristics of the 7th milestone and its vicinity was perhaps its strong Roman Catholic and Teochew presence. Many referred to this milestone at the end of Upper Serangoon Road as Kangkar ("foot of the river" in Teochew). While it was unknown when Chinese immigrants first began settling in the area, it was clear that by the mid-1800s, the Paris Foreign Missions Society, Les Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), saw it necessary to send a missionary priest to serve the predominantly Teochew Catholic population at the 7th milestone.

The MEP had begun missionary work among the Teochew provinces in China as early as the 1700s and many of the Teochews who arrived in Au Kang by the 1800s were Catholic converts, or relatives and kinsmen of the converts. These links between MEP in China and Au Kang in Singapore brought about steady arrivals of Catholic and non-Catholic Teochew immigrants to the area.

Meanwhile, the settlement at the foot of Sungei Serangoon had become a thriving fishing village by the turn of the century. Known locally as Kangkar and officially called Serangoon Village, the settlement mostly comprised Teochew immigrants who made a living as farmers, fishermen and fish traders.

Tay Chin Tian (b. 1897), a Teochew, arrived in Singapore during the 1920s from Jieyang county, China. Shortly after her arrival, she made her way to Kangkar where she and her



An aerial image of the 7th milestone area at the foot of Sungei Serangoon, with the steeple of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary seen in the distance, 1958

Aerial photographs by the British Royal Air Force between 1940 to 1970s, from a collection held by the National Archives of Singapore. Crown copyright

husband built a house near the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (more details on the church can be found on page 39). She described her house then:

*"We nailed the pieces of wood and partitioned two rooms, one for myself and another for my sister-in-law. Another side was the kitchen for cooking and doubled up as a place for taking our meals. Another corner was fenced up to rear chickens ... it was mud floor, not cement floor. Nine out of ten houses had mud floor ... Unless you are a rich towkay, otherwise it is mud floor for all the houses."*

In addition to Teochew Catholics, there were also Teochew Taoists and Buddhists that resided at Kangkar. Chinese religious festivities were regular events and Teochew opera troupes were usually invited to perform at major religious festivals and birthdays. Rosa Lee, a Teochew who grew up near Lorong Batawi recalled:

*"People then would come from Punggol on bullock carts, children on the carts, even their milk bottles and such all on the carts, families, old and young, would come to Kangkar to watch the opera shows."*



Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, built to serve the Teochew Catholic community in Kangkar, 1976  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

# MEMORIES OF AU KANG DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

During World War II, Au Kang was not spared the impact and shadows of war. When Japan began its invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the Chinese diaspora in Singapore launched fund-raising efforts to support China. Au Kang, with its large Chinese population, also saw its share of relief efforts for China. Rallies were held in Au Kang, such as one at the 4th milestone (present-day Woodleigh area) in 1939, to collect donations from Chinese residents. Proceeds were handed to the Upper Serangoon Branch of the China Relief Fund, a regional body established to co-ordinate fund-raising efforts to support China by the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia.

In December 1941, Japan invaded Malaya. In Au Kang, Air Raid Precaution Posts, which provided information and assistance during air raids, were set up in local landmarks such as Serangoon English School at Simon Road. The school also became a holding place for Eurasian evacuees from Malaya. Like other rural areas of Singapore, Au Kang became a place of refuge for those living in town. Tan Ah Sang (b. 1927) was staying at Upper Cross Street when her family decided to flee to Au Kang 5th milestone, where her father rented a house for the family, including her sisters, grandmother and uncles. She shared:

*"At that time many people fled to Au Kang ... when the invasion began, people said the houses in the town were not as safe and the Japanese would bomb anytime, the countryside would be safer, so many people fled to the countryside."*

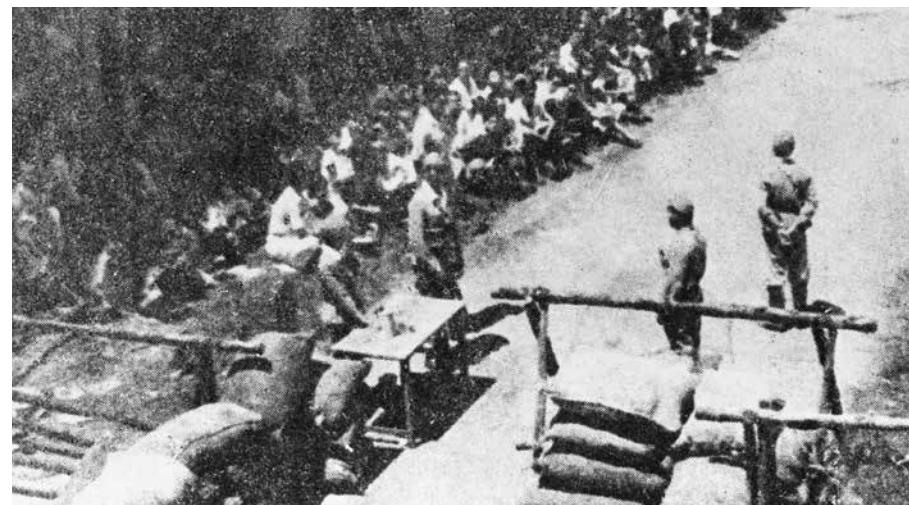
The various religious institutions of Au Kang became safe havens for those seeking to

escape Japanese brutality. Frank Tay (b. 1932), who grew up at Jalan Payoh Lai, shared:

*"In the first three or four weeks or maybe even a month after Singapore surrendered, in Au Kang, in our area anyway, any young woman on the road was fair game for them. And there were a number of cases of rape in that particular area, and the women took refuge in the Catholic church of Au Kang (Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary) ... And the Japanese knew there were a lot of women in that church and my aunt, my father's adopted sister, was one of them taking refuge in that church. But the Japanese never attacked them, never broke the doors open. You need to give them some credit for respecting religious institutions."*

Shortly after the Japanese occupied Singapore, they began screening the Chinese population for anti-Japanese elements. Survivor Tan Tian Chor (b. 1923) sought refuge at the Hainanese enclave at Lorong Ah Soo with a friend when they were ordered to go for screening at 6th milestone. Tan survived the screening as he was later interrogated by a Taiwanese officer who released him and some others. However, for Frank Tay, his extended family was not as lucky. Eleven of them were killed. He shared:

*"... my father's cousins, brothers and uncles at the adjoining estate were taken. And they lived very close, almost next door, to where the Japanese rounded all these people ... and they were subject to a very cursory examination. They were told to open their palms. And those with smooth palms were told to go to one side. And those which had calluses were told to go to the other side. Well the assumption being that if you had smooth palms, you were educated and therefore*



A mass screening centre in Singapore (location unknown) during the Japanese Occupation, 1942  
The Nanyang Miscellany Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

*you were pro-British ... and if you had calluses, you were illiterate, you were a farmer, you were a peasant, you probably didn't know much about world politics or whatever, so you were left on your own."*

Those with smooth palms were then sent by lorries to Punggol end, where they were executed at the beach.

During the Japanese Occupation, some schools resumed classes though lessons were taught in Japanese and markets reopened. With food shortage in Singapore, school's soccer fields were turned into a market garden, with every class assigned to grow different crops.

As in other parts of Singapore, the Japanese established the Auxiliary Police, comprising local volunteers, for surveillance of the population. The Auxiliary Police was also involved in other duties such as supervising food distribution at the 5th and 6th milestone markets. Over at Simon Road, the Japanese established Koa Gakuin, a military interpreters' institute to train the locals.

When the occupation ended, residents of Au Kang were overjoyed and relieved. Frank Tay recounted how his family celebrated:



Students in training at Koa Gakuin at Simon Road, 1944.  
Courtesy of National Library Board

*"My mother suddenly said to me, 'Ah well, I hear the bakeries in Tampines market were opened! Go and see if you can get some fresh loaves of bread.' Suddenly, you know. That's pretty remarkable. During the war, we didn't have bread. When the war ended, suddenly flour appeared from somewhere ... So she said, 'We shall celebrate, I shall cook some curry chicken, go and get some bread and then we can eat curry chicken with freshly-baked bread!' I went to get this bread. We didn't use banana money. Somewhere along the lines she must have hidden Straits dollars, and we took some and I remember buying three loaves and it tasted, the smell, oh it was divine! And I remember picking bits of it walking back from the market from 6th mile back to our place ... that was a great occasion."*



## THE WAR HERO

Lim Bo Seng, a war hero, was the 11th child and first-born son of pioneer builder and businessman, Lim Chee Gee or popularly known as Lim Loh. Lim Bo Seng and his family lived at the 6th milestone, a distance away from Lim Loh's family home at Wolskel Road. After his father's death, Lim Bo Seng, his siblings and extended family ran the extensive family businesses, from managing properties and rents to plantations and factories including Hock San Brick Works, Teng San Brick Works and the Hock Ann Biscuit factory all located along Wolskel Road.

In the years leading up to the war, the Lim family played a significant role in supporting relief efforts for China. Lim Bo Seng also organised people to support the defence of Singapore and was involved in operations such as the destruction of the Causeway. When Singapore fell, Lim was then trained in intelligence work and established an intelligence network in Malaya before he was betrayed and captured by the Japanese, leading to his death in a Perak jail in 1944. After the war, his remains were brought back to Singapore and temporarily kept at the office of Hock Ann Biscuit Factory while a burial site was chosen.

Lim Bo Yam, brother of Lim Bo Seng, recalled when Singapore fell:

*"... they came to our house to look for Lim Bo Seng. 'You know where is he?' ... They got these spies, Japanese spies in Singapore ... first thing they look for is Lim Bo Seng. So, they came to the family house and told the Japs, 'They are not here.' So one morning, about half past five or six, about 200 soldiers surrounded our family house. Then, they came, knocked at the door, chase all the women folks to one house, all the men folk to another house ... So after some time in the morning, we are all tied. All the men folks are tied to Tampines (6th milestone screening centre) there and sit there for two nights in the tennis*

*court ... from our family, we have 22. Twenty-two men folks, some workers, some relatives, and nine were taken away and never returned."*

In the meantime, Lim Bo Seng's family had fled their house at the 6th milestone to seek refuge on St. John's Island. The Japanese took control of their brick factories and the family had to produce bricks for them.

Some years after the war, Hock Ann & Company was liquidated. The Lim family also gradually sold off their extensive properties in Upper Serangoon and other parts of Singapore over time. Today, Kai Hock Tong Temple at Hougang Avenue 3 is the last remaining legacy of the Lim family (more details on the temple can be found on p. 35).



Portrait of Lim Loh also known as Lim Chee Ghee, father of Lim Bo Seng, c. 1920s  
Lee Brothers Studio Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Portrait of Lim Bo Seng, c. 1940s  
Lim Leong Geok Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

## » OUR HERITAGE

# LIFE IN RURAL AU KANG



Upper Serangoon Road at the junction of Yio Chu Kang Road, with pedestrians walking on the side of the road, c. 1957-1958  
Derek Lehrle Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

For long-time residents, life in post-war Au Kang was filled with idyllic memories of a rural yet lively area. Since the days of plantations and fruit orchards, the kampongs in Au Kang have grown to house diverse communities, numerous schools, businesses and markets. Upper Serangoon Road continued to be the arterial road that connected the places of the rural Au Kang to each other. Amy Cheong (b. 1966) recalled the Au Kang she grew up in:

*"Upper Serangoon Road was much narrower then. There were no pavements, just sand and rocks. At that time, most of us walked to school. Between Realty Park, CHIJ Punggol (renamed CHIJ Our Lady of the Nativity) and Montfort, there were just kampongs all the way, coconut trees, attap houses. My friends and I used to love to go to Kangkar when it was still a jetty or go a little bit further to Punggol Point to dig for clams."*

## KAMPONG LIFE

Most of the kampongs in Au Kang were set up since the days of plantations and orchards. Over the years, as more kampongs emerged,



Boats at Kangkar jetty, 1982  
From the Lee Kip Lin Collection. All rights reserved. Lee Kip Lin and National Library Board, Singapore 2009

many were simply named after the nearest landmarks such as Ya Kar Tui ("foot of the coconut grove" in Hokkien) for the village of Hokkien families further in Lorong Ah Soo. In addition, other kampongs were named after their founders such as Kampong Haji Sirat at Jansen Road and Somapah (Serangoon) Village at the 6th milestone (present-day Hougang Street 21).

The area around Somapah Village was also referred to as Tua Jia Kar ("foot of the big well")



The Arozoo family house at Jalan Hock Chye, c. 1970s  
Photo from the collection of the late Harold Arozoo

in Teochew) by locals, after a big communal well located within the village. This well provided a good and consistent supply of clean water to villagers, some of whom even made a business of selling the well water. Although piped water was later installed in Somapah Village, it was said that many villagers still preferred to draw water from Tua Jia Kar. This well was so significant to long-time residents that a replica of the well with a commemorative plaque was installed at Hougang Street 21 in 2005.

