

GREAT PERANAKANS

FIFTY REMARKABLE LIVES



ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM



Great Peranakans: Fifty Remarkable Lives

The story of Singapore is the story of encounters: between traders, travellers, and immigrants; between empires and communities; and between cultures. For centuries, Peranakans – or Straits Chinese – played pivotal roles in the life of Singapore and the region.

Peranakans were pioneers in crossing boundaries and forging multiple allegiances. They expressed loyalty to both Britain and China, as well as to the strong community they established in Singapore.

Among the Chinese, Peranakans were pioneers in business and government. They were also leaders in social areas – education, health, religion, and culture. Peranakans played many roles simultaneously. They spoke English well (and later were English-educated) and could act as middlemen in colonial society. And beyond Singapore, their networks extended throughout Southeast Asia and further.

These are the stories of fifty remarkable Peranakans.

A culture between

From the start of their rule in Singapore, the British thought that they would need Chinese leaders to control traders and labourers. Because of their wealth, and the role as leaders of important temples and associations, Peranakans usually led Singapore's Chinese communities in the 19th century. While they protected their business interests, Peranakans also fought for the rights of all Chinese.

The Malay word *Peranakan* usually refers to the creolized Chinese who lived in island Southeast Asia. Peranakans generally trace their roots to early Chinese immigrants who married indigenous women from the Malay Archipelago. *Baba* and *nyonya* are terms for Peranakan men and women respectively. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *Straits Chinese* was often used for Peranakans and Chinese who had lived in the region for many generations. The term connected the community to the Straits Settlements colony encompassing Penang, Malacca, and Singapore.

In the 20th century, many Peranakans lost fluency in Chinese, but they supported Chinese schools and newspapers. Some Peranakans converted to Christianity, while others like Lim Boon Keng rediscovered Confucianism. This multiplicity was often dismissed as conflicted or contradictory, but such combinations are now familiar in the modern world. Peranakans have played significant roles across the political spectrum in building today's Singapore.

1819 to 1889: Commerce and community

Peranakan Chinese arrived in Singapore as soon as the British established the port in 1819. More waves of immigration soon followed. The wealthiest and most powerful Chinese merchants were Hokkien-speaking Peranakans from Malacca. From the beginning, philanthropy established certain families as community leaders, a fact recognized by the British.

Tensions between the Hokkien and Teochew communities led to riots in 1854, and the British government depended on Peranakan leaders to settle these disputes. These activities led the British to appoint Chinese to the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements to help govern the colony.

Peranakans initially worked for the large British trading companies as intermediaries, since they could speak Chinese dialects, Malay, and also English. They later set up their own companies to supply Chinese workers, grow gambier and other commodities, and run shipping companies. Several wealthy Peranakans purchased the government monopolies of opium, which proved to be extremely profitable.

Seah Eu Chin 余有进
Near Shantou, China 1805–1883 Singapore

Gambier king and leader of the Teochew community

Seah Eu Chin moved to the Straits in 1823, and married the daughter of the wealthy Peranakan *kapitan* of Perak. Although not a Peranakan by birth, Seah became part of the Straits Chinese community through marriage and business connections. He made his fortune on gambier, which was used as a medicine and tanning agent.

Seah led the Teochew community, Singapore's largest Chinese dialect group in the early 19th century. He founded the Ngee Ann Kongsi 义安公司, which oversaw the Wak Hai Cheng Bio 粤海清庙, one of the oldest Chinese temples in Singapore. He also mediated the Hokkien-Teochew riots of 1854.

Seah commanded respect because of his wealth, his father-in-law, and also because he came from the educated political class of China. He became a British citizen in 1853 and was appointed a justice of the peace. He led the Chinese in welcoming Viceroy Dalhousie to Singapore in 1850.

Tan Kim Tian 陈金铤
Malacca 1832–1882 Singapore

Shipping magnate

In 1871, Tan Kim Tian founded the Tan Kim Tian and Son Steamship Company, one of the first Chinese firms in Singapore to buy and build ships. At its peak, it had 11 ships. Tan was the first president of the Tan Si Chong Su 陈氏宗祠, the Tan clan temple. He built a mansion at the corner of Neil Road and Craig Road called Botan House. In 1882, he presented several natural and anthropological curiosities to the Raffles Museum.

Tan Kim Ching 陈金钟
Singapore 1829–1892 Singapore

Friend to Thai royalty

Tan Kim Ching was the eldest son of Tan Tock Seng and inherited much of his father's social standing, although it was rumoured that he was also head of a network of secret societies. Tan expanded his father's rice business into Vietnam and Thailand. He founded the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company with the purchase of the steamships *Siam* and *Singapore* in 1863. He was appointed president of the Hokkien Huay Kuan in 1860, joined the municipal council, and became a justice of the peace.

Tan had very close connections with Thai royalty, developed from his business enterprises. He was appointed the first Thai consul in Singapore, and was responsible for helping King Mongkut find an English governess to educate his children. In honour of his close Thai relations, Tan Kim Ching named his Singapore residence on North Bridge Road "Siam House", which subsequently hosted the visiting King Chulalongkorn in 1890.

