

## Letter writers of Chinatown

*Professional Chinese letter writers provided an invaluable service to the mainly illiterate immigrants who flocked to Singapore in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

If anyone was privy to secrets of the immigrants of Chinatown, it was the letter writer. Being told the most intimate details and happenings of their clients' lives, they made a living mainly by listening and transcribing on behalf of illiterate or at best, semi-literate immigrants. These immigrants included labourers, samsui women (female labourers from Samsui, China) and amahs (immigrant domestic helpers). They were reliant on letter writers to communicate with family members back in China.

These letter writers set up shop in Chinatown along North Bridge Road, Mosque Street, Pagoda Street, Spring Street, Sago Street and Middle Road. Later in the 1980s, they also had presence in Chinatown Complex. Letter writers were typically Chinese men who were aged 55 and above. There were no female letter writers because traditional Chinese families considered it a waste of time to educate daughters, who were brought up to keep house instead.

Besides writing letters for their clients to send back home, letter writers also provided a reading service and would assist to read letters aloud – for the immigrants to understand what had been written to them. This way, they enabled the immigrants to maintain a connection with their loved ones at home. Usually, reading the letters was a service provided free of charge, with the understanding that the client would then commission the letter writer to compose a reply or another piece of communication.

### Myriad roles

It was extremely important for letter writers to be accurate while reading or writing. Not only did he play a critical role in communications between the sender and the receiver, he also composed many other important and significant documents. These included spring couplets, invitation cards, leases and marriage certificates. At the time, marriage certificates were known as “three generation cards”, as couples were required to indicate the names of their families spanning three generations on the marriage certificates.

Spring couplets – made up of pleasing phrases with wishes for prosperity or good health – were written and sold before Chinese New Year, according to Mr Song Moh Ngai, who contributed an oral history account to the National Archives in 2000. Local Chinese families, especially the Cantonese, would hang these up in their homes when they got ready for Chinese New Year. “It’s something every household will buy,” he said, adding that the production of spring couplets supplemented the income of these letter writers.

Some letter writers also wrote ancestral tablets that were used for the worship of one’s ancestors. At the time, it was common practice to display one’s ancestral tablets whenever an immigrant moved into his or her own residence.

In addition to writing, the letter writer also had to know how to use the abacus as he needed to calculate foreign exchange rates. This came in handy when a client wished to convey the remittance given to his or her family members back home in China.

As time went by, said Mr Song, some letter writers branched out into geomancy. “During those days, whenever someone wanted to get married or matched-up, they will go to a letter writer. He will

open up a book which had information about our days and times of birth and see if the intended pair matches.”

Dealing with such private issues on behalf of clients could be difficult, and the letter writer would do his best to maintain an aloof and disinterested demeanour regarding these affairs – even when asked to write suicide notes!

### **A struggle to survive**

The life of a letter writer was hard. Equipped with brushes, ink, paper, abacus, a small table, and a chair or two to operate his business, many writers would begin their day from as early as 8am. Some might go on for eight to 12 hours. They would work on five-foot walkways in makeshift stalls, or if a stairwell was big enough, they would establish themselves there.

In the 1930s, the rate was 20 cents per letter and with one to two clients a day, some letter writers earned about \$10 to \$15 a month. Good ones, especially later on in the 1960s, received \$2 a day and their average monthly earnings were between \$50 and \$60.

Some 40 years after World War II, the number of letter writers started to dwindle. There were several reasons for the declining demand: many of their regular customers had either passed away or were too old to maintain communication with their families in China. Literacy was increasing as well, and the younger generation could compose their own letters. Parents then relied on their children to help them write letters and other documents. The advent of the telephone also contributed to the decline of the letter-writing business.

### **References:**

- *Oral history account:* [http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral\\_history\\_interviews/record-details/76f9d2ac-115e-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad?keywords=letter%20writer&keywords-type=all](http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/76f9d2ac-115e-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad?keywords=letter%20writer&keywords-type=all)
- *Personal account:* <http://www.stone-family.info/pjs-memories-singapore.html>
- *Letter writers in Chinatown:* [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_603\\_2005-01-04.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_603_2005-01-04.html)