For children, growing up in Au Kang meant plenty of outdoor life. Georgie Ong (b. 1950), a former resident of 6th milestone remembered climbing trees, plucking rambutans and *buah langsung* (*Lansium Parasiticum*) at Flower Road as a child. John Chia Ah Hang (b. 1939), a long-time resident of Punggol, recalled swimming at Sungei Serangoon with his childhood friends:

*"... the rivers were wonderful ... the water was clear and clean ... you need just the shorts, you don't need the swimming trunks, you are ready, you can jump into the river, and then you open the eyes, you could see the creatures. It was deep, Sungei Serangoon."*

Children of Au Kang also played and lived harmoniously with one another, regardless of their race and religion. Glory Barnabas (b. 1941), former national sprinter, shared that she used to play catching, hopscotch, five stones at Lorong Low Koon with her Teochew neighbours. Edmund Arozoo (b.1947) who grew up at Jalan Hock Chye recalled:



Birthday party at the home of the Arozoo family with children from the neighbourhood, c. 1950s  
Photo from the collection of the late Harold Arozoo



Food stalls set up near the wayang stage during a religious festival at the 6 1/2 milestone, 1980  
Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

*"Kampung children had a special bond. We did not have much back then, but most parents gave their kids the best they could. Come Chinese New Year, Christmas, Deepavali and Hari Raya, most kids were given new clothes and shoes. We treasured these and wore them for special occasions during the year until we got new ones the following year. At my sister's birthday party in 1957, our neighbours' children were invited as well. Everyone wore their Sunday best and we were privileged to have them, regardless of race, religion or wealth!"*

Festivities in Au Kang were particularly memorable events for residents. For the large Catholic and Protestant communities residing in the area, religious holidays such as Christmas were days to look forward to. Joseph Yeo (b. 1954), long-time parishioner of Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, has fond

memories of carolling in the kampongs and being served food and desserts by residents.

Sharing was also part of festivities among Au Kang's various communities. Edmund Arozoo wrote about the exchange of delicacies in his kampong at Jalan Hock Chye:

*"During any festival it was customary to have the exchange of delicacies amongst the neighbours in the kampong. Our dining table was always graced with the various cakes and cookies of the various races during these festive times. In reciprocation at Christmas time our neighbours had a share of the various cakes that Mum baked for the season ... Living in a kampong allowed everyone to witness and partake in festivities of the various races."*

Other notable Chinese festivities in Au Kang included the seventh lunar month and the ninth lunar month. In Au Kang, the seventh lunar month, or Hungry Ghosts' Festival, meant several days of wayang, with food and game stalls lining the streets. At Kangkar, the wayang stage would be erected at Lorong Sepat (expunged). For three nights, Teochew opera was performed, followed by two nights of *getai* (live music and dance performances) featuring singers who were escorted by bodyguards.

John Chia remembered the seventh month celebrations at the 6th milestone organised by the market stall holders. For villagers like him who lived further away from Au Kang, attending the festivities meant walking a few miles to get a bus, which stopped operating after 10pm. Chia said:

*"All the villagers would definitely be there (for the wayang) ... Once the stage was built, they'll reserve the front seats with all kinds of things ... Sing Yong Hua and Lau Sai Thor ... these were the two most famous Chinese (Teochew) troupes. And when they (the villagers) asked, 'This year, what troupe is coming?' I said, 'Sing Yong Hua', 'Whoa! Ho sei, ho sei ('Good' in Teochew and Hokkien), good, good!' Or Lau Sai Thor, 'Woah! Ho sei, ho sei!' You mention other troupes, 'Aiyah!' ... below the stage, you have the gambling, like*

*mini-casinos, black jack, all kinds of things, and Chinese tiles ... The front stage are the serious opera lovers ... they would glue to the actor and actress, glue to the acting, and then behind, you have the young girls and outside the fringe, you have the young men, and some of them, the young men, go with some girls ... on the outside, you have the hawkers, they sell the drinks, they sell the chwee kueh ... This was one of the highlights of the kampong."*

The Malay-Muslim families in Au Kang also celebrated their various festival days as a community in the kampongs. Fatimah binte Abdul Rahman (b. 1945) who grew up at Kampong Haji Sirat along Jansen Road shared:

*"Mawlid Nabi (Prophet Mohammed's birthday) was when we had procession around the village for about three hours. Most of us were involved, the young and the elderly. We would carry the bunga manggar (palm blossom props) and play kompang (a Malay traditional drumming instrument) during the procession around the village."*

## GOING TO THE MARKET

Prior to the redevelopment of Hougang, there were three important markets in Au Kang—the Kangkar fish market, Upper Serangoon Market at Simon Road and Lim Tua Tow market near the 5th milestone. These markets not only served the residents of Au Kang but also drew in sellers and marketgoers from the north-eastern part of Singapore.

Kangkar was home to the most important fish market in the north-eastern side of Singapore until the early 1980s. The fish was supplied by fishermen living in the settlement and from nearby districts such as Punggol and Changi. Wholesalers would then sell the fish to hawkers and traders, who would in turn sell the fish in other parts of Singapore. Lee Chor Eck (b. 1916), who was a long-time resident of Punggol recalled to the National Archives:

*"The biggest market (in the region) was at Kangkar at the end of Upper Serangoon Road ... the main activity was gathering the catch from fishermen. The Malay fishermen would come in*



*small boats with their catch and the people at the market would buy from them, and then sell the fish to other fish hawkers in the town area ... the fish market already existed when I was a child ... This Kangkar market, their main activity was to buy the fish from fishermen and sell them In the 1980s, Kangkar was earmarked for redevelopment and the fish market was relocated to Punggol in 1983."*

At the 6th milestone, a new market was constructed in 1948 at Simon Road to replace an old dilapidated market at Lim Ah Pin Road. The former market was built before the war but was largely unused as it was too far from the main Upper Serangoon Road and villages in the vicinity. Its steel frame was dismantled and reused in the new market. Upper Serangoon Market, more often referred to as Simon Road market, soon became a key feature of life in Au Kang, selling fresh produce and attracting farmers from other areas like Tampines and Pasir Ris. Today, the site of Simon Road market has been replaced by a condominium, with a pair of bronze statues erected along Upper Serangoon Road to commemorate this significant market.



*Fish auctions that were held at the Kangkar fish market, 1983*  
The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission

In the 1950s, a new municipal market housing hawker stalls was built at Lim Tua Tow to serve the residents living around the 5th milestone. The market was famed for its fried carrot cake and Hokkien mee (fried noodles with prawn). By 1951, the market was operational.

Nearby, stands a landmark of the former Lim Tua Tow market area, Teck Chye Terrace, which was built in 1928 by businessman Lim Teck Chye. Together, the terrace and the market have long been known as a food haven for people living in the vicinity. Until the 1990s, itinerant hawkers selling fares from fried carrot cake to beef noodles also used to throng the market grounds. Long-time Au Kang resident Chan Kum Chye (b. 1943) has fond memories of the hawkers at Teck Chye Terrace:

*"In the evening, the hawkers come to set up push carts. Beef noodles, fried Hokkien mee (fried noodles with prawn), ngoh hiang (five-spice pork rolls wrapped in bean curd skin), cheng tng (a Chinese desert), char kway (fried carrot cake) ... For char kway teow (stir-fried flat noodles), you*



*Stalls at Simon Road market, 1986*  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Lim Tua Tow market, 1986*  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*A signboard at the entrance of Upper Serangoon Market, more popularly known as Simon Road market, 1986*  
Courtesy of National Archives Singapore



*Hawkers displaying their wares outside Lim Tua Tow market, 1986*  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*The food street at Teck Chye Terrace, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

## THE FIRST SOCIAL CENTRE FOR SINGAPORE'S RURAL AREAS

In 1951, the Social Welfare Department announced that it would start building social centres in Singapore's rural areas to bring essential social services to the people. The first of these centres was to be built at Lim Ah Pin Road, on the site of the former market.

In 1953, the centre, consisting of a cluster of buildings, was officially opened. Facilities and services included a maternity and infant welfare clinic, classes for children, a boy's club and regular adult education classes. The clinic, often referred to as Lim Ah Pin Clinic, served the residents of Au Kang, Punggol and Tampines. Besides having resident nurses and midwives, the clinic also administered vaccinations and dispensed medications.

The following year, Raffles Library established its first branch, Lim Ah Pin Library, in the social centre with 2,000 books. It was part of the government's plan to set up satellite libraries around Singapore. The library operated there till 1960, when it was moved to Serangoon English School after the Ministry of Health took over the centre.

Midwife Mary Hee Sook Yin (b. 1937) was posted to Lim Ah Pin Clinic for three months

during the 1960s. Nurses and midwives were then housed in quarters in the clinic. Hee recalled being woken up in the middle of the night for calls and having to cycle to villagers' homes in Au Kang, Tampines and Punggol to attend to women giving birth. She shared: "... last time the patients are very good. They are really grateful to you. Even some, after they have [given] birth, they give me eggs from the farm ... until I don't know what to do with the eggs, I learn how to make sponge cake, butter cake ... I tell you, I really enjoyed my three months there."

Up to the late 1980s, the centre continued to provide various healthcare services. Today, the buildings are leased for commercial use.



Crowds waiting for polio vaccine at Lim Ah Pin Road Clinic, 1958  
Singapore Press Holdings Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Opening of Lim Ah Pin Clinic by wife of the Colonial Secretary, Mrs William Allmond Codrington Goode, 1953  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

can bring your own eggs. It's ten cents cheaper ... The hawkers, when they come to sell their mee siam or laksa (rice noodles in spicy soup), you sit along the drain to eat. No proper chairs or tables. You bring your own tingkat (food container) if you want to tapau (take away), no plastic bag."

Known for its food shops and hawkers from early days, Teck Chye Terrace continues to be a popular food destination today.

## RECREATION IN AU KANG

Bustling market days and lively festivities aside, living in Au Kang also presented plenty of recreational activities. At the 6th milestone junction of Tampines and Upper Serangoon Road, there used to be a storyteller who set up station in the traffic island every night. He would time his sessions with lit joss sticks, and when the joss sticks burned out, the audience would have to pay another ten cents for him to continue.

The circus was another big highlight when it came to Au Kang. Martin Lim (b. 1937), who grew up at Highland Road, shared:

"Every year, the Tai Thean Kew Circus would set up a tent where the Church of Immaculate Heart is now, with all the horses, elephants and all that. I used to take the bicycle to see the show."

As the number of residents grew in Au Kang, so did the demand for film entertainment. During the post-war years, Au Kang's four cinemas offered regular screenings of films of different languages to meet the various demands of residents living here.

There were the Mercury and Kok Wah theatres at 5th milestone, and the Empire and Zenith theatres at the 6th milestone. Kok Wah Theatre, which occupied the site of the former Hollywood Talkies along Yio Chu Kang Road, was reportedly an open-air cinema before it was rebuilt and upgraded with air-conditioning and the latest projectors by 1966. Patrons would flock there for Chinese movies. Mercury Theatre, located along Upper Serangoon Road, started operating in the late 1940s. It was known for screening English films in its earlier

years before it began screening more Indian and Malay films by the 1970s. Both theatres stopped operating by the 1980s.

At the 6th milestone, there was Empire Theatre at Lowland Road and Zenith Theatre along Tampines Road. Empire Theatre began screening as early as 1946 and was known then for Hollywood hits. Chan Kum Chye recalled:

"They used rattan chairs at Empire Theatre, opposite the current Serangoon Shopping Centre. A lot of bugs! They used to run the projector and you could hear it in the theatre. The shows screened were Ben Hur, Samson, Sinbad the Sailor and Indian shows. That was the only recreation then before television."

Zenith Theatre, at the site of present-day Fortune Park Condominium along Tampines Road, was built at a cost of \$500,000 in 1964 and was reported to be a modern, grand building. It was best known for screening Chinese movies though it also showed Hollywood blockbusters. It was demolished in 1993.



Advertisement for Zenith Theatre, 1996  
The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.



Zenith Theatre, 1990  
Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority





A post card showing the crocodile farm as a tourist attraction, c.1970s  
National Museum of Singapore Collection, Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Tan Moh Hong Reptile Skin and Crocodile Farm, 1986  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Au Kang also offered a unique tourist attraction with its crocodile farms. Tan Moh Hong Reptile Skin and Crocodile Farm, also often referred to as the Singapore Crocodile Farm, was a landmark at the 5th milestone. Businessman Tan Gna Chua started rearing crocodiles for skin in his sprawling residence along Upper Serangoon Road in 1945. Tan also established a factory on the grounds to process the skin. The farm's products, including wallets, handbags and crocodile meat were exported as well. Over time, the farm became

an attraction in itself, with tourists and even dignitaries such as Earl Louis Mountbatten, paying visits to the site.

By the 1980s, Tan Moh Hong Reptile Skin and Crocodile Farm had become one of Singapore's largest manufacturer of reptile skin products, with some 600 crocodiles. The animals were fed a diet of mainly pigs' lungs and fish. Besides Tan Moh Hong Reptile Skin and Crocodile Farm, there were also other smaller crocodile farms in Au Kang. For instance, the stretch of Upper Serangoon Road near Lim Ah Pin Road used to be known as Bua Kia Hng, a mixed Malay-Hokkien phrase which means "crocodile garden", after the crocodiles kept in a compound. When Tan passed away in 2000, his estate was worth some \$30 million, including a house at Surin Avenue and the farm. The farm was closed in 2012.