Tan Beng Swee 陈明水
Singapore 1828–1884 Singapore

Founder of the Tan clan temple

Eldest son of Tan Kim Seng, Tan Beng Swee took over Kim Seng and Company after his father's death. Together with Tan Kim Ching, he funded the construction of Tan Si Chong Su 陈氏宗祠, the Tan clan temple in Singapore. He refused the offer of a seat on the Legislative Council because he did not think his English was good enough. Like his father, he maintained close ties with Malacca, where he was president of the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple.

Tan Kim Seng 陈金声
Malacca 1805–1864 Malacca

Leading merchant and supporter of Singapore's water supply

Tan Kim Seng was educated in a private Chinese school in Malacca, and fluent in English and Dutch. As a merchant in Singapore, he ran the successful Kim Seng and Company, which had vast business dealings with European trading houses.

He was appointed justice of the peace after Tan Tock Seng's death in 1850, signalling his status as leader of the Hokkien community in Singapore. He requested greater rights for the Chinese community, and also petitioned the government to permit more open Chinese religious observances. These activities were accompanied by pro-colonial gestures, for example, when he and Seah Eu Chin helped fund the Dalhousie Obelisk.

Tan Tock Seng 陈笃生
Malacca 1798–1850 Singapore

The first community leader

Tan Tock Seng arrived in Singapore in 1819, the year it was established by the British. He sold produce before building his fortune as a landowner in partnership with J. H. Whitehead of the British firm of Shaw, Whitehead and Company.

Tan was leader of the Hokkien community in Singapore and led the establishment of the Thian Hock Keng (Temple of Heavenly Blessings), which became the focal point of the Hokkien community. Tan was the first Asian to be appointed a justice of peace in Singapore. He is remembered today as the founder of Singapore's first hospital for poor Chinese.

Wee Bin 黃敏
Fujian province 1823–1868 Singapore

Owner of an early shipping company in Singapore

Wee Bin married Kiong Lian Kin, who descended from a prominent Peranakan family in Malacca. Wee Bin and Company began as a firm trading with the Dutch East Indies, and then invested in shipping. At its peak it owned a fleet of 20 ships plying the waters of the Malay Archipelago and the route to China.

His only son, Wee Boon Teck (1850–1888), took over the business. He expanded it and became an active philanthropist, notably giving \$4000 to Tan Tock Seng Hospital. A great-grandson of Wee Bin, Wee Eng Cheng (1895–1928) built a magnificent house at 157 Neil Road, known today as the Baba House.

Gan Eng Seng 颜永成
Malacca 1844–1899 Singapore

Founder of a bilingual Chinese-English school

Gan Eng Seng was born to a poor family in Malacca and moved to Singapore at the age of 16. He joined Guthrie and Co., one of the leading trading firms in Singapore, and eventually rose to be its chief comprador. He made his fortune contracting labour for Tanjong Pagar Dock Co. and from land holdings.

Gan was a keen supporter of education. In 1885, he founded the Anglo-Chinese Free School for the poor. The school was innovative in teaching in both English and Chinese. In 1923 it was renamed the Gan Eng Seng School.

Tan Keong Saik 陈恭锡
Malacca 1850–1909 Singapore

Ship owner

Tan Keong Saik came to Singapore to work as a shipping clerk. In 1890, together with Tan Jiak Kim and Lee Cheng Yan, he formed the Straits Steamship Company, the first joint Singapore-European shipping enterprise. It was bought by Keppel Corporation in 1983. Tan also sat on the board of Tanjong Pagar Dock Company.

Tan helped form the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in 1906. He was an early member of the Po Leung Kuk, an association set up for the protection of women and children, and was one of the earliest supporters of education for girls. His daughters were taught by Sophia Blackmore, founder of the Methodist Girls' School in Singapore. He owned several houses near Kreta Ayer, and in 1926 Keong Saik Road was named for him.

Cheang Hong Lim 章芳琳
Singapore 1825–1893 Singapore

The opium king

Opium overlord and conspicuous donor, Cheang Hong Lim has left a problematic legacy. He greatly expanded his father's opium monopoly and protected his market with the help of secret societies. The opium trade was encouraged by the colonial government, but Cheang's enhancement of his position was illegal.

He has been described as a ruthless businessman who "bought and ingratiated his way into both the colonial and the Chinese status systems and acquired honorary titles in both."

Cheang's public generosity deflected attention from these less savoury activities. He is said to have spent \$100,000 aiding the poor. He built schools, markets, and Hong Lim Park, one of Singapore's first public gardens.

In 1869, Cheang was the first Singaporean to receive an imperial Chinese title, although he purchased the honour. He was also the largest buyer of Qing titles in the Straits.

Oei Tiong Ham 黃仲涵
Semarang, Java 1866–1924 Singapore

Sugar king

Oei Tiong Ham ran a vast conglomerate of businesses involving shipping, opium trading, and sugar cane. His company, Oei Tiong Ham Concern, was the leading sugar producer in the Dutch East Indies and grew to become the largest Chinese-owned company in Asia.

The director of his shipping company in Singapore was Lee Hoon Leong, the father of Dr Lee Choo Neo and the grandfather of Lee Kuan Yew. In 1920, Oei moved permanently from Semarang to Singapore, perhaps to escape Dutch taxes and inheritance laws. He donated \$150,000 to Raffles College and the land for Tao Nan School.

