

Chinatown's roadside barbers

Roadside barbers and hairdressers provided an important service to Singapore's early Chinese settlers.

When they arrived in Singapore in the 1800s and 1900s, most Chinese settlers worked as coolies (labourers), indentured servants, hawkers and tradespeople (blacksmiths, carpenters and so on). They toiled for long hours for meagre wages and were known to be frugal with their money, remitting most of what they earned back home to their kin in China.

Although they lived on a tight budget, the early Chinese settlers did not neglect their personal grooming, and would frequent the barbers and hairdressers that set up shop along the streets, back lanes and five-foot-ways (sheltered walkways) of Singapore's Chinatown.

How roadside barbers and hairdressers operated

As recently as 50 to 60 years ago, roadside barbers and hairdressers were common in Chinatown, operating mainly out of makeshift sheds, with walls of wooden planks and wooden roofs or awnings. Their "shops" usually consisted of a few old-fashioned chairs, a box-like cupboard hung on the wall, a small wall mirror and a few plastic bins filled with water. Their tools of the trade included scissors, combs, brushes, razors, powder puffs, barber cloth and a mirror.

These tradespeople were also known as street barbers or five-foot-way barbers, and many were self-taught, although some picked up the trade by apprenticing under established barbers. These young apprentices would eventually start their careers as roadside barbers.

These barbers worked hard, often operating from morning to dusk or until it got too dark for them to see. Due to the fact that they conducted business outdoors in makeshift conditions, their work very much depended on the weather. So when it rained, they saw fewer customers. The Chinese New Year season was a busy period for them because it was customary for the Chinese to begin the year with a fresh haircut.

Personal hygiene and grooming services offered

Chinese families also engaged roadside barbers to shave their babies' heads. The Chinese have a tradition of shaving a baby's head bald after the baby turned a few weeks or a month old. The barbers usually visited the family's home in order to perform this service, and for such house calls they were paid extra.

These roadside barbers and hairdressers also provided a range of other personal hygiene and grooming services for an extra small fee. For instance, customers could request for hair treatments and neck massages. Some barbers even cleaned their customers' ears – using a 5cm long metal ear cleaner that had a hook at one end to remove the earwax. After that, a small,

fluffy brush was swished around the middle ear for the final clean up. Other services provided by these barbers included tongue and nose cleaning, nose-hair trimming, shaving and eye cleaning.

Self-care: A must for early Chinese settlers

The popularity of roadside barbers and hairdressers was a clear sign that Singapore's early Chinese settlers took personal hygiene and grooming seriously. They may have lived simply – and some even in extremely squalid conditions – nevertheless, it was important for them to keep themselves well-groomed and maintain a sense of personal cleanliness, so much so that they were willing to spend their hard-earned money on these services.

Prior to the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命) in China in 1911, it was mandatory for Chinese men to wear pigtails or queues. But after the Revolution, which overthrew China's last imperial dynasty and established the Republic of China, Chinese men cut off their pigtails and started patronising roadside barbers in greater numbers.

A dying trade

These days, one would be hard-pressed to find roadside barbers in Chinatown, or anywhere else on the island, for that matter. One of the last few roadside barbers, whose stand is behind a row of old shophouses in Mohamed Ali Lane, has been cutting hair for more than 35 years. Uncle Goh, as his customers call him, works rain or shine six days a week, from 8am to 4.30pm each day. He has had his stall in Mohamed Ali Lane for about 20 years. For \$5, Uncle Goh will cut his customers' hair, trim their eyebrows and shave their facial hair.

There are many reasons why roadside barbers are almost non-existent today. For one, they face stiff competition from unisex hair salons – most men in their mid-20s to 50s prefer to get their haircuts and other grooming services at trendier, upscale salons and barber shops in town or nearby HDB estates. For another, even if the roadside barbers wanted to move from the streets, many simply cannot afford to relocate their business to a shophouse, as rental costs would be relatively much higher. Lastly, due to hygiene reasons, their trade is largely unlicensed, so they cannot afford to be spotted plying their trade out in the open.

Nevertheless, elderly men and migrant workers looking for cheap, hassle-free trims still seek out these roadside barbers. In 2012, four Chinatown roadside barbers talked to journalists about the problems they faced working from a fixed location. One of them, who went by the name of Koh, traded his makeshift awning and wooden roof for a proper storefront at the back of a shophouse in Kelantan Lane two years ago. "My friend offered the space to me for free," he said. "Now, it's more cooling with the fan – and I have access to water."

Another barber, Goh, in his 70s, said that he was only allowed to keep running his makeshift business because he knows "the boss of the shop in front". The shop used to be a medicinal hall and Goh bought herbs from him, adding: "If the authorities find me an eyesore, they will chase me away."

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