#### OFF TO SCHOOL

Education in Au Kang has a long history that originated from the early kampong days. A



Holy Innocents' Chinese Girls' School, c. 1958-1977  
Holy Innocents' Chinese Girls' School Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

majority of the schools established in rural Au Kang still serve the residential town of Hougang today. Among these are the Christian schools started by the missions and schools established by the various Chinese associations and social institutions in the area. Apart from these schools, the first government co-educational school of Singapore also saw its opening here in Au Kang.

The Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, established by the Catholic mission of Les Missions Étrangères de Paris at the 7½ milestone, had four schools on its church grounds before they were relocated to different parts of Hougang town and the surrounding housing estates today.

Holy Innocents' Chinese Boys' School (est. 1892), the oldest known school in Au Kang, was renamed Holy Innocents' High School in 1958, after it moved out of the church compound to its present site along Upper Serangoon Road. Holy Innocents' Primary School at Lorong Low Koon was formed in 1985 when the primary school section of Holy Innocents' High School and Holy Innocents' Chinese Girls' School (est. 1932) merged.

Chng Nguan Im (b. 1926), a Teochew who arrived in Singapore from Shantou prefecture in China in 1930 with her family, stayed at

Kangkar and studied at the Holy Innocents' Chinese Girls' School. She recalled:

*"My younger brothers went to school too, they went to Holy Innocents' School. At that time, they had to walk barefoot from Kangkar to Holy Innocents ... no shoes! ... they would set off earlier than me, because I'm the eldest and had to do housework while they were younger ... but they also had to help prepare to feed the chickens, my younger brother had to prepare the chicken feed before washing up and changing into school uniform to go to school ... I remember when I was studying, lessons were taught in Teochew."*

To avoid confusion with Holy Innocents' Chinese Boys' School, Holy Innocents' English Boys' School (est. 1916) was renamed Montfort School in 1958 to honour St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, a Roman Catholic religious figure. The school had earlier been transferred in 1936 to the care of another Catholic mission, the Brothers of St. Gabriel, whose founder was St. Louis. Today Montfort School, located at Hougang Avenue 8, had grown to become two institutions providing primary and secondary education—Montfort Junior School and Montfort Secondary School.

The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ), a Catholic institute, also founded two schools in Au Kang. CHIJ Our Lady of the Nativity, was founded on the grounds of the Church



The former premises of Hai Sing Girls' High School along Upper Serangoon Road, 1988  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1957 and provided education for girls residing in the Kangkar area and Punggol. Over time, as its enrolment grew, bigger premises were needed. It relocated to a new school complex on the former site of Montfort School in 2001. Along Flower Road, the convent established CHIJ St. Joseph's Convent in 1938. The school moved to Hillside Drive in 1951 and continued to operate there till 2000, when it relocated to Seng Kang.

Another iconic Catholic school that has its roots in Au Kang is Hai Sing Catholic School. Established in 1959 as Hai Sing Girls' High School by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, it started in borrowed classrooms at Holy Innocents' Chinese Girls' School before building its own premises at 1271 Upper Serangoon Road in 1961. In 1990, it relocated to Pasir Ris due to the need for bigger premises.

The Brothers of St. Gabriel also established St. Gabriel's School in 1953 at the junction of Hillside Drive and Upper Serangoon Road. Starting with an intake of 212 students, the school's population had grown to 1,350 by 1969. In that year, the primary section, later renamed St. Gabriel's Primary School, moved to new premises at the junction of Highland Road and Yio Chu Kang Road before moving again to Lorong Chuan in 1988. The secondary section, renamed St. Gabriel's Secondary



Sing Hua School, 1986  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

School, moved to its current site at Serangoon Avenue 1 in 1992. Its old premises along Upper Serangoon Road are now used by the Girls' Brigade Singapore.

Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School, which started out as a boys' school in 1916 at Boundary Road, was established by the Methodist church. In 1918, the school began taking in girls. In 1945 after the Japanese Occupation, the school restarted with two sessions. The morning school was attended by the girls and the afternoon school was attended by the boys. In 1961, the school became an all-girls' school. It continued running at Boundary Road in the present-day Covenant Centre of Paya Lebar Methodist Church till 1986, when it moved to its present site at Lorong Ah Soo.

Due to the large group of Chinese communities in Au Kang, many associations and institutions started schools to provide education for their young. These schools which were started in Au Kang continue to operate in Hougang town today.

The Teochew-affiliated Sing Hua School (est. 1930) at Lim Tua Tow Road is another Chinese school that continues to function today. The school started in a structure with a thatched roof that was rebuilt into a brick building just before the war. When war broke out, the school was converted into barracks and ceased to

function. After the Japanese Occupation, the school building was turned into a soap factory. It was only in 1946 that the factory finally vacated the premises and Sing Hua School could run as a school again. In 1957, Sing Hua School became a government-aided school. A new school building at Lim Tua Tow Road was constructed in the 1970s to allow greater intake. In 1985, the school's name was changed to Xinghua Primary School after it moved to Hougang Avenue 1.

Right after the war, a group of Chinese residents in the area decided to set up a school, as the Japanese Occupation had disrupted the education of many children. Sin Min School was thus founded on rented premises along Upper Serangoon Road at end 1945. Starting with primary education for boys, the school began taking in girls and added secondary education in the 1950s. Through fund-raising efforts, the school also managed to acquire its own land and erected a three-storey block. In the mid-1970s, the two-storey block was rebuilt into a three-storey building. In 1986, Sin Min School became an English-medium government secondary school. The following year, it moved to Hougang Avenue 8 and was renamed Xinmin Secondary School. Its old premises along Upper Serangoon Road are being used by The Helping Hand, a halfway house.

Meanwhile, other Chinese schools that did not originally start in Au Kang but moved here from elsewhere have continued to remain and operate in Hougang today, adding to Au Kang's rich history of schools. Yuying Secondary School, located at Hougang Avenue 1, is the oldest school in Singapore to be established by the Hainanese community. Yuying, originally named Yock Eng High School, started at Prinsep Street with only 15 students. At its height during the 1950s, it had 2,400 students. The school moved to Hougang Avenue 1 in 1985 and was then renamed.

Chung Hwa Girls' School (est. 1911) was founded by the Chinese community in 1911 at Mohamed Sultan Road, it was the first Chinese-medium girls' school in Singapore. In 1951, the school



Yock Eng High School at Tanjong Katong Road, 1941  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Chung Hwa Girls' School, 1953  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

moved to larger premises at Bartley Road at the 4th milestone and became a government-aided school in 1957, offering the standardised education curriculum set by the government. The school became an English-medium school in 1980 as it faced declining enrolment. In 1984, it became a full-fledged government school and took in male students for the first time. The school moved to new premises at Serangoon Avenue 4 in 1987 and was renamed Zhonghua Secondary School. Zhonghua Primary School, built next to the secondary school, started the same year as well.



Other Chinese schools formed in Au Kang have since moved to other locations. The former Kong Yiong School (est. 1918), which provided primary education, operated first along Upper Serangoon Road before relocating to Yio Chu Kang Road in 1930. In 1959, the school began offering secondary education and was renamed Kong Yiong High School. With the growing importance of the English language in Singapore, the school became bilingual in 1978. In 1984, the secondary school and primary school sections separated. The primary school became a government school in 1986 and was renamed Guangyang Primary School in 1988 before relocating to Bishan in 1993. The secondary section closed down in 1986. The advisory committee of the school, however, had left \$60,000 to be given to a school which adopted its name. The name Guangyang Secondary School was thus given to a new school started in Bishan.

Besides Chinese associations, other social institutions also started schools to educate the children of the community. On the premises of the Mental Hospital, later renamed Woodbridge Hospital, a Tamil vernacular school was set up to provide education for the children of the hospital employees. Called Kalaimagal Tamil School, it was first housed in an attap house before it was relocated to Yio Chu Kang Road in 1950. In 1967, the school came under the management of Ramakrishna Mission, a Hindu spiritual and welfare organisation located at Bartley Road. Kalaimagal Tamil School functioned till 1979, when it closed due to falling enrolment.

Au Kang was also the first suburban area to have a government school. In 1928, the authorities built Au Kang's first government school. It was also the only government co-educational school in Singapore at the time. Located at Simon Road, Serangoon English School started with only seven classes, with a headmistress and seven teachers. In 1957, the school became a secondary school and a decade later, it moved to Lowland Road and was renamed Serangoon Secondary School. Today, the school continues



*Serangoon English School, 1958*  
Singapore Press Holdings Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

to operate at Upper Serangoon View, where it relocated to in 2011.

During the 1950s, the municipal government also opened other schools in Au Kang to serve the population. Some former schools included Charlton School and Aroozoo School at Aroozoo Avenue. These two schools merged in 1991 before merging again with Xinghua Primary School in 2003. At Parry Avenue, there was a cluster of former schools, namely Parry Avenue Boys' School, Parry Avenue Girls' School and Parry Avenue Government Chinese Middle School. These schools were later merged in 1981 to become Parry Primary School before merging with Xinghua Primary School in 2007. Parry Secondary School was formed in 1966 at Parry Avenue and eventually merged with Hwi Yoh Secondary School at Serangoon Avenue 4 in 1984 to form Peicai Secondary School.

### A LEPER SETTLEMENT AND MENTAL HOSPITAL

Over to the north-western edge of Serangoon, the former Trafalgar rubber estate in Yio Chu Kang saw two new developments in the 1920s. In 1926, a centre with four wards was built for female leprosy patients. This was followed by a camp for male patients in 1930, and the facilities were named Singapore Leper Asylum. In a time where contagion was greatly feared,

it was thought that the Yio Chu Kang area was sufficiently remote to keep leprosy patients away from densely populated areas.

The colonial government also constructed a mental hospital in the same estate in 1928. The \$2.25 million hospital had a total capacity of 1,200 patients and was surrounded by a ten-foot fence. All mental patients in Singapore who were up till then held in various facilities were eventually relocated there.

According to an article dated 23 November 1926 in *The Straits Times*, the site was chosen as it came with *"sufficient elevation to ensure a breeze throughout the day and a view of the hills of Johore across the Straits. The extent of the grounds is more than ample for exercise and the occupational work which is part of the curative methods employed and the surroundings of the*



*Woodbridge Hospital, 1965*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

*hospital should be far more helpful to the patients than those at Sepoy Lines and Pasir Panjang."*

The two institutions continued to function until well after the war. In 1950, the leper asylum was renamed Trafalgar Home to destigmatise the facility. The home continued to treat leprosy patients till 1992 when all the patients were transferred to the Singapore Leprosy Relief Association.

The mental hospital was renamed Woodbridge Hospital in 1951, the name likely derived from a nearby wooden bridge. Over the years it was expanded and reformed to include more effective treatment programmes. In 1993, the hospital moved to a new modern complex at its current address in Hougang while its original site was slated for redevelopment. It was then renamed Institute of Mental Health.



*Trafalgar Home, 1952*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*View of a ward in Woodbridge Hospital, 1975*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

# FROM KAMPONGS TO HOUGANG TOWN

The Au Kang area was earmarked in 1974 by the government for redevelopment, and by the late 1970s, the area had begun its rapid transformation to become a new housing town. With the redevelopment, the landscape of Au Kang began changing dramatically. The government acquired land and resettled residents and by 1976, construction had begun on the first housing estate in the area, along Lorong Lew Lian. Au Kang became Hougang (Mandarin pronunciation of Au Kang) in 1980, reflecting the nation's drive to promote Mandarin as the common language among the Chinese in Singapore.

Geraldine Ng (b. 1957), former resident of Kangkar, recalled the impact of resettlement on her father:

*"Every day, my father would go back to the old house at Kangkar and stay there till evening, only coming home to the new flat to sleep. He did so until we told him it wasn't very safe since most people had moved out of the village already."*

While there were those who were resettled to other housing estates such as Ang Mo Kio, there were many former villagers who found their homes in the new Hougang town. As a result, Hougang today is still known as a Teochew enclave among Singaporeans.

Bernard James Braberry (b. 1955), a Eurasian, only moved to Hougang in 1985, having spent his growing up years in Whampoa. He shared how speaking Teochew is still very much a part of Hougang today:



The new Hougang housing estate, 1984  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Old shophouses at Kampong Sireh during the era of redevelopment in Hougang, with HDB blocks and Upper Serangoon Shopping Centre in the background, 1986  
Courtesy of National Archives Singapore

*"My immediate neighbours, basically all of them are Teochew except for a Sikh family. One of my neighbours helped to look after my daughter when she was young, and my daughter learned to speak Teochew from her."*

Today, the kampong spirit still remains as a part of daily life for many of the residents. Bernard Chiang (b. 1951), who moved to Lorong Lew Lian after his former kampong at Chia Keng was resettled, shared:

*"... the people mostly are resettled from the same areas, so actually ... and when they shift to Lorong Lew Lian they are still together here, so they actually live in a vertical kampong now... even the interaction and the bonding is very strong ... they're just like people living in the kampong. They can know so-and-so stay in which block, stay in which floor, they can tell you."*

## NEW TOWN, NEW IDENTITY, NEW STORIES

In the 1980s, HDB started to create a greater sense of identity for housing estates through the design of the towns and streets. The first batch of housing towns that benefitted from the new approach included Jurong East and West, Bukit Batok, Tampines, Yishun

and Hougang. During this period, HDB also began putting up prefabricated flats as part of a productivity drive, since such apartments required less manpower and time to be built. Hougang was one of the new towns to be fitted with prefabricated flats.