At Oei Tiong Ham's death, there were rumours that he was worth as much as \$140 million, although a more plausible estimate of his estate is about \$50 million.

Lee Cheng Yan 李清淵
Malacca 1841–1911 Singapore

Shipping tycoon

Lee Cheng Yan arrived in Singapore in 1858 and soon set up a trading firm. He worked closely with European companies and was reported to have been the first Straits Chinese to visit Britain on business. Together with Tan Jiak Kim and Tan Keong Saik, Lee established the Straits Steamship Company in 1890, the first joint Singapore-European shipping enterprise.

Lee supported Chinese-language education by founding the Hong Joo Chinese Free School and donating to the Gan Eng Seng and Tao Nan schools. He also publicly displayed loyalty to the British monarchy by raising funds for Victoria Memorial Hall and attending Edward VII's memorial service in London in 1911. He owned four large European-style residences in Singapore, his main one being Magenta Cottage on Killiney Road.

Seah Liang Seah 余連城
Singapore 1850–1925 Singapore

Colonial politician

Seah Liang Seah succeeded his father, Seah Eu Chin, as leader of the Teochew community by heading the Ngee Ann Kongsi, the influential Teochew welfare association. He often led the Chinese community in colonial ceremonies, including an address in English to celebrate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee in 1887. Along with others, Seah formed the Straits Chinese British Association, and helped fund the Singapore medical school.

Though he was a supporter of the British, Seah can also be seen as attempting to work within the colonial system to ensure stability for Singapore. He defended traditional

Chinese practices against government interference, including private burials and Chinese shophouse design, which kept extended families together.

Tan Jiak Kim 陈若锦
Singapore 1859–1917 Singapore

Colonial Peranakan

Tan Jiak Kim was grandson of Tan Kim Seng, and son of Tan Beng Swee. He joined Kim Seng and Company, and served on the Straits Legislative Council and other government bodies. In 1900, he founded the Straits Chinese British Association and became its first president.

A strong ally of the British, he attended the coronation of George V in 1911 and helped organize the Straits Chinese volunteer division. He donated \$19,200 for a British military aircraft. Tan was also a supporter of education. He contributed to the Chinese Girls' School, and to help start a medical school in Singapore. C. W. Darbshire in 1915 praised Tan as someone "broadminded enough to grasp the Western point of view and to weld it easily and smoothly with the Eastern point of view".

Chan Kim Boon 曾锦文
Penang 1851–1920 Singapore

Translator of Chinese tales into Malay

Chan Kim Boon translated Chinese literary works into Malay, making ancient Chinese fables accessible to audiences who were unable to read Chinese. Chan was fluent in English, Malay and Chinese. He moved to Singapore to work as a bookkeeper and cashier.

The first Malay translations of Chinese classics were published in Batavia (Jakarta) in the 1880s, and by 1889 similar versions appeared in Singapore. Chan added historical explanations, sometimes in English, and included Chinese characters for names and titles. His books appeared in series like magazines, with news reports, amusing stories, and correspondence. Readership stretched across the Malay Archipelago and included romanized-Malay readers, not just Peranakans familiar with Baba Malay.

Pang Teck Joon 冯德润
Malacca 1844–1928 Singapore

Baba Malay translator

Following in the path set by Chan Kim Boon, Pang Teck Joon translated classical Chinese stories into Malay. He had become wealthy through discerning property investments and his position as a storekeeper for Getz Company, and later Henry Waugh and Company.

Kim Seck Chye Press, at 174 Telok Ayer Street in Singapore, printed many of Pang's translations beginning in 1899. These volumes form important early written records of Baba Malay, a version of Malay with significant Hokkien influence, and the language of the Peranakan Chinese in Singapore and Malacca.

See Ewe Lay 薛有礼
Malacca 1851–1906 Singapore

Founder of Singapore's first major Chinese newspaper

See Ewe Lay descended from an old Peranakan family in Malacca. He moved to Singapore and became comprador for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. In 1881, he started, *Lat Pau* 告报, the first major Chinese-language daily newspaper in Singapore; it continued to be published until 1934. This demonstrates that English-oriented Peranakans were still intimately involved in Chinese-language culture.

1890 to 1945: Colonial collaboration

Official positions

A handful of powerful Peranakans held all the important government positions open to the Chinese, namely membership on the Legislative Council, the Municipal Commission, and the Chinese Advisory Board. These positions were simply rotated among a small number of men. Each of them also led the Straits Chinese British Association, an organization devoted to reforming and modernizing the Chinese community. In contrast, Chinese remained excluded from the civil service until 1934, when Asians were permitted to take a few low-level government jobs.

Education

The offer of the Queen's Scholarship to study at a British university encouraged more students to remain in school to compete for the honour. Peranakans led the foundation of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School in 1899 and the establishment of a medical school for Malaya in 1905.

Honours

In 1877, the Chinese government established a consulate in Singapore, which sold imperial titles. Worried by China's interest in the Straits Chinese, the British also began to grant titles to Peranakans. In 1936, Song Ong Siang became the first Straits Chinese knight, followed by Tan Cheng Lock in 1952.

