Itinerant traders

The roving tradespeople who hawked their wares and services in colonial times were Singapore's original entrepreneurs.

If you were living in Chinatown during the 19th and early to mid-20th centuries, you would have headed for the streets to mend your shoes, sharpen your knives or sew on your buttons. Small-time tradespeople like cobblers, knife sharpeners and seamstresses would ply their services by the roadside and five-foot-ways (covered walkways of shophouses).

These immigrants from China toiled hard on their tiny businesses, making a meagre living as they scrounged for work. As the years wore on, their useful skills and services filled a gap between the department stores and small shops. But the once familiar sight of roadside vendors is now a rarity.

The peddlers' past and growing regulation

With the influx of male Chinese immigrants, finding work was difficult, and street hawking allowed many illiterate, unemployed and unskilled immigrants to make a living.

Little capital investment was needed for these budding businessmen, who provided cheap services and commodities to their fellow immigrants. Without a fixed shop space, these mobile peddlers would operate along the five-foot-ways (五脚基, or "gho kha ki" in Hokkien).

Some also roamed the streets with their tools, looking for customers as they travelled from lane to lane and door to door. In those days, Chinatown had plenty of travelling or itinerant traders who favoured busy streets and intersections instead of overcrowded shophouse corridors.

Yet for all of their hard work, most of them lived a tough existence. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, street traders found it even more difficult to make a living as they faced competition from artisans and coolies (unskilled labourers), who became hawkers after losing their jobs.

The colonial authorities also objected to these street vendors, saying they were a nuisance, littering streets, obstructing traffic, giving unfair competition to shopkeepers, and having suspected ties to secret societies.

From the turn of the 20th century, efforts were made to control, regulate and monitor these vendors. Their numbers were curbed, their hours and locations limited, and they were relocated to dedicated shelters. Licenses were also issued, at first covering food hawkers and later including itinerant and day hawkers. Even then, the authorities could not clamp down fully on them despite these efforts. In 1931 for instance, there were 4,000 unlicensed itinerant hawkers on the streets.

It was only in the post-independence years that these troubles were successfully managed. Street vendors were registered, some were moved to the back lanes, and illegal hawking was clamped down as more markets and hawker centres were built.

By the mid-1980s, as people became wealthier and were more willing to spend on modern services and goods, many of these pavement trades disappeared as they moved off the streets into shop spaces.

Types of street traders

Although you could find all sorts of services and sundry goods in the streets, some of the most common tradespeople included letter writers, knife sharpeners, street barbers, tin workers, clog makers and hairdressers.

Street barbers enjoyed a roaring trade with the influx of male Chinese immigrants. Up until the 1911 Revolution in China, men were forced to grow long queues and forbidden to cut them. Barbers then did not provide haircuts, but instead offered grooming services such as forehead shaving, queue braiding, ear cleaning and tongue scraping. There were also hairdressers who would oil and coil the hair of older Chinese women, give facials or thread away facial hair.

Letter writers helped Chinese immigrants communicate with their family and friends back home. Besides family letters, the writers also penned letters with different intents, from social and sick-leave purposes to agreements and bills, and even threatening and suicide notes.

Knife sharpeners in Chinatown were mainly Cantonese. Using a portable sharpening stone and a bucket of water, they would skilfully sharpen blunt scissors, choppers and knives along the five-foot-ways or on the streets.

Cobblers were a common sight, as they repaired shoes and worn-out soles along five-foot-ways, at road junctions and on sidewalks. Just as busy were the seamstresses or "sew-sew women" – nimble with needle and thread as they mended torn trousers and stitched on missing buttons, a convenient service popular with unmarried men.

Fortune-tellers were aplenty along Smith Street, making predictions on their almanacs. They would also tell your fortune by reading palms and faces, sizing up large and small ears, bushy and sparse eyebrows, and large and small moles on the body.

Apart from these pavement trades, there were also itinerant remittance carriers, storytellers, calligraphers, shoeshine boys, tinsmiths, furniture repairers, and, later on, even roving projectionists with their little cinemas on wheels.

Surviving the streets

Street traders of yesteryear are a testament of Singapore's diverse traditions and cultures. Although their lives on the street were difficult as they tried to make ends meet, they were some of Singapore's early fearless pioneers who did whatever was necessary to survive in a foreign land.

A handful of vanishing trades, such as roadside barbers and fortune-tellers, still ply their services on the streets of Singapore. But most are long gone and remain preserved in history.

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