To create a distinctive identity for Hougang, HDB's architects introduced specific design features in the housing blocks. For example, buildings at the first town centre at Hougang Street 21 were designed with elements of colonial architecture suggesting Singapore's pre-war bungalows, such as low-rise buildings with rounded arches, multi-paned windows and louvres. The second town centre located at Hougang Central was distinguished by a pair of blocks with stepped pitched-roof buildings, a hark back at Hougang's rural past. Diamond-shaped motifs on the facade of HDB's area office in the centre further added to the character of the place.

Another distinctive feature was the use of curves in its buildings. Housing blocks such as those along Avenue 7 were designed with rounded balconies and curved columns. Certain blocks throughout the town were also painted with murals to add colour and interest





*Rounded balconies incorporated into the buildings, 1990*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Low-rise buildings with arches at Hougang town centre, 1990*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Curved columns featured on a housing block in Hougang, 1990*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

to the buildings. For instance, Block 316 was painted with a sweeping rainbow mural, which became iconic in Hougang. Over the years, despite modifications to the rainbow design, the block continues to be painted with a rainbow mural. Another instance is Block 25 nearby, which is painted with a mural of a bright and sunny sky, welcoming visitors to Hougang town.

Residents living in Hougang also enjoyed a vibrant lifestyle in the heartlands. The original town centre situated at Hougang Street 21 provided residents with facilities and even boasted a series of “firsts”. In 1984, McDonald’s opened an outlet in the town centre, making Hougang the first housing estate in Singapore to have a fast food restaurant. In 1986, the first bowling centre in an HDB estate was opened at Hougang Avenue 1. Known as The Striker’s Bowl, the \$4 million centre made a splash in

the news with its 26 lanes and cutting-edge computerised scoring system. The centre also became known during its time for hosting bowling leagues.

The town centre also housed the largest supermarket emporium at the time. Built in 1983, the emporium offered residents a supermarket, restaurant, music schools and other commercial businesses in the building. This first town centre was later revamped and renamed Kovan City in 1998.

In 1987, another town centre was built at Hougang Central and featured a few “firsts” as well. Hougang Plaza was opened in 1993 and was said to be the first all-entertainment complex in a HDB estate. Up until its demolition in 2013, the plaza was provided residents with recreational facilities such as a bowling alley, a billiards hall and a cineplex.



*Block 316 with its iconic rainbow mural painted on its facade at Hougang Avenue 7, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Another more recent “first” for Hougang is Hougang Mall, opened in 1997. It was the first shopping mall developed by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC).

Today, Hougang is known as a vibrant area of the heartlands. For many of the long-time residents and business owners in the area, however, the memories of old Au Kang are what make Hougang a unique town. Augustine Ng (b. 1961) moved out of Kangkar in 1983. To him, the Au Kang he grew up with remains very much alive:

*“I can still remember the food stalls, where they were and what they were selling. There was the roti prata (Indian flatbread) man opposite Montfort, the rojak (fruit and vegetable salad) man, the tau kwa pok (fried bean curd dish) man on the bicycle, the best kway chap (Teochew braised pork dish) selling from a house in Kangkar*



*Kovan City, 2009*  
From the Little Red Dot Collection. All rights reserved.  
National Library Board, 2009

*beside the stream, the Hokkien mee man on his bicycle, the Malays selling prawn cakes and the Indian man selling putu mayam (Indian steamed rice noodle dish). I close my eyes and I can still see the provision shops, the coffin maker, the two barbershops and even the Chinese physician shop. That was Au Kang.”*

# A PLACE OF MANY FAITHS

Many of Hougang's places of faiths today have origins dating back to the early kampong days of Au Kang. These different religious institutions represent the diversity and stories of Au Kang's people and communities. Some of these places are open to the public. Be sure to check the institutions' websites and follow any instructions on appropriate behaviour and attire when visiting them.

## HOUGANG TOU MU KUNG (后港斗母宫)

779A Upper Serangoon Road

Hougang Tou Mu Kung (also known as Kew Ong Yah Temple, named after the Nine Emperor Gods in Teochew and Hokkien) began as a shrine at Lim Loh village at Au Kang 4th milestone in 1902 and is the oldest temple in Singapore dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods. A Hokkien devotee, Ong Choo Kee, was said to have brought incense ash from an established Nine Emperor Gods temple in Penang to start an altar at his residence in the village. The Nine Emperor Gods were then popularly worshipped in Malaya, especially among Chinese labourers working in tin mines, as they were believed to be efficacious in warding off epidemics and diseases.

The altar at the 4th milestone quickly gained worshippers as its reputation for effecting cures for ailments spread and was later relocated to Boundary Road. One of the devotees, Ong Chwee Tow, donated a piece of land in 1919 for the construction of a proper temple. Ong Chwee Tow was a self-made businessman who went from being a rickshaw puller for Chinese tycoon Tan Kah Kee to making his riches in pineapple canning. Another devotee by the name of Ong Koi Gim was also said to have donated large sums of money for the same purpose.



*Prior to renovations, the temple's roof ridges were distinctively Hokkien in their pronounced curvatures, c. early 1900s.*  
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*The permanent wayang stage at the Hougang Tou Mu Kung, 1978*  
Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Sedan chairs used for carrying the Nine Emperor Gods at the temple, 1990*  
Singapore Tourism Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



*Hougang Tou Mu Kung, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

In 1921, a new temple was completed on the present site. It was originally built in the traditional Hokkien architectural style, characterised by pronounced curvatures in the roof ridges. Subsequent renovations saw the incorporation of Teochew architectural features such as gentler-sloping roof ridges, probably due to the strong Teochew presence in Au Kang. A permanent stage for opera performances was built in 1925. From stele records at the temple, it was established that the worshippers came from various Chinese dialect groups, including Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese and Hakka.

The temple was known for its spectacular festivities during the 9th lunar month, when the deities were welcomed into the temple and festivities were held for 11 days before the deities were sent off. Devotees would abstain from meat and alcohol and partake in ritual cleansing. On the last day of the 8th lunar month, a procession starting from the temple would move towards a nearby river or sea to invite the deities back to the temple. The last day of the festival would see a grand procession to the beach followed by rituals to send the deities back to the sea. In early years, the rituals were reported to be held at Sungei Whampoa. By the 1960s, the rituals were conducted at Sungei Serangoon.

Over the years, the temple and its grounds have seen significant changes. For example, in

1998, part of the temple's land was acquired for the widening of Upper Serangoon Road. The temple's permanent wayang (local Malay term referring to Chinese opera) stage was demolished as a result. Extensive restoration works were launched in 2016, and extensions were added to the original building. Today, the temple, which was gazetted as a National Monument on 14 January 2005, continues to be one of the most popular temples dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods in Singapore.

## ZI YUN KAI JI GONG (紫云开吉宫)

58 Hougang Avenue 3

Completed in 1996, Zi Yun Kai Ji Gong's compound consists of three temples established by Hokkien Chinese, Kai Hock Tong (开福堂), Keat Sun Beo (吉山庙) and Chao Ying Kong (朝云宫). These three temples were combined in the present site in 1992 as their original sites were acquired for redevelopment.

Kai Hock Tong Temple was established by Lim Loh, also known as Lim Chee Gee, father of war hero Lim Bo Seng. The temple's incense originated from the mother temple of the same name in Nan An county, Fujian. Lim Loh had brought along the ashes when he immigrated to Singapore in the late 1800s.

The temple started as a shrine in Lim's brickworks factory at the 4th milestone. As the area around the 4th milestone was





*Zi Yun Kai Ji Gong, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



*The family shrine of Keat Sun Beo, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



*Kai Hock Tong Temple before it shifted to its current location, undated*  
Courtesy of Kai Hock Tong Temple



*Worshippers at Chao Ying Kong's opening ceremony held at its previous location in Yishun, 1988*  
Courtesy of Chao Ying Kong

populated by many of Lim's kinsmen from China, they worshipped at the same shrine, and subsequently built an attap structure near the brickworks to serve as a temple for the community. Later on, Lim Loh constructed temple buildings at Wolskel Road to replace the attap structure. However, by the early 1900s, the temple buildings were falling into disrepair. In 1919, the devotees, many of them from the Lim clan, came together and built a new temple. This temple functioned till 1991, when it had to relocate to its current site.

Keat Sun Beo was established in 1898 in a village at Lorong Chuan by Hokkien immigrants from Anxi county, Fujian. Initially, it functioned as a family shrine for the founders and their families who had the surname of "Tan". Over time, it began to serve devotees from other clans and dialect groups who were drawn to worship there as the shrine gained a reputation for efficacy and medium consultation services. Due to urban redevelopment, the temple had to relocate several times before Zi Yun Kai Ji Kong was finally constructed. Aside from its religious functions, the temple also disburses bursaries to needy students living in the Hougang area.

Chao Ying Kong Temple, the newest temple of the three, was established by its temple leaders in 1988 when they brought incense ash from the mother temple in Nan An county, Fujian. The temple started in Yishun and relocated a few times before combining with the other two temples in 1992. Today, the temple continues to maintain a strong relationship with the mother temple in China through exchange visits.

#### **TIAN KONG & KANCANARAMA BUDDHIST TEMPLE**

2 Lorong Ong Lye

Tian Kong & Kancanarama Buddhist Temple is a joint complex housing a Taoist temple and a Thai Buddhist temple. Both temples were founded by a deeply religious devotee known as Kan Chee Yin, who also donated the land upon which the complex stands. Kan Chee Yin first set up Tian Kong Temple (year unknown),

before she invited Thai monks to establish Kancanarama Buddhist Temple in 1960.

It was said that the temples used to be housed in a small attap building before a two-storey concrete building was commissioned. The current complex was built in phases over 14 years, starting in 1982 and completed in 1996. The building incorporates classic features of traditional Thai architecture, complete with multiple roof tiers and decorative pointed structures at the gable ends of the roofs.



*The temple building before it was rebuilt in 1982*  
Courtesy of Tian Kong & Kancanarama Buddhist Temple



*Tian Kong & Kancanarama Buddhist Temple, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board





Chee Tong Temple, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

The roof of the gate and building are also decorated with intricate gold engravings, which were hand-carved by the resident head monk for over a decade. Today, it is one of the five Thai temples in Singapore to be officially recognised by the Thai king as an authentic Thai Buddhist temple.

### CHEE TONG TEMPLE (慈忠坛)

62 Hougang Avenue 3

This eye-catching temple along Avenue 3 was designed by established local architects Tay Kheng Soon and Patrick Chia. The project was commissioned in 1983 when the temple, originally founded in 1961 at the foot of Fort Canning, had to relocate from Bukit Timah.

To design the building, the architects had to conduct regular consultations with the deities through the temple's medium. Auspicious design features, apparently requested by the deities, included the elimination of sharp corners in the building and using multiples of three for steps as trinities. The apex of the roof was originally designed to be square-shaped but was modified to be a series of eight-sided prisms evoking the lotus after the divine

consultations. To add to the modern design, the temple broke away from tradition by not having doors at its entrance.

When the temple was finally completed in 1987, more than 3,000 people turned up for the inauguration ceremony. Besides its outstanding architecture, the temple is also known for its charitable work, especially among the elderly and poor.

### MASJID HAJI YUSOFF

2 Hillside Drive

(Note: This site is not open to walk-in visitors, but its exterior can be viewed from outside the compound.)

Masjid Haji Yusoff was built in 1921 on land donated by Gujarati merchant and philanthropist Ahmad Mohamed Salleh Angullia (1874-1939) and is the oldest mosque in Hougang. The first two co-trustees appointed by Angullia were Shaik Omar bin Abdullah Bamadhaj and Haji Mohamed Eusofe. The mosque was likely named after Haji Mohamed Eusofe.

In the 1930s, Shaik Omar Abdullah Bamadhaj established a madrasah on the grounds of



Masjid Haji Yusoff, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

the mosque. Known as Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah, the school catered for some 40 students living in the Serangoon area. In 1982, the madrasah unfortunately caught fire. Following the incident, the number of returning students fell by half. In 1989, the madrasah came under the management of charity Muhammadiyah Association. It subsequently merged with the association's madrasah, Madrasah Ulumul Quran and moved to Toa Payoh.