Tan Cheng Kee 陈庆直
Singapore 1882–1939 Singapore

Movie entrepreneur

Son of Tan Keong Saik, Tan Cheng Kee was a pioneer of the entertainment industry in Singapore. He owned the Alhambra, Marlborough, and Palladium theatres, as well as Luna Park. Construction of a new hall for the Alhambra began in 1914 and was completed in 1916. Designed by the local Eurasian architect J. B. Westerhout, the interior featured oil paintings of the British king and queen. The theatre was bought by Shaw Brothers in the 1930s, and in 1938 it became the first air-conditioned movie house in Singapore.

Ong Boon Tat 王文达
Singapore 1888–1941 Singapore

Amusement park pioneer

In 1923, Ong Boon Tat opened New World, the first amusement park in Singapore. It came to include many attractions, including an air-conditioned cabaret with a large dance floor, movies screenings, boxing tournaments, *ronggeng*, *bangsawan*, Cantonese opera, and beauty contests. Visitors could also buy tickets to dance with the “taxi dancers”. The park offered Western and Asian entertainments for an audience drawn from all ethnic groups.

New World's success led to similarly imitations like Great World, Gay World, and Happy Valley. The park closed in 1987.

Goh Hood Keng 吳福庆
Singapore 1888–1961 Singapore

Methodist preacher

Reverend Goh served for many years as pastor of the Straits Chinese Methodist Church (now Kampong Kapor Methodist Church), which had a large Peranakan congregation. He was the first Straits Chinese to be ordained a Methodist minister. By his own account, his parents, strict Buddhists, initially objected but later came to accept his conversion to Christianity.

The Methodist Church played a major role in establishing schools in Singapore: the Anglo-Chinese School, followed soon by Sophia Blackmore's schools for Indian and Chinese girls.

A number of Peranakan Chinese became Christian in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang. This represents a wider trend in the Chinese elite, for example, Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and others were Christian.

Song Ong Siang 宋旺相
Singapore 1871–1941 Singapore

Historian of the Straits Chinese and Singapore's first Chinese knight

The first Chinese from Malaya to receive a British knighthood, Song Ong Siang was deeply committed to reforming the Chinese community in the Straits. That he was also among the most pro-British of all Peranakans embodies the complexities of Singapore's transition to the modern world.

A Queen's Scholar, he studied law at Cambridge University. On his return to Singapore, he established the law firm of Aitken and Ong Siang with his fellow-Queen's scholar James Aitken.

In 1894, he started the first romanized Malay newspaper in Singapore, *Bintang Timor*, and in 1923 published his landmark *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*. In partnership with Lim Boon Keng, Song spearheaded several progressive initiatives, including the Straits Chinese British Association and the *Straits Chinese Magazine*. Song was an elder of the Straits Chinese Church (now Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church) for 41 years, and the president of the Chinese Christian Association.

Tan Chay Yan 陈齐贤
Malacca 1871–1916 Malacca

Rubber king

In 1895, Tan Chay Yan obtained nine rubber tree seedlings from the Singapore Botanic Gardens (the rubber plant originated in Brazil), and used them to start a plantation at Bukit Lintang, Malacca, using his father's old tapioca farm. Tan's work started the rubber industry in Malaya, which by 1920 had covered 2.2 million acres, and was a major cash crop for the region. Tan's 3000-acre rubber plantation at Bukit Asahan was the largest in world. He contracted malaria through his work in the plantations and died in 1916.

A grandson of Tan Tock Seng, he was also involved in banking and insurance, helping to form the Eastern United Assurance Corporation. He served on Malacca's municipal council and founded the Malacca branch of the Straits Chinese British Association, but also joined Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui. He funded the construction of a building for Singapore's medical school, named after his father, Tan Teck Guan.

Lim Peng Siang 林秉祥
Xiamen 1872–1944 Singapore

Banker and president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce

Lim Peng Siang was the grandson of Wee Bin, for whom his father, Lim Ho Puah, worked. Lim was the principal founder of the Ho Hong group of companies, which were involved in shipping, rice, cement, oil, and banking. He served as president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and was a member of the Chinese Advisory Board. During World War I, he and his brother-in-law Lee Choon Guan donated an aircraft.

Lim Nee Soon 林义顺
Singapore 1879–1936 Shanghai

Pineapple king and Chinese Nationalist

Lim Nee Soon married Wi Pek Hay, a Peranakan woman whose father is thought to have been a *kapitan* in Bali. Lim started a rubber and pineapple company in 1911, and his large plantations in the booming pineapple industry earned him the moniker "Pineapple King".

A friend of Sun Yat-sen, Lim became deeply involved in Chinese Nationalist politics. Together with Teo Eng Hock and Tan Chor Nam, he founded the revolutionary paper *Thoe Lam Jit Poh*, and started the Singapore branch of the Tongmenghui 同盟会, the Nationalist underground organization. The town of Yishun (the pinyin rendering of Nee Soon) was named after Lim Nee Soon.

Tan Boo Liat 陈武烈
Singapura 1875-1934 Shanghai

Horse racing enthusiast

Great-grandson of Tan Tock Seng, Tan Boo Liat followed his ancestors in leading the Hokkien Huay Kuan and Thian Hock Keng temple. He had strong international connections and commercial interests in Thailand. He was also a supporter of Sun Yat-sen and president of the Kuomintang in Singapore.

