

Chop Wah On

One of the most well-loved medicated oil companies started life on Chinatown's Pagoda Street.

Besides food souvenirs, one of the best tokens to bring home from a trip to Singapore has always been medicated oils and balms. One heritage brand that's popular with travellers is Chop Wah On, Singapore's oldest medicated oil company.

Its founder, Mr. Tong Chee Leong, hailed from Guangzhou, China, and first set up shop in Chinatown in 1916 on Pagoda Street. He originally traded in Chinese herbs, spices and medicines. He was also interested in the use of medicated oils and balms to treat ailments common to Chinese immigrants in the early 1900s – who often did not have access to proper medical care.

Oils, balms and other medications

From his shop on Pagoda Street, he began to concoct medicated oils such as Red Flower Oil (红花油) for rheumatic pains, Eucalyptus Oil (驱风镇痛膏) for its antiseptic qualities, and Citronella Oil (香茅油) to serve as an insect repellent. Over the years, he added on more oils and balms to his list of product offerings.

These medicated oils and balms became popular with the immigrant Chinese community. They were also often presented as gifts when the immigrants visited their relatives or returned to China and Hong Kong.

A few factors contributed to the success of the brand. The entrepot trade of Singapore in the 1900s, which included the trading of essential oils and other medicated items, made it easy for the ointments to be produced locally. There was also a ready market as migrant workers from China were familiar with the use of traditional Chinese medication, which included medicated oils and balms. Buying a bottle of medicated oil for a few cents was more affordable than visiting a doctor. They also saw the products as natural remedies for the aches and pains many of them suffered from.

The shop's original location on Pagoda Street was also ideal. The street was where many coolies (unskilled immigrant labour) settled between the 1850s and 1880s, with many coolie lodging houses set up by the early 20th century. In 1901 for instance, there were 12 lodging houses located on the street. This formed a natural customer base for Chop Wah On.

Passing on the baton

In 1942, Mr Tong's son, Tong Seng Mun, inherited the business after his father's passing. Apart from managing Chop Wah On, Mr Tong Seng Mun was a collector and dealer of wildlife. He opened a miniature zoo in Pasir Panjang and kept a tiger cub, named Margaret, in the Chop Wah On shop.

Under his leadership, the range of medicated oils was expanded to include Crocodile Oil for skin related ailments and dried crocodile meat for treating asthma and cough. Today, through ongoing research, Chop Wah On's product line has increased to 23 products and includes signature products such as Eucalyptol Balm for stiff necks, aches and pains, and itchiness, Lao Feng Huo Luo Oil (栲枫活络油) for back aches, and Pepo Embrocation Oil (八宝百油) for headaches and motion sickness.

As the popularity of Chop Wah On's products grew, there was a need to increase its production capabilities. In 1987, Chop Wah On leased a factory space at Alexandra DistriPark and in 2007, the company relocated to its own premises at Eunus.

Now managed by its third generation, the formulae for Chop Wah On's products have changed little over time. They are trade secrets, known only to a few direct descendants. Instead, technological advancements have been made. For instance, the oils used today are more refined compared to the oils used when the brand first started. Also, to attract younger customers who may not be as accustomed to the smell of traditional medicinal oil, all the company's products have now pleasant aromas with enhanced efficacies.

Today, Chop Wah On's main shop is located at No. 34, Upper Cross Street. Its items are popular with tourists and for many of them, a visit to Chop Wah On to purchase the various medicated oils and balms is part of the Chinatown experience.

References:

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