The mosque served the Muslim communities living in Au Kang. Fatimah binte Abdul Rahman (b. 1945) grew up in Kampong Haji Sirat near Jansen Road. A volunteer with the mosque now, she recalled: *"I started attending the mosque in the '60s with my family. I started going to the mosque on my own for religious classes when I got older. During Hari Raya I would volunteer to cook for those involved in the religious ceremony. I also made many friends there."*

To accommodate the increasing numbers of worshippers, the mosque underwent redevelopment in 1994. The \$2.1 million project included the construction of additional



Masjid Haji Yusoff before redevelopment, undated  
Courtesy of Masjid Haji Yusoff

classrooms and new toilet facilities. The mosque now serves as a social hub for the Malay-Muslim community living in the Hougang and Upper Serangoon areas.

### CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

1259 Upper Serangoon Road

Located at the end of Au Kang, the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the oldest place of worship in the area. It was established by Les Mission Étrangères de Paris (MEP; "Paris Foreign Missions Society" in French), a Roman Catholic missionary organisation based in France to serve the growing Teochew Catholic population.





*An aerial photograph showing the church, Kangkar and surrounding coconut plantations, 1958*  
Aerial photographs by the British Royal Air Force between 1940 to 1970s, from a collection held by the National Archives of Singapore. Crown copyright.



*A procession of church members carrying the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour on the church grounds, 1964*  
Courtesy of Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The first chapel was known as Church of St. Mary. It was first an attap structure that was erected in 1853 and later rebuilt in brick. It was only in 1857 that the church managed to procure a 40-acre piece of land from the British East India Company, including the site it was occupying. Part of the land was used for church buildings and the remainder was leased to those who needed a place to set up a home.

By 1891, there were some 700 believers, most of them were farmers and fishermen. The growing congregation called for bigger church premises. In 1901, the mission constructed the present-day Neo-Gothic building, complete with pointed arches and ribbed vaults, and the church was renamed Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The side transepts, sanctuary and sacristy were added to the original church building in 1933.

Besides tending to spiritual needs, the church also began providing other services for the Au Kang residents. This includes the St. Joseph Dying Aid Association, which was founded in 1926 to pray at the homes of the seriously ill and dying. This service continues to operate today, such as providing free coffins to needy families whose loved ones have passed away.

When war broke out in 1942, the church became a place of refuge for villagers, especially young



*The Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

women seeking safety from invading Japanese soldiers. During the occupation, however, parish life came to a halt as worshippers feared stepping out of their homes.

Church activities only picked up again after the Japanese Occupation. One memorable event after the war was when Sultan Ibrahim of Johor donated the marble statue of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which still stands in front of the church today. According to the church, the Sultan made the donation in 1946 due to his friendship with the parish priest, Father Francis Chan.

By the 1970s, urban redevelopment of Au Kang had started and the government began acquiring part of the church land from the mid-1970s onwards. Villagers residing in the affected areas were first relocated to other housing towns in Whampoa, Ang Mo Kio and Marine Parade, and later on to Tampines and the new housing town of Hougang.

While the Teochew Catholic identity of the area around the church diminished somewhat after urban redevelopment, the church nonetheless continues to provide religious services in Teochew today. In 2005, the church was gazetted as a National Monument.

### ST. PAUL'S CHURCH

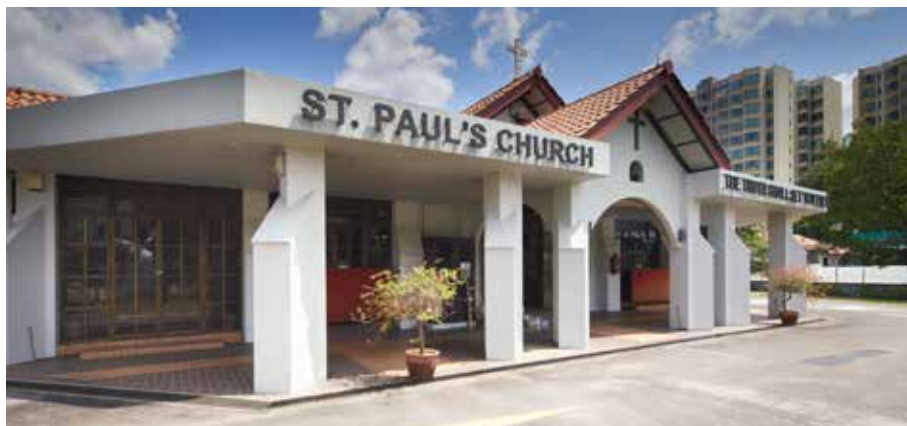
839 Upper Serangoon Road

St. Paul's Church started during the 1930s, with a handful of worshippers meeting in the house of a fellow Anglican congregant located near the church's present location. At that time, the British had established military bases in various rural parts of Singapore, including Serangoon. The first Anglican worshippers of the church were from the families of British military personnel deployed to Au Kang and its vicinity.

As the congregation grew, the Anglican Diocese purchased a plot of land in 1935 at the 6th milestone to build a church. The cost of building was borne by George Rae Oehlers, a prominent Eurasian contractor. He was also the father of Sir George Edward Noel (1908-1968), later first Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Singapore and the first Eurasian in Singapore to have been knighted. Oehlers



*George Rae Oehlers, a Eurasian who funded the building of St. Paul's Church, undated*  
Courtesy of St. Paul's Church



*St. Paul's Church, 2018*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



*St. Paul's Church before the building extensions, undated*  
Courtesy of St. Paul's Church

erected the church in memory of his son Harry, who was killed in a motorcar accident in Hampshire.

The foundation of the church was laid on 3 December 1935 by Sir Andrew Caldecott, Governor of Hong Kong. The church building was completed in April 1936. Over the years, the church underwent rounds of building extensions, the first of which was in 1960. The present parish hall was built in 1982 and the latest church extension was completed in 1994.

Though the church started with English-speaking worshippers, its congregation grew to include Chinese and Tamil members by the 1990s as the population in its vicinity evolved. The church also continues to be committed to serving the community through initiatives such as a kindergarten, a play centre to provide

pre-school education for needy students, volunteering with students from single parent families, and community outreach for lower-income and vulnerable children.

#### **PAYA LEBAR METHODIST CHURCH AND PAYA LEBAR METHODIST CHINESE CHURCH**

Paya Lebar Methodist Church: 5 Boundary Road  
Paya Lebar Methodist Chinese Church: 299 Upper Paya Lebar Road

Paya Lebar Methodist Church was founded in 1932 and is the first Methodist Church to be established in Au Kang. The Methodist Mission's presence in the area, however, goes back to 1916, when it acquired a piece of land occupied by a former hotel. There, it set up a branch of the Anglo-Chinese School in 1917. Known as the Paya Lebar English School, the institution was the predecessor of present-day Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School.

In 1929, the hotel building was deemed unfit by the government for use as a school and had to be demolished. The school thus moved to a rented shophouse at 166-D Upper Serangoon and Paya Lebar Methodist Church was inaugurated in this shophouse. Fund-raising for a new church building kicked off soon after and by 1938, a four-room church was completed at 7 Boundary Road, on the parcel of land purchased in 1916.



*The Paya Lebar Methodist Church, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

The church was then known for its Peranakan service, which has its roots in its Malay Prayer Service launched in 1934. The church offered this service in an effort to reach out to the Peranakan families living in the vicinity. Consequently, the Peranakan congregation grew steadily and in 1961, the church started its Peranakan service and fellowship meetings.

Over the years, the church saw rounds of rebuilding and extensions. In 1963, the old parsonage was demolished to make way for a new parsonage and hall. In 1982, a new sanctuary was constructed. Rebuilding was again carried out in the 1990s and the current structure was completed in 1998.

Today, Paya Lebar Methodist Church is the only church in Hougang that provides service for Peranakan Christians conducted in Baba Malay. Its various ministries are also active in social welfare work, such as providing after school care. The church also actively works with the visually impaired community.

Paya Lebar Methodist Chinese Church's origins could be traced to 1937, when the



*The original church building, c. 1938*  
Courtesy of Paya Lebar Methodist Church

Methodist Mission borrowed a classroom from its school at Boundary Road to start a Chinese-language ministry. The new chapel was then named Sin Chew Hougang Chinese Methodist Church (Sin Chew refers to Singapore in Teochew and Hokkien).

When Paya Lebar Methodist Church completed its first building in 1938, the Chinese ministry began holding its services there as well. The board of the Chinese ministry was officially formed in 1939, marking the formal start of Paya Lebar Methodist Chinese Church.



As the number of Chinese-language and Hokkien worshippers grew, the need for a separate building grew more urgent. In 1968, the Chinese ministry finally built a two-storey church building at its present site along Upper Paya Lebar Road. Further extensions were carried out in later years, including the addition of a four-storey block in 1987.

### HARVESTER BAPTIST CHURCH

4 Eden Grove

(Note: This site is not open to walk-in visitors, but its exterior can be viewed from outside the church compound.)

Harvester Baptist Church's two-storey building was originally a hotel known as Country Hotel. Constructed in 1949 by a Chinese businessman, Country Hotel, later renamed New Country Hotel, came with facilities such as

tennis courts, billiards room, an air-conditioned reading and card room, and a bar. During the 1950s and 1960s, it was popular as a venue for wedding receptions and gala dinners. The hotel operated until the late 1970s.

According to Harvester Baptist Church, its founders Cliff and Eloise Hunnicutt, who came from United States, had their eye on the hotel as church premises since their arrival in Singapore in 1968. The church was then operating along Braddell Road. When the building became available in the late 1970s, the church began negotiations to purchase the property. The process took a decade and the church finally moved into the former Country Hotel in the late 1980s. Much of the hotel's original structure is retained, including the main lobby and rooms.



*The Harvester Baptist Church, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



*The main lobby of the hotel, which has been retained by the church, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

## SERVING COMMUNITIES

Hougang is home to a number of institutions established to serve communities, from providing medical care, education and social support to advancing community bonding. Most of these institutions had a long history, founded before the area was transformed into a modern housing town. Examples are the Ramakrishna Mission along Bartley Road, as well as charities established by the various Chinese clan associations.

### RAMAKRISHNA MISSION

179 Bartley Road

The Ramakrishna Mission is a branch of the Ramakrishna Order of India, a worldwide spiritual and welfare organisation based in West Bengal, India. This order was originally started by the saint Sri Ramakrishna. The mission in Singapore was established in 1897 by Swami Vivekananda, the main disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and focuses on fostering spiritual beliefs and carrying out social service programmes. By the early 20th century, there were already followers of Ramakrishna Mission in Singapore. In 1919, a benefactor donated a plot of land at Norris Road to establish a mission branch. However, it was only nine years later, when the building was completed, that the headquarters in India approved the request to open a branch in Singapore. The Ramakrishna Mission thus started at Norris Road on 7 August 1928.

In 1941, the mission purchased 5¾ acres of land at Bartley Road to build a residential school for boys. However, with the onset of war, the mission realised that there was a need to care for destitute and orphaned children. It decided instead to start a home for such boys at Bartley Road. Temporary wooden dormitories were put up and the home was officially launched in 1943. News of the facility spread and orphaned boys from other parts of Malaya such as Kedah and Negri Sembilan were also sent to the home.



*The temple at Ramakrishna Mission, 1954*  
Singapore Press Holdings Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

By the time the war ended, it was clear that new permanent facilities were needed. In 1947, there were 66 boys housed at Bartley Road. The following year, the number grew to 77. Fundraising was carried out for a new building. On 10 December 1948, Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald laid the foundation stone for the new building. On 18 June 1950, Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru officially opened the first floor of the new home. Over time, more amenities were added to the home, including a second storey constructed in 1959.

Besides the boys' home, Ramakrishna Mission also ran other services from its Bartley site. In 1948, it established an industrial school to teach tailoring and carpentry. Its temple, which held religious classes and lectures by religious teachers, was completed in 1952 with donated funds from well-known Tamil merchant P. Govindasamy Pillai (1887-1980). The mission also built a temple on its grounds in 1954 for the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. The blue and cream building is modelled after the mission's main temple in West Bengal and integrates architectural features and motifs from different religions such as Buddhism and Islam. This mix of cultural features reflects the mission's belief that all religions lead to



Ramakrishna Mission compound, with the Boys' Home on the left, the temple in the centre and the Swami Centenary Memorial Cultural Building on the right, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Official opening of the Swami Centenary Memorial Cultural Building by Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam, 1969  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

the same goal of enlightenment. In 1969, the Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Building was officially launched by Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam. The building housed an auditorium, a library, a reading room and living quarters for monks and senior students. From 1972 to 1979, the mission also ran the Kailaimagal Tamil School located in Yio Chu Kang.

Over the years, the mission has steadily expanded its social welfare and community work. Today, the boys' home continues to take in boys from vulnerable backgrounds. The mission also runs counselling services, yoga classes, a clinic, a kindergarten and a small library open to the public.

### THE SHANTANGS OF AU KANG

Au Kang is home to three *shantangs*, Phoh Kiu Siang T'ng (普救善堂), Nam Ann Siang Theon (南安善堂), Poh Teck Siang Tng (报德善堂). *Shantangs* are traditional charity organisations closely linked to the Teochews. Such organisations bring together philanthropy, religion and rituals for the afterlife. In the pre-war years, Teochew *shantangs* provided medical services, free coffins and funeral assistance to their compatriots, many of whom were without kin in Singapore. The *shantangs* were conducted after-death rituals as a means to ease the deceased's path to the afterlife. Besides charitable works, *shantangs* are also often bearers of Teochew culture, with most of them having affiliated Teochew opera or music interest groups.