Tan's residence along Pender Road, called Golden Bell, is one of the few Peranakan mansions that have survived. Golden Bell is the translation of his grandfather's name, Kim Ching. Sun Yat-sen once stayed at the house.

Lim Boon Keng 林文庆
Penang 1869–1957 Singapore

Intellectual and social activist

Lim might be considered an emblem of the Peranakans around 1900. Fluent in Malay, English, but less so in Mandarin, Lim moved comfortably in British, Chinese, and Peranakan societies, and he personally embraced Christianity and Confucianism.

He studied medicine in Britain, entered Singapore politics, invested in banking, and advocated for education and political reforms in both the Straits Settlements and China. Lim's approach was one of compromise: political change within the British colonial structure and a neo-Confucianism that stressed a respectful modernizing of traditions.

The first Chinese Queen's Scholar, Lim earned first-class honours in medicine at University of Edinburgh. He joined the Straits Legislative Council and helped found the *Straits Chinese Magazine* and the Straits Chinese British Association.

Chew Joo Chiat 周如切
Xiamen 1857–1926 Singapore

King of Katong

After moving to Singapore, Chew Joo Chiat married a Peranakan woman named Tan Quan Neo. He made his fortune by growing gambier, nutmeg, and coconut. Chew acquired large tracts of land in the Katong area of Singapore. In 1917, he allowed a public road through his land, and today the area is known as Joo Chiat.

Cheong Koon Seng 钟坤成
Singapore 1880–1934 Singapore

Malay-language theatre impresario

Cheong Koon Seng built the Theatre Royal as a venue for the Star Opera Company, a Malay-language performance company. It was the first major theatre in Singapore to specialize in Malay performances. It presented Shakespeare's plays, Chinese classics, and fairy tales of many cultures – all embellished with a variety of entertainments, from dance and music to magic, wrestling, and clowns.

The audiences, as reviews and advertisements make clear, included all Malay-speaking people, regardless of ethnicity. Star Opera attracted the patronage of the governor and the sultan of Terengganu.

See Tiong Wah 薛中华
Singapore 1886–1940 Singapore

Founder of Bukit Brown Cemetery

See Tiong Wah worked for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, which opened an office in Singapore in 1877. Also a founding director of Great Eastern, he was one of the many Peranakans active in banking and insurance. He served on various government bodies and was president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. He was on the committee that established Bukit Brown Cemetery in 1922.

Low Kway Song 刘溪松
Singapore 1889–1982 Singapore

Painter

Low Kway Song was a self-taught artist known for his portraits of prominent members of society in Singapore and Malaya. A member of the Singapore Amateur Drawing Society, he organized and participated in exhibitions in Singapore and Malacca. Low made portraits of Queen Elizabeth II, Sun Yat-sen, Aw Boon Haw, and Malaysia's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. He was reportedly the first Singapore artist to receive a four-figure sum for a commission, the portrait of Oei Tiong Ham in 1927. Low was also a cartoonist for *Eastern Illustrated Review*.

Low also excelled in the performing arts. He was a founding member of the Merrilads Musical and Dramatic Association, a popular Peranakan performing group started in 1923.

Lee Choon Guan 李浚源
Singapore 1868–1924 Singapore

Banker

The son of Lee Cheng Yan, Lee Choon Guan greatly expanded his family's wealth through shipping and banking. Lee was chairman of the Chinese Commercial Bank, which later merged with Ho Hong Bank to form the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC).

He served on the Municipal Commission and Chinese Advisory Board, and donated generously to educational causes. He was an active member of the Straits Chinese British Association. During the First World War, he and Lim Peng Siang donated a military plane to Britain.

Mrs Lee Choon Guan (Tan Teck Neo) 陈德娘
Singapore 1877–1978 Singapore

Socialite and founding president of the Chinese Ladies' Association

Tan Teck Neo was the daughter of Tan Keong Saik, who helped the Methodist missionary Sophia Blackmore set up a girls' school, in part because he wanted his daughters properly educated. In 1900 she married Lee Choon Guan, becoming his second wife.

Mrs Lee supported a number of women's causes, including scholarships for midwives and an endowment for the Singapore Chinese Girls' School. She was one of the founders of the Chinese Ladies' Association (now the Chinese Women's Association) and served as its first president. They gave classes on domestic skills, and later took on charitable causes.

During the First World War, she went to India to help with welfare for British troops, and was active in the Red Cross. In 1918, she was the first Chinese woman to be made a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

Koh Hoon Teck 许云德
Singapore 1878–1956 Singapore

Master of Malay poetry and song

Koh Hoon Teck was a master of *pantun* (a Malay poetic form) and *dondang sayang* (an exchange of songs). He began his career in 1904 as one of the Cornwall Minstrels, a group of "young respectable Straits Chinese gentlemen" who performed comic songs in English for weddings, parties, and charity events. In 1910, Koh founded the Gunong Sayang Association, one of the earliest Peranakan theatre groups in Singapore, which remains active today. He would often gather members of the association for rehearsals at his home, with him on violin. He requested that *dondang sayang* accompany his funeral.

Koh founded a publishing and stationery firm, Koh and Company, on Bras Basah Road. It produced postcards showing the monuments and everyday scenes of Singapore.

1946 to 1965: Nation building

Political activism

In the aftermath of World War II, many of Singapore's emergent leaders were drawn from the English-educated Peranakan community. While some chose to continue to work closely with the British for gradual change, others were inspired by independence movements. Peranakan women were pioneers in the women's rights movement, and assisted in the passing of the Women's Charter.

Banks and reconstruction

Peranakans helped restore Singapore's economy, which had been devastated by the war. For example, local banks offered liberal loans to allow old businesses to resume and new ones to set up. In the 1960s, commercial banks also helped finance economic development for Singapore's new industries.

Arts and popular culture

The Straits Chinese reform movement of the early 20th century associated Peranakans with leisure and lavish excess. Since colonial times, the community was actively involved in the cultural sector, particularly in music, theatre, and entertainment. After the war, amateur musical and dramatic societies remained popular among the Peranakans.

Kwa Geok Choo 柯玉芝
Singapore 1920–2010 Singapore

Lawyer and women's rights advocate

Born into a Peranakan family, Kwa Geok Choo was the daughter of Kwa Siew Tee. She won the prestigious Queen's Scholarship to read law at the University of Cambridge, where she graduated with first-class honours, the first woman from Malaya to do so. In December 1947, she quietly married Lee Kuan Yew in England.

As a founding member of the People's Action Party, Kwa helped draft the party's constitution. Although she attended the first organizing meeting, she was not part of the party's inner circle. In 1965, she helped prepare the crucial water provision that guaranteed Singapore's water supply after separation from Malaysia.

Kwa was a keen advocate for women's rights. She helped draft the Women's Charter of 1961, which provided for monogamous marriages, protected women against physical abuse, and guaranteed financial protection in divorce. She also supported the removal of gender discrimination in salaries.

Mrs Seow Peck Leng (Chua Seng Kim) 蔡成金
Singapore 1911–2007 Singapore

Women's rights advocate

Mrs Seow Peck Leng was the founding president of Singapore Women's Association. Educated at Singapore Chinese Girls' School and Raffles Girls' School, she taught at Telok Kurau English School and was principal of Cantonment School. She was the first female secretary and vice-president of the Singapore Teachers' Union, and led the battle for the entry of married women teachers into the government's new Education Service Scheme.

Singapore's first woman opposition politician, Mrs Seow represented Mountbatten for the Singapore People's Alliance from 1959 to 1963. She proposed legislation to outlaw polygamous marriages, which led to the passing of the Women's Charter in 1961. She also advocated that the example of Peranakans as a "synthesizing" culture with its own strong traditions should be a model for the new multiracial nation of Malaysia. In 1965, she retired from politics to devote herself entirely to social work.

Sylvia Kho 许黄仙妹
Kanching 1917–2013 Singapore

Bridal designer

Sylvia Kho was the best known bridal designer in Singapore from the 1960s to the 1980s, and her clients were the rich and famous of the region. Born Wong Sien Moy, she learned sewing and beadwork from her Peranakan mother. By the age of nine she could design, cut a pattern, and sew. She studied in Singapore and worked at the Singapore General Hospital as a nurse until the outbreak of the Second World War, when she left for Semarang to join her fiancé, Kho Hock Chiao. She took lessons there in cooking, baking, and dressmaking.

Upon her return to Singapore in 1946 she started a bridal business from home. She opened her first boutique in Tanglin Shopping Centre in 1968. Her wedding dresses were made of luxurious laces and fabrics that she procured on trips to America and Europe.

Mrs Tay Lian Teck (Tan Chew Neo) 陈秋娘
Singapore 1898–1986 Singapore

Social activist

Tan Chew Neo was one of the founders of the Chinese Ladies' Association. She organized a committee to raise funds for the war effort in 1939, and in 1948, became president of the association.

In 1922, she married Tay Lian Teck (1899–1941), a member of the Legislative Council. He was killed during the Japanese invasion of Singapore, but Mrs Tay and their daughter managed to escape to Australia.

After the war, Mrs Tay was a champion of greater women's involvement in politics. She was one of the first two women appointed to the Chinese Advisory Board, and a justice of the peace. She also served on the Film Appeal Board.

Lee Choo Neo 李珠娘
Singapore 1895–1947 Singapore

Singapore's first female doctor

Lee Choo Neo broke away from the tradition of the cloistered *nyonya*, and used her privileged position to take advantage of social reforms. She was the daughter of a Peranakan from Semarang who managed Oei Tiong Ham's shipping company in Singapore. Her brother, Lee Chin Koon, was the father of Lee Kuan Yew.

Lee Choo Neo attended Singapore Chinese Girls' School and Raffles Girls' School, and was the first Straits Chinese woman to obtain a Senior Cambridge Certificate, in 1911. She studied medicine at the King Edward VII Medical School in Singapore, and became the city's first Chinese female doctor in 1920.

Lee also took a keen interest in Malay drama, and in 1912 she wrote, co-directed (with the artist Low Kway Soo), and acted in a comedy, *Mustapha*, presented at Victoria Theatre.

Maggie Lim 林陈美仪
Singapore 1913–1995 Singapore

Family planning pioneer

Maggie Lim was the daughter of businessman Tan Kwee Swee, and a descendant of Tan Tock Seng. She was the first woman to win the prestigious Queen's Scholarship. Lim attended the London School of Medicine for Women and then practised at the Royal Free Hospital.