During the Japanese Occupation, the five existing *shantangs* in Singapore joined together to form a charity known as the Chinese Charitable Institutions Union. The union dispensed medical care and distributed food to the needy. It also took care of the dead by collecting corpses and providing free coffins and burials. Staff and volunteers of the union were commonly referred to as the "Blue Cross workers" as they would carry a membership card marked with a blue cross. Today the union, made up of the Teochew *shantangs* in Singapore,

continues to carry out charitable work under the name "Blue Cross Charitable Institution". While the *shantangs* started as Teochew institutions, their charitable work has always been extended to all the needy, regardless of race or religion. Over time, many of them have also opened their doors to non-Teochew members to assume leadership positions.

### PHOH KIU SIANG T'NG (普救善堂)

15 Simon Lane

Established in 1929 at Upper Circular Road, which was known as a Teochew enclave, Phoh Kiu Siang T'ng started with providing funeral services for its members and dispensing medicines to the poor. The *shantang* was founded and pioneered by established Teochews including Huang Shi Tong, who was also involved in leading other Teochew organisations such as Poit Ip Huay Kuan and Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association. During the Japanese Occupation, the *shantang* was also one of the founding members of the Chinese Charitable Institutions Union.

Besides its charitable mission, the *shantang* also played a role in nurturing Teochew culture. For example, at one point, its members formed a Teochew opera section who would perform regularly. During religious festivals

and major events, the *shantang* would also commission Teochew opera performances by established troupes.

In 1953, the *shantang* purchased a plot of land at Simon Lane to build bigger premises for its members and activities. According to the organisation, the decision to move from Upper Circular Road to Simon Lane was likely due to the fact that Au Kang then had a large concentration of Teochews. The new headquarters were officially opened on 6 December 1953 and the famed Teochew troupe Lao Sai Tao Yuan was invited to perform for two days as part of opening festivities.

Today, the *shantang* is established in Hougang for its free clinic. In its founding years, the



Phoh Kiu Siang T'ng, 1958  
Courtesy of Phoh Kiu Siang T'ng



Phoh Kiu Siang T'ng's compound, with the temple on the left and the clinic on the right, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



organisation had dispensed medicines on an ad-hoc basis depending on their resources. By 1967, Poh Kiu Siang T'ng had established a free medical clinic in its new quarters at Simon Lane. As the demand for the service grew, the organisation purchased an adjacent plot of land in 1990 to extend its premises and the medical facilities. This extension project was completed in 2012, with a new building situated on the right of the temple, providing larger accommodation for the temple's clinic and offices.

### NAM ANN SIANG THEON (南安善堂)

36E Paya Lebar Crescent

A founding member of Chinese Charitable Institutions Union, Nam Ann Siang Theon was founded in 1944 during the Japanese



*Nam Ann Siang Theon at its original premises at Ah Hood Road, undated*  
Courtesy of Nam Ann Siang Theon



*Nam Ann Siang Theon at its current site in Paya Lebar, 2020*  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Occupation with the mission to provide relief and aid. It was first located at Ah Hood Road on a plot of land donated by a Chinese businessman. The *shantang* was named "Nam Ann", meaning "Peace in the South" in Teochew, to express the hopes of its members to live once again in peace during the turbulent times.

Like the other *shantangs*, Nam Ann Siang Theon played an important role in providing social welfare and support to the poor and needy. Other than helping to alleviate poverty, dispensing medicines and looking after funeral arrangements, the *shantang* also established an education department in the post-war years. This led to the founding of Nam Ann School in 1946 at Ah Hood Road, which closed in 1975 because of falling enrolment.

In 1975, the organisation's premises were acquired for urban redevelopment. Nam Ann Siang Theon thus purchased its current site in Paya Lebar. Its new headquarters were officially opened in 1980.

### POH TECK SIANG TNG (报德善堂)

109 Hougang Avenue 5

Poh Teck Siang Tng was founded in 1959 by 17 Teochews living in two localities of Toa Payoh,



*Poh Teck Siang Tng at Braddell Road. The facade had two crosses to signify the shantang's membership with the Blue Cross Charitable Institution, 1960s*  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Hup Choon Hng and Ann Siang Suah (not to be confused with Ann Siang Hill in Tanjong Pagar). Shortly after its founding, the *shantang* began its charitable work, including donations to the poor and providing free coffins and burials. It also started a clinic for consultations and dispensing of Western medicines.

The *shantang* was officially registered in 1961. It then moved from Toa Payoh to 108 Braddell Road. An attap house was first built to house the organisation, which also erected a shrine to deity Song Dafeng. This was rebuilt as a zinc and cement structure when the *shantang's* site was affected by road construction works in 1962. The new building, completed in 1965, had a worship hall in the front dedicated to Song Dafeng, and a merit hall at the back housing ancestral tablets of the *shantang's* members.

In the early 1970s, the *shantang* was informed that the land it occupied was zoned for educational use. It thus joined three other temples to build a Tian De Temple, completed in 1985 off Lorong Low Koon. Since then, besides its charitable work through the Blue Cross, Poh Teck Siang Tng also continues its social welfare work among communities in Hougang, such as food distribution, regular donations to the needy and disbursing bursaries to students.

### NANYANG NEO CLAN ASSOCIATION (南洋梁氏公会)

87 Kovan Road

Nanyang Neo Clan Association has its origins in 1913, when Chinese immigrants with the



*The former clan building along Upper Serangoon Road, undated*  
Courtesy of Nanyang Neo Clan Association

surname Neo purchased a plot of land at Lorong Lew Lian to build an ancestral hall. Completed in 1928, the hall provided the space for the Neos to gather and worship their ancestors during important days such as Qing Ming.

In 1932, the Neos registered the Neo Clan Association with the objectives of bringing together their kinsmen, fostering bonds and providing social assistance for their members. A clan building for the members, however, was only to be erected two decades later, when the Neos constructed two three-storey blocks along Upper Serangoon Road in 1954. The name was then officially changed to Nanyang Neo Clan Association. With the new headquarters, the clan's membership grew steadily.

Due to urban redevelopment, the plot of land at Lorong Lew Lian was acquired in 1974. The clan thus bought 87 Kovan Road to relocate the hall. The new clan building and ancestral hall were thus completed in 1984. Today, besides serving its members, the clan also regularly organises charitable activities such as supporting and befriending the elderly.

### THE SERANGOON KHIUNG JAI CO-VILLAGERS ASSOCIATION AND TWEE BOEY TENG NIANG TEMPLE (新加坡后港海南同乡会; 后港水尾圣娘庙)

Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association:  
102 Lorong Ah Soo  
Twee Boey Teng Niang Temple: 109A Hougang Avenue 5

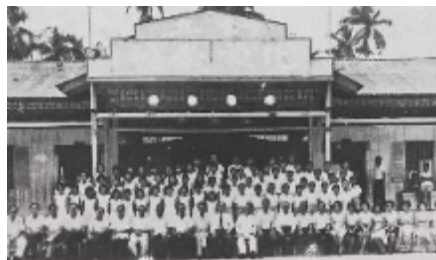
The Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association represented and served the Hainanese enclave living in Lorong Ah Soo. Called Hai Lam Hng ("Hainan Garden" in Teochew and Hokkien), it was said that there were a few hundred Hainanese families residing in the area then. To educate their children, the villagers of Hai Lam Hng banded together and raised funds to set up Wah Mong School in 1937, which conducted its classes in Hainanese.

In 1958, the villagers registered a clan association, renting its first premises at 141-2 Lorong Ah Soo. The association served to foster closer ties among the Hainanese members, provide social support and mutual aid. Within a short time, its membership had grown to 400. In 1961, the association purchased a property at 148 Lorong Ah Soo to house its new, bigger headquarters. The Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association was then officially opened in 1962.

The association also played a role in nurturing Hainanese culture. In 1964, it set up Guang Yi

troupe helmed by well-known Hainanese opera stars such as Zhou Chao Zhen, Feng Jin Chuan and Feng Zhen Xue. Among those who were joined the troupe and later became established performers were Fu Qing Yun, Long He Run, Huang Wang Wen and Zhen Jia Ling. The troupe featured regularly at the association's events and was often invited by other associations and temples to perform as well.

In the 1970s, Lorong Ah Soo had to undergo urban redevelopment. The association thus raised funds and bought its current site at 102 Lorong Ah Soo in 1979. Its new headquarters was completed in 1984. Since then, the association has continued to be active in fostering ties among the Hainanese in Singapore. In 1997, it also set up a network with seven other Hainanese associations in Singapore to coordinate their programmes.



The association's headquarters at 141-2 Lorong Ah Soo, undated  
Courtesy of Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association



The Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association at the present site, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



The temple's opera stage, undated  
Courtesy of Twee Boey Teng Niang Temple

Twee Boey Teng Niang Temple was founded in Lorong Ah Soo during the pre-war years and is closely linked to the history and development of the Hainanese enclave at Lorong Ah Soo and The Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association. Dedicated to Shui Wei Sheng Niang, a deity known to be a protector of seafarers and closely linked to Hainanese culture, the temple was known to have housed Wah Mong School in its early years. Later, when the temple erected a permanent opera stage, the stage served as classrooms for the students as well.

According to the temple, quite a few of the Hainanese residing in Lorong Ah Soo then were working as seafarers. The temple and worship of its main deity thus played a particularly relevant role in their lives. Before The Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association was established, the temple was the de-facto social hub for the Hainanese villagers.

During its three main religious festivals, the last two days of Chinese New Year, Zhong Yuan festival (also known as Hungry Ghosts' Festival) and the birthday of Shui Wei Sheng Mu in the 10th lunar month, thousands of villagers would gather for feasts and celebrations. On top of its religious function, the temple also provided mutual aid such as dispensing help to the needy and sick. The temple also enjoyed a close relationship with The Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association, and the association often used the temple's premises for its activities during the early years.

In 1981, the temple had to relocate due to urban redevelopment. It combined with two other temples and Poh Teck Siang Tng to build a new temple complex, completed in 1985, at the present site.

### SAI HO PIAT SU (西河别墅)

777 Upper Serangoon Road

Sai Ho Piat Su was formed to bring together Chinese with the surname Lin, also spelled "Lim" in Hokkien and Teochew. According to Lim Cheng Song (b. 1915), who was one of the founders of Sai Ho Piat Su and founder of Puay Kee Chinese School, the Lims living in Au Kang came together in 1937 to found the association as there was no such organisation in the area then. The members were from various Chinese dialect groups, with Hokkiens and Teochews forming the majority.

The association was first housed in premises at the 6th milestone rented from businessman Lim Ah Pin, who was also one of the founding members. A few years after its founding, war broke out, and the association dissolved. After the war, the members revived the organisation in 1946, this time renting premises at the 5th milestone near Hougang Tou Mu Kung. The current headquarters was erected in 1982.

The association was named Sai Ho Piat Su, meaning "West River Villa" in Hokkien. "Sai Ho", or "West River", is the choronym for those of the surname Lim. A choronym, which is the name of the region associated with a specific



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew with the members of Sai Ho Piat Su during his visit to Upper Serangoon, 1963  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



family name, is also referred to as *denghao* in Mandarin, literally meaning the name on lanterns. This is because the choronym is painted on paper lanterns, usually hung outside a home or ancestral hall, as a means of announcing the familial origins of the residents.

In the case of the Lims, “Sai Ho” was an ancient administrative district in China closely associated with the family name.

### ALL SAINTS MEMORIAL CHAPEL

5 Poh Huat Road

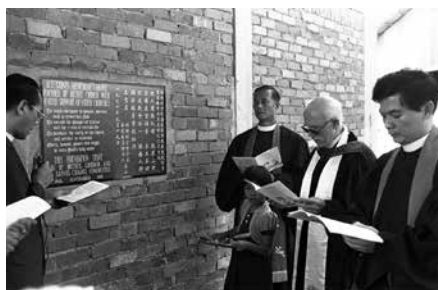
Built in 1978, All Saints Memorial Chapel was established by Bethel Presbyterian Church with the support of Christian denominations including the Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist churches and other independent churches.

Though the chapel was only constructed in 1978, the history of the site goes back to 1885, when the colonial government allocated the land to the Senior Missionary of the Presbyterian Church of England for 999 years. It was to be used for building a chapel and as a burial site. However, it appears that the land was left largely undeveloped by the church.

In 1969, the government issued a notice to acquire the land for urban redevelopment. Bethel Presbyterian Church, who inherited the

land, appealed to retain the land for the building of a memorial chapel and columbarium. This was subsequently approved by the government.

In the early years, All Saints Memorial Chapel functioned primarily as a memorial chapel and columbarium before branching into social welfare services. In 1986, the chapel started a 30-bed nursing home in its ancillary hall. Called All Saints Home, it operated till 2001 when it moved to a new building in Tampines. The ancillary hall was then rebuilt as a three-storey building to become a new nursing home cum memorial hall. Completed in 2004, the new home was named All Saints Home (Hougang). The memorial plaque was unveiled by then President S R Nathan in 2005.