On her return to Singapore in 1940, Lim became a public health officer specializing in maternal and child health, and campaigned to raise awareness of birth control. In 1949 she joined the newly founded Family Planning Association and was responsible for recruiting doctors, recommending forms of contraception, and managing clinics. In 1963, she became head of the Ministry of Health's maternity and child welfare department, and president of the Family Planning Association. She later worked abroad, including at the University of Hawaii's School of Public Health and East-West Center.

Kwa Siew Tee 柯守智
Semarang, Java 1888–1977 Singapore

Banker

Kwa Siew Tee came to Singapore at the age of ten to learn English and to find his fortune. After teaching at Raffles Institution, he went to work in rubber plantations and tin mines in Malaya. Later, he co-founded the accounting firm Chan Sze Onn and Co. In 1932, he joined the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation as an exchange manager, eventually rising to general manager.

He served on Singapore's Municipal Commission and Public Service Commission. Kwa married Wee Yew Neo; Kwa Geok Choo is their daughter.

Seow Eu Jin 蕭友仁
Singapore 1920–1993 Perth

First Baba architect and champion of preservation

Seow Eu Jin grew up in a mansion on Emerald Hill. His mother, Polly Tan, was a daughter of Tan Boo Liat, a descendant of Tan Tock Seng. He studied engineering in Perth and then architecture in Melbourne. His career began with the firm Booty and Edwards in Kuala Lumpur, but in 1951 he started E. J. Seow Associates, which later became Seow, Lee and Heah.

He was the first president of the Singapore Institute of Architects. Seow was also vice-chairman of the Preservation of Monuments Board. He encouraged Singaporeans to contribute suggestions on monuments to preserve. In 1974 he became head of the University of Singapore's School of Architecture. Working in an international modernist style, Seow's firm designed houses and residential tower blocks. One of Seow's most prominent buildings is the original wing of the Shangri-La Hotel, finished in 1971.

Lim Yew Hock 林有福
Singapore 1914–1984 Jeddah

Second chief minister of Singapore

Lim Yew Hock was one of the most powerful Singaporean politicians in the years before Singapore's independence. A third-generation Peranakan, Lim was a member of the Straits Chinese British Association. After the resignation of David Marshall, he served as the country's second chief minister, from 1956 to 1959.

As chief minister, Lim dealt with a succession of strikes, and ordered the arrest of union leaders, journalists, teachers, and students. Although he had strong trade union credentials and helped achieve self-government for Singapore, the suppression of students and left-wing elements alienated most Chinese voters. Lim became associated with heavy-handed British rule, and he was defeated by the People's Action Party in 1959.

Although he served as leader of the opposition, Lim soon lost interest in Singapore politics. When Singapore became independent in 1965, he chose Malaysian citizenship, although he described himself as a “child of estranged parents, and when Malaysia and Singapore make up I shall be a happy man again.”

Tan Cheng Lock 陈祯禄
Malacca 1883–1960 Malacca

Malayan statesman

The first genuine Chinese politician in the Straits Settlements, Tan Cheng Lock was appointed to the Legislative Council in 1923, where he argued for the end of discrimination against the Chinese in the civil service, the police force, and in immigration policy. He urged the creation of “a united self-governing British Malaya, with a Federal Government and Parliament” that would not be divided by races.

After World War II, he formed the Malayan Chinese Association. The party formed an alliance with the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). In 1955, the Alliance Party won the first Malayan elections as well as three seats in the Singapore general election. Tan attended the first meeting of the Peoples’ Action Party in Singapore, and continued to express hopes that Singapore and Malaya would be united.

Tan began to retire from public life in the mid-1950s and did not enter the Malayan parliament. His son, Tan Siew Sin became Malaya’s minister of commerce and later finance minister.

Tan Chin Tuan 陈振传
Singapore 1908–2005 Singapore

Mr OCBC

Tan Chin Tuan was the son of banker Tan Cheng Siong. His plans to study law in England were cut short by the death of his father. He worked his way up from junior clerk at the Chinese Commercial Bank to become managing director of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC) at 34. He became chairman in 1966. Tan was responsible for OCBC’s far-sighted strategy of investing in blue-chip companies during periods of economic uncertainty.

Tan worked closely with the British colonial government for gradual self-rule. In 1951 he became the deputy president of the Legislative Council – the highest political rank held by an Asian under colonial rule.

Lim Kim San 林金山
Singapore 1916–2006 Singapore

Mr HDB

Lim Kim San was the first chairman of Singapore's Housing and Development Board (HDB), created in 1960 to rapidly build public housing. He went to Anglo-Chinese School and Raffles College. A shrewd businessman, he ran his family's rubber, commodities, salt, and gasoline businesses, and also took over his father-in-law's sago and pawnshop interests. He made his first million by the age of 34.

Lim chaired the HDB from 1960 to 1963. Under his leadership, HDB built more than 26,000 flats, more than its predecessor, the Singapore Improvement Trust, had built in 32 years.

In 1962, Lim was the first person awarded the Order of Temasek. The following year, he was elected to parliament, and headed in succession the ministries of national development, finance, defence, education, and environment, until his retirement in 1981.

Toh Chin Chye 杜进才
Perak 1921–2012 Singapore

Founding chairman of the PAP

Toh Chin Chye earned a PhD in physiology in London. Upon his return to Singapore in 1953, Toh taught at the University of Malaya before entering politics.

Toh proposed the formation of the People's Action Party and was its chairman for 27 years. After the 1959 general election victory, his vote picked Lee Kuan Yew as the prime minister of Singapore. As Singapore's first deputy prime minister, he was a strong advocate of merger with Malaysia, although a rift later developed with Lee over the separation of the two nations.

After he left the cabinet in 1981, Toh became an outspoken backbencher. He argued for greater political tolerance and press freedom. He retired from politics in 1988. Lee Kuan Yew said of Toh: "when men of strong convictions get together, strong clashes of opinion are quite usual. But our clashes were always principled and within the bounds of honourable disagreement ...".

Goh Keng Swee 吴庆瑞
Malacca 1918–2010 Singapore

Architect of Singapore's public policy

While pursuing his PhD at London School of Economics, Goh Keng Swee started the Malayan Forum with a group of students from the Straits, and forged close ties with Lee Kuan Yew and Toh Chin Chye.

Goh joined the People's Action Party in 1956 and entered parliament in 1959. While in the colonial civil service, he had learned of the deplorable living conditions and poverty of many Singaporeans. He became minister of finance in 1959, an ideal platform from which to begin to rectify these conditions. Goh devised the State Development Plan in which he laid out a long-term blueprint for Singapore's economic development.

Goh left his fingerprints on virtually every aspect of public policy for 25 years from mid-1959, having served as minister for finance, defence, education, and as deputy prime minister. Lee Kuan Yew said: "of all my Cabinet colleagues, it was Goh Keng Swee who made the greatest difference to the outcome of Singapore".

William Tan Wee Liam 陈威廉
Singapore 1928–2009 Singapore

Performing arts pioneer

William Tan Wee Liam was a pioneer Peranakan actor, playwright, director, and producer. He was well-known for his roles in Peranakan drama (Wayang Peranakan) during the 1950s and 1960s, often playing female roles. He acted in several famous shows, including Satu Darah, Janda Kaya, Tidak Berdosa, and Air Mata Ibu.

Tan specialized in dondang sayang, a traditional Malay verbal art that draws on pantun (traditional four-line verse) and uses Malay and Western musical instruments. He was trained by Gwee Peng Kwee in the art of pantun singing, and was so good that he could improvise on the spot. He was a leading member of the Gunong Sayang Association, a Peranakan group dedicated to the preservation of dondang sayang. Founded in 1910 and still active today, it was originally an all-male social club, but admitted women from the late 1980s.

Goh Soon Tioe 吳順疇
Padang, Sumatra 1911–1982 Singapore

Maestro

Goh Soon Tioe was a pioneer of Singapore's classical music scene. He came to Singapore at 13. He only started violin lessons at 15, but showed great promise, and in 1932 left for Switzerland to join the Conservatoire de musique de Genève. Goh also trained under Alfred Marchot at the Royal Academy of Music in Brussels.

In 1954, he founded the Goh Soon Tioe String Orchestra. In the 1950s and 1960s he promoted concerts that brought internationally renowned musicians to perform in Singapore. He taught many of Singapore's musical prodigies, including violinists Lynnette Seah and Lee Pan Hon, pianists Seow Yit Kin and Melvyn Tan, and conductor Choo Hoey. Goh was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal in 1963 in recognition of his outstanding contributions to Singapore's music scene.

Lee Kuan Yew 李光耀
Singapore 1923–2015 Singapore

First prime minister

Lee Kuan Yew was the eldest son of Lee Chin Koon and Chua Jim Neo. His maternal grandfather, Chua Kim Teng, was a Peranakan Hokkien. Lee attended Raffles Institution, and read law at Cambridge. In London he became involved in the Malayan Forum, and this growing political involvement landed him and Goh Keng Swee on the Special Branch's watch list.

On their return to Singapore, Lee and his wife Kwa Geok Choo joined the law firm of Laycock and Ong before starting their own firm, Lee and Lee. He took on a number of high-profile labour union cases, and became legal advisor to unions, clan associations, and students. This gave him access to working-class Chinese. Lee joined the Straits Chinese British Association in the hope of launching a political party from it. When this failed, Lee led the formation of the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1954 and became its first secretary-general.

He won the Tanjong Pagar constituency in the Legislative Assembly election of 1955. In 1959, the PAP won a spectacular victory of 43 out of the 51 seats, and Lee became Singapore's first prime minister, a position he held until 1990.

Lee fought for merger with Malaya in 1961, an initiative which split his party, leading to the formation of the Barisan Sosialis. When Malaysia was formed in 1963, he became one of 15 Singapore representatives in the new Malaysian parliament. Relations between the two sides deteriorated rapidly; community tensions and political acrimony were only quelled when Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965.

Lee never publicly declared himself a Peranakan, since his chief concern for the nation was to foster a collective sense of identity that would surmount ethnic divisions.

Nonetheless, his wife said: "Both Kuan Yew and I come from Peranakan families, speaking no Chinese, not even dialect."