Laying of the foundation stone for All Saints Memorial Chapel, 1976  
Singapore Press Holdings Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



All Saints Memorial Chapel in the foreground with All Saints Home in the background, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

## HERITAGE BUSINESSES: FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

A place where families have lived generation after generation, Hougang is also where many long-time businesses have started and flourished, serving generations of residents. Having been operating and living in Hougang since the kampong days, the owners of these businesses carry fond memories of the old Au Kang as well. Today, as you walk around the precinct, you can still find some of these traditional businesses operating, having been passed down to the next generation. These businesses, along with many others not mentioned here, are part of Hougang's cultural fabric. They continue to be very much a part of life in the housing town today, serving long-time and new customers alike.

### AH SEAH TEOCHEW PORRIDGE

31 Teck Chye Terrace

Ah Seah Teochew Porridge has been serving Teochew porridge, a well-loved staple in the Teochew enclave of Hougang, since the 1960s. Founder Lee Huat picked up his culinary skills at the age of 15 when he started working at a Teochew porridge shop at the junction of Upper Paya Lebar and Upper Serangoon Roads. In 1964, he set up his first stall in the former Lim Tua Tow market. Over the years, the business relocated several times before settling in its current premise. Lee Huat, who named the shop after his pet name, Ah Seah, shared: “My dishes are simple; meat balls, mixed vegetables, braised duck, braised pork—all traditional Teochew dishes. Many of my



Ah Seah Teochew Porridge occupying 2 shop units at Teck Chye Terrace, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

customers have been coming for years, even after moving away from Hougang. Some have grown up eating my food. As a Teochew selling Teochew porridge in Hougang, known to be a Teochew place, I feel very proud. Over the years, I've been involved with so many happenings here, from the annual Hungry Ghosts' month celebrations to relocation of hawkers. Today, my daughter Carol has taken over the business."

### NEO KIAN GUAN CONFECTIONERY & CAKES

7 Hougang Avenue 3

Now managed by the third generation, Neo Kian Guan Confectionery & Cakes is famed for its traditional Hokkien and Teochew pastries. Chook Kam Yook recalled: "My father-in-law was an apprentice in a traditional confectionery in Nan An, China. Shortly after coming over to Singapore, he started his own business at Jalan Kayu in 1932. There he sold traditional Hokkien snacks such as laohua (made of puffed glutinous rice and sugar)."

In 1949, the shop relocated to 702 Upper Serangoon Road, near Lim Tua Tow Road. There, the family lived on the second floor while the shop occupied the ground floor.

Besides selling snacks, the shop also sold wedding confectionery and special pastries used in religious festivals. John Neo, Chook Kam Yook's son, shared: "My grandfather also provided rental of traditional wedding gowns. Customers who bought wedding confectionery



Laohua confectionery are traditionally used during Hokkien weddings and ceremonies, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Neo Kian Guan Confectionery & Cakes, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

could get their gowns here as well. We also had an old-styled catering business, whereby we would cook on site for wedding feasts. It was a one-stop wedding shop then."

During religious and cultural festivals, the confectionery would be busy with orders. For instance, during Chinese New Year, there would be orders for *gek hong* (red/white candy), *huat kueh* (steamed cakes) and *ni ko* (a cake made from glutinous rice flour). For the seventh month celebrations, the confectionery would prepare *shoutao* (longevity buns), *shou mian* (longevity noodles) and *huat kueh* (steamed cakes). When the Nine Emperor Gods festival comes around, they would sell black and white sesame balls. John Neo recalled: "During religious festivals, we would have huge orders for longevity buns which were all hand-made. It took us three days two nights to fulfil the orders. No sleep! 15 bags of 25kg of flour. My mother would steam the buns as we made them."

Due to urban redevelopment, the shop relocated first to Hougang Central, and then to its current premises in 2008. The business has also adapted to changing times. John Neo shared: "Nowadays we use less lard than in the past. Customers now also want more colourful cakes. In the past, customers would order laohua (a snack made from sticky rice, sugar and peanut oil) by the kilogram for weddings to give to friends and family. Now the trend is to give cakes instead. Still, we have regular customers coming back. Some are even third-generation customers."

### CHEONG ANN WATCH MAKER

4 Lim Tua Tow Road

Opened in 1947 along Upper Serangoon Road, Cheong Ann Watch Maker specialises in clocks and gramophones and is now run by the second and third generations of a Hokkien family. Lim Gee Lam, who founded the shop, had learnt his skills as a young apprentice in a watch repair shop.

In the early years, Cheong Ann mainly provided watch and clock repair and servicing.

In the 1980s, as Cheong Ann saw more expatriate customers sourcing collectibles, the business evolved to selling antiques and collectibles. Initially, the family would scour Singapore for antique pieces. Over time, they built a network in Malaysia to collect vintage timepieces. Today, Lim's grandson, Sean Lim, sources for merchandise through social media and his travels.

Second-generation owner, David Lim, shared: "I grew up at 533 Upper Serangoon Road, where our shop was then. There were many plantations then, and childhood days were very happy. Near us, there was a tailor, shoe shop, provision store, a shop that made mattresses and pillows, and a Chinese medical shop. Growing up, I spent my time playing with the mechanical stuff in the shop. I would take all the parts out and did not know how to put them back! That was how I got interested in the business—how to put everything back and get it working again."



David Lim in his shop at Lim Tua Tow Road, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Second-generation owner David Lim, with his father, at the shop, c. 1960s  
Courtesy of David Lim



### HO TIT COFFEE POWDER FACTORY

402 Upper Paya Lebar Road

Ho Tit Coffee Powder Factory is one of the oldest surviving coffee companies in Singapore and has been operating in the same premises since the early 1950s. According to the current owner Dominic Chua, his father Chua Tok Hoon ventured into the coffee business sometime in the 1940s. The senior Chua was working for prominent Chinese businessman Neo Ao Tiew during the Japanese Occupation in warehousing and got to know people in the coffee industry. After the war, he worked for a coffee factory and built his knowledge of the trade.

In the early 1950s, Chua set up his shop along Upper Paya Lebar Road dealing in coffee beans and powder. Next to his shop was a coffee factory which did the roasting for the beans. The factory ran into financial troubles some years later and Chua took over the

roasting machines. Dominic Chua recalled: *"My mother used to live at Lorong Ah Soo. That was probably why my father started shop here. Most of the customers then were households. My parents would prepare the coffee powder in tins and peddle it in Lorong Ah Soo and Tampines area. When I joined the family business in 1985, we already had routes established for selling and sending the powder. Every day would have its own route. We had a pair of Taiwanese sisters who told us that their grandmother used to dip their pacifiers in coffee when they were babies. That was how they started drinking coffee."*

The factory is now run by Dominic Chua and his wife Cynthia Aw. From a humble shop selling beans and powder, Ho Tit has grown to produce traditional and gourmet coffee blends as well. Today, the factory still uses some of its original machines from its early days, such as its grinding machine and weighing scales that measure in catties (one catty is equivalent to 600g).



Ho Tit Coffee Powder Factory, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

### JUST ANTHONY

379 Upper Paya Lebar Road

Just Anthony was set up by its founder Anthony Lee in the 1970s and is a well-known Chinese antique furniture and accessories store in Hougang. Notably, the business itself is situated in an eye-catching bungalow on stilts that was built since the 1950s along Upper Paya Lebar Road.

Lee started his business due to his interest in Peranakan Chinese furniture. Over time, it became harder to source Peranakan Chinese furniture in Singapore. Lee thus started

bringing in Chinese antique pieces from China and expanded the business to include classic and modern Chinese furniture reproductions. Just Anthony's customers used to be largely made up of expatriates, but now they have more local customers.

Today, the business continues to be run by his daughter Danielle Lee, who shared: *"I have an interest in vintage items and design, so it was exciting for me when we have sourcing trips. Some of our customers who were expatriates were from 10, 20 years ago, and when they come to Singapore for a holiday, they would visit us. That was very nice."*



Just Anthony at its present site, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Just Anthony's collection of Chinese antiques, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

## SERANGOON LIAN HIN TAILOR

955 Upper Serangoon Road

Tailor Cha Ah Kau still runs this long-time business in the same shop where he started out in 1964. Cha had immigrated to Singapore from Malaysia at the age of 16 in 1957 looking for a better life. His neighbour, who had arrived in Singapore earlier, had by then set up a tailoring shop along Upper Serangoon Road. Cha thus joined him as an apprentice. Cha recalled:

“After some years, my boss acquired a new shop in Changi, but there were riots in Geylang then. I was afraid to join him there, so I decided to open my own business instead. Someone told me then that there was a shop for rent near Simon Road market at \$80 a month. The “tea money”, however, was \$2000 (undocumented transaction fee for leasing a space then). I managed to borrow \$5000 and used the remaining \$3000 to buy sewing machines, textiles and materials. My boss’ shop was called Lian Hin Tailor and he was fine with me using the same name, with a ‘Hougang’ in front.”

In 1968, Cha began renting the whole shop instead of just the front. By then the tea money demanded had increased to \$5000. Cha remembered: “Back then we had over 30 workers. We could make 100 pairs of pants a day. There were about 12 tailoring shops then in this

area. There were also many secret societies here then. When I started the business, they came to demand protection fees every day. Not just one, a few different triads. In the end, I paid one triad \$108 a year for exclusive protection so that the other gangs did not come to harass me!”

By the 1980s, business had slowed down as denim jeans became the trend. Cha eventually decided to buy over the shop space. He mused: “This shop was single-storeyed when I bought it. I rebuilt it to become three storeys. Today, I still have many customers from Tampines and Punggol. Most of them are in their 40s, 50s, or 60s. I’m now the oldest business owner in this area.”



Owner Cha Ah Kau cutting a piece of cloth to make a pair of trousers, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Serangoon Lian Hin Tailor, 2020  
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

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Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Fa Hua Monastery

Fatimah binte Abdul Rahman

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Harvester Baptist Church

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# SUGGESTED SHORT TRAIL ROUTES

## LANDMARKS OF HOUGANG

1 hour with public transport

Dive into the history of Hougang through the landmarks that have characterised the landscape along Upper Serangoon Road for more than 70 years. This trail takes you down one of Singapore's oldest roads and introduces sites that represent the diverse communities who lived and worked in Hougang.

Begin your journey at the [Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary](#), the oldest landmark in Hougang and the emblem of the Teochew Catholic community in this area. This Roman Catholic church has its roots in France, when in 1852 a French missionary organisation Les Mission Étrangères de Paris (MEP) sent its first priest here to serve a growing Teochew Catholic community. Schools such as Holy Innocents' English Boys' School (renamed Montfort School) and Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) Our Lady of the Nativity were founded on the church's grounds in 1916 and 1957 respectively. Today, the church's Teochew heritage can still be seen in its weekly masses held in the Teochew dialect. The church was gazetted as a National Monument in 2005.

Next, cross the overhead bridge and take a bus to Kovan MRT. As you cross the road, you will see a row of single-storey terraced units on your right and bronze statues of a poultry seller and his customer on your left. These bronze statues commemorate [the former Simon Road market](#) that was located in this area. Simon Road market was constructed in 1948 and was an important commercial node for the population living in Singapore's north-eastern region until its closing in 1999. Complementing



the market is the row of single-storey terraced units that you see today. This row is the only remaining building of the former market area. In the market's heyday, these units housed businesses such as provision shops, eateries and motoring workshops.

Continue to walk up Upper Serangoon Road to [St. Paul's Church](#). Completed in 1936, this Anglican church first served British servicemen, their families and the Eurasian community living in the Teochew-dominated area. The construction of the church was funded by the Oehlers, a Eurasian family that lived in Hougang. By the post-war period, the church's congregation grew to include Chinese and Tamil members.

Proceed along Upper Serangoon Road towards [Masjid Haji Yusoff](#), the oldest mosque in Hougang that was founded in 1921. This institution was built on land donated by Gujarati merchant and philanthropist Ahmad Mohamed Salleh Angullia, who was also



a Justice of the Peace, a member of the Municipal Commission and a prominent figure within the Muslim community. The mosque catered to Muslims living in the surrounding Malay kampongs of Hougang and Upper Paya Lebar, such as former Kampong Haji Sirat near Jansen Road.

A short distance away from the mosque stands [Hougang Tou Mu Kung](#), the oldest temple in Singapore that is dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods. It was first founded as a shrine at Lim Loh Village (at present-day Wolskel Road) before relocating to its current site in 1921. The temple is noted for the 11-day long Nine Emperor Gods festival during the ninth month of the lunar calendar. This festival is marked by traditional rituals and grand processions to Sungei Serangoon to invite the deities into the temple. The spectacular processions draw devotees from across Singapore, giving the temple its well-established status as a landmark of Hougang. The temple was gazetted as a National Monument in 2005.



Next, head further up until you reach the junction of Upper Serangoon Road and Boundary Road. Here, you will come across

[Teck Chye Terrace](#), which was built in 1928 by Chinese businessman Lim Teck Chye. A landmark of the former Lim Tua Tow market area, Teck Chye Terrace and the market have long been known as a food haven for the people living in the vicinity. Until the 1990s, itinerant hawkers peddling fares from fried carrot cake to beef noodles also used to throng the market grounds. Today, Teck Chye Terrace is still reputed for its food offerings. You may wish to have a stop by [Ah Seah's Teochew Porridge](#), one of the shops housed in the terrace. The family-run business has been serving the traditional Teochew fare to residents of Hougang since the 1960s and the porridge is still a well-loved favourite amongst many foodies today.

Finish your exploration of Upper Serangoon Road at [Paya Lebar Methodist Church](#), sited just across the junction of Upper Serangoon Road and Boundary Road. Established in 1932, this church is the first and only church in Hougang to offer service for Peranakan Christians conducted in Baba Malay. This service originated from the Malay Prayer Service started in 1934 to reach out to the Peranakan community living in the area. The present-day Covenant Centre behind the main church building is also the former site of the Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School before it shifted to Lorong Ah Soo.

## ARCHITECTURAL GEMS

1 hour 45 min with public transport

Hougang is a showcase of architectural styles that reflect the time and cultural landscape of the area before the modern Housing & Development Board (HDB) town was built in the early 1980s. This trail brings you to explore the built heritage of Hougang, such as its pre-war shophouses, religious institutions and National Monuments.

Start your journey at [Ramakrishna Mission](#), just a short walk from Bartley MRT station. The conserved buildings within the mission's compound were built in the 1950s, shortly



after Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald laid the foundation stone for the boys' home in 1948. Look out for the beautiful temple that was erected on the grounds in 1954. This blue and cream building is modelled after the mission's main temple in West Bengal, India, and integrates architectural features from different religions such as Buddhism and Islam. This mix of cultural features reflects the mission's belief that all religions lead to the same goal of enlightenment.

Next, walk through How Sun estate and along Upper Paya Lebar Road to reach **Tian Kong & Kancanarama Buddhist Temple**, a joint complex housing a Thai Buddhist temple and a Taoist temple. This institution is one of the five Thai temples in Singapore that are officially recognised by the King of Thailand. The building, completed in 1996, incorporates classic features of traditional Thai architecture, complete with multiple roof tiers and decorative pointed structures at the gable ends of the roofs. On the roof of the gate and building, you can also see intricate gold engravings which were hand-carved by the resident head monk for over a decade.

Stroll along Upper Paya Lebar Road until you reach the junction at Upper Serangoon Road and cross over to **Teck Chye Terrace**. Built in 1928, these pre-war shophouses were designed to subtly reflect the Art Deco style that was popular at the time. Features of this style can be seen through the geometric decorative elements above the second-floor windows and the simple clean lines that frame the façade of the building. Since its completion, this building's



lower level has housed many shops and eateries that served the residents of the vicinity.

Continue on your trail by walking along Upper Serangoon Road to reach **Hougang Tou Mu Kung**. This temple was originally built in 1902 in the traditional Hokkien architectural style, with pronounced curvatures in its roof ridges. To reflect the Teochew community in Hougang, renovations in later years integrated Teochew architectural features such as gentler slopes for the roof. Take a closer look at the walls around the windows on the main temple building to spot the geometric decorative carvings that were incorporated since the temple was first constructed. During past renovations, these carvings were covered by plaster and were only rediscovered and restored during the temple's most recent renovation in 2016.

Hop on a bus to Hougang's second National Monument, the **Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary**. Along the way, be sure to look out for Block 25 on your right, an HDB block with a mural of a bright and sunny sky, welcoming visitors to Hougang Town. Upon arriving at the church, take a close look at the building's Neo-Gothic features, such as pointed arches and ribbed vaults. Over a century old, the church was built in 1901 and was later extended in 1933 to accommodate a new sanctuary and sacristy. Look out for the marble statue of the Immaculate Conception of Mary located in front of the church. Donated by Sultan Ibrahim of Johor in 1946, it was said that the statue was gifted as a sign of the strong friendship between the sultan and the parish priest at that time.

Continue down Hougang Avenue 7 and head to **Block 316**, more popularly known as the **Rainbow Block of Hougang**. This eye-catching building is one of the earliest HDB blocks that were built in Hougang during the 1980s. These HDB blocks were planned and designed with curved corners to give the buildings a more distinctive character. Like Block 25, Block 316 stands out visually with a colourful and bright rainbow mural splashed across its façade since its construction was completed in the 1980s. This rainbow mural has since been redesigned a few times, but it continues to be a modern icon of Hougang Town today.

**Optional:** If you would like to explore more, take a stroll along Hougang Avenue 3 to **Chee Tong Temple**, an impressive structure completed in 1987. During its construction, appointed architects underwent regular consultations with the temple's deities through mediums to seek divine inputs on the design of the building. As requested, architects deliberately excluded sharp corners in the building, which are considered to be inauspicious. Atop the temple, the apex of the roof is designed in a series of eight-sided prisms, evoking the lotus, which is the symbol of purity in Chinese culture.



## INSTITUTIONS OF SERVICE

1 hour 30 min with public transport

Hougang is perhaps best known as a Teochew enclave. Lesser known is the fact that it is also quite a diverse area, whether in terms of cultural or religious communities. From the Hainanese to the Eurasians, this thematic trail brings you on a tour of the legacies of Hougang's diverse communities.



Begin the trail at **Phoh Kiu Siang T'ng**, which is a short walk from Kovan MRT. This organisation is one of the three *shantangs* or charitable halls in Hougang, with these traditional charity organisations being strongly affiliated with the Teochew community. Phoh Kiu Siang T'ng was founded in 1929 at Upper Circular Road and relocated here in 1953. Since 1967, this Teochew organisation has opened a free medical clinic to serve the people of Hougang. Today, besides the clinic, the organisation also regularly supports charitable initiatives such as donations to the elderly.

Walk through Kovan City to reach **Tua Jia Kar** ("foot of the big well" in Teochew), a commemorative replica of a large well that once supplied clean water to the kampong residents of the area. The communal well was originally sited at the former Upper Serangoon Somapah Village (now Kovan City). Although piped water was later installed in the village, it was said that many villagers still preferred to draw water from Tua Jia Kar. This well was so significant to the kampong residents that





a commemorative plaque and replica was installed here at Hougang Street 21 in 2005.

Next, walk to Hougang Avenue 3 to visit **Neo Kian Guan Confectionary & Cakes**, a family business that has served and fed Hougang's residents for more than 70 years. Famed for its traditional Hokkien and Teochew pastries, the business was originally founded in the 1930s in Jalan Kayu. In 1949, the Hokkien founders moved to Lim Tua Tow Road where they became popular among Hougang's residents and temples. The shop moved to its current premises in 2008 and is now run by the family's third generation. They continue to make traditional confectionery for long-time customers in Hougang, who would return to make orders of these sweet treats during festivals such as the Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival and even weddings.

Take a stroll down Hougang Avenue 3 to **Zi Yun Kai Ji Gong**. This temple complex houses three smaller temples that relocated here since the 1990s: Kai Hock Tong Temple, Keat Sun Beo and Chao Ying Kong Temple. Notably, Kai Hock Tong Temple was founded by Lim Loh, father of war hero Lim Bo Seng. During the late 1800s, Lim Loh brought incense from his clan's temple in Fujian, China, to his brickworks factory at Wolskel Road to serve as a family shrine. In 1919, a permanent temple was built in the shrine's place and operated until the 1990s before relocating to its present site.

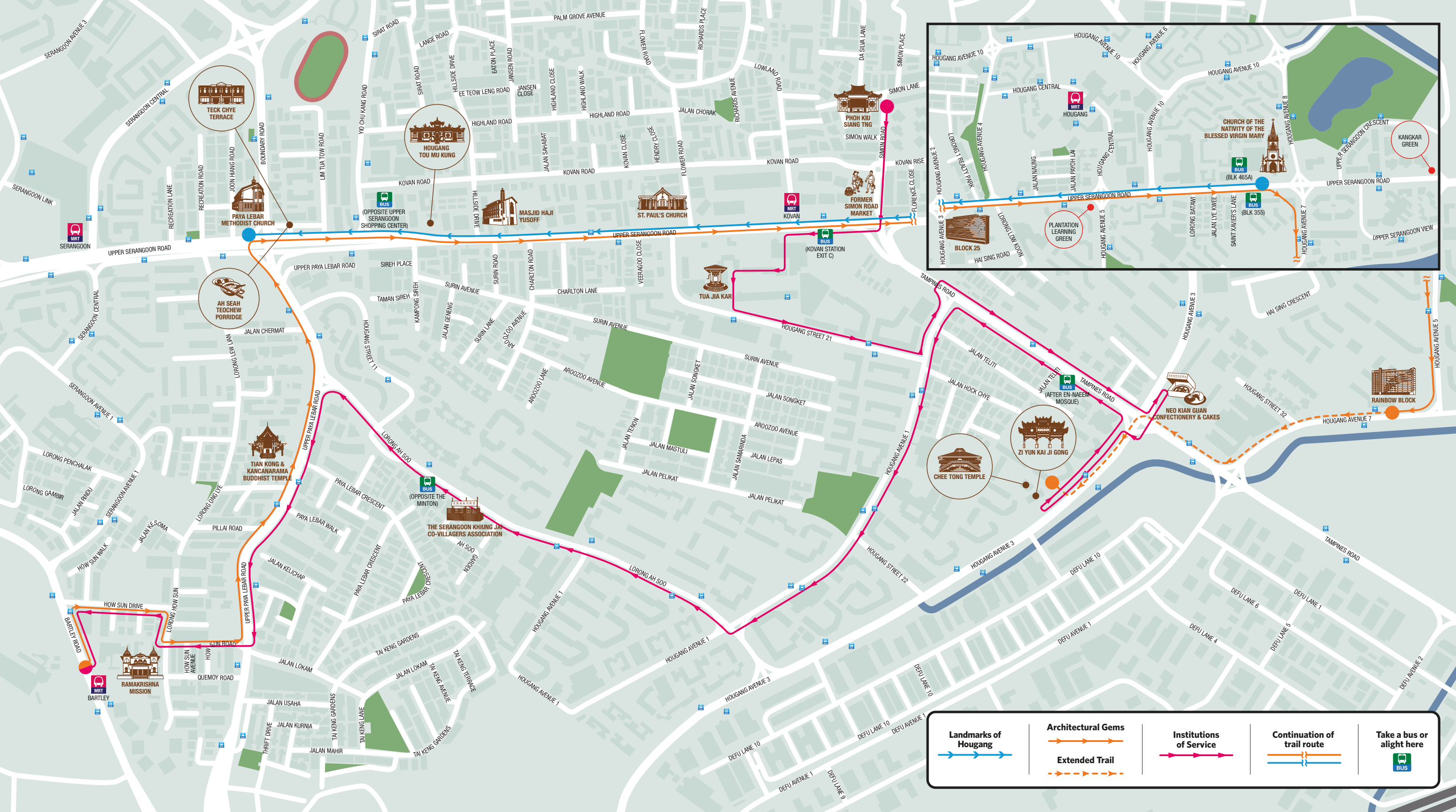


Today, while many of the descendants of the Lim clan still worship at the temple, the reach of worshippers has since expanded beyond the surname clan.

Next, return to Tampines Road. Take a bus into Lorong Ah Soo and alight at **The Serangoon Khiung Jai Co-Villagers Association**. This association was established in 1958 by the Hainanese community living along Lorong Ah Soo, an area that residents referred to as Hai Lam Hng ("Hainan Garden" in Teochew and Hokkien). The association facilitated social support and mutual aid to the Hainanese families living in Lorong Ah Soo at the time and was also known for nurturing Hainanese opera performers during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, the association continues to offer programmes and services to the community, including providing education bursaries for children living in the Hougang area.



Finally, take a bus or walk down Upper Paya Lebar Road and cut through How Sun Estate to end the trail at **Ramakrishna Mission**, a branch of the Ramakrishna Order of India, a worldwide spiritual and welfare organisation based in India. In 1943, the mission founded a boys' home for the destitute and orphaned at its Bartley Road site. In 1950, then Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru visited the mission and officially opened a new building in the compound for the boys' home. Since then, the mission expanded its social work to include a former Tamil language school, a medical clinic, counselling services, a kindergarten and a small library open to the public.



<b>Landmarks of Hougang</b> →→→→→	<b>Architectural Gems</b> →→→→→ <b>Extended Trail</b> →→→→→	<b>Institutions of Service</b> →→→→→	<b>Continuation of trail route</b> →→→→→	<b>Take a bus or alight here</b> BUS
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*An aerial image of the 7th milestone area at the foot of Sungei Serangoon, with the steeple of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary seen in the distance, 1958*

*Aerial photographs by the British Royal Air Force between 1940 to 1970s, from a collection held by the National Archives of Singapore. Crown copyright*

The Hougang 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.

Supported by



*Upper Serangoon Road near the junction with Upper Paya Lebar Road, 1967  
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore*