

The Story behind Smith Street

Smith Street has undergone several incarnations from its early days and is today a haven for foodies.

Smith Street, which lies between South Bridge Road and New Bridge Road in the heart of Chinatown, has a long and interesting history.

In its early days, Smith Street was nicknamed *hei yuen kai* (戏院街) or theatre street in Cantonese as it was closely associated with the popular 834-seat Chinese theatre Lai Chun Yuen at 36 Smith Street. For Hokkien residents, it was affectionately known as *gu chia chwi hi hng koi* (the latter two mean “theatre street in Kreta Ayer”).

In 1901, at least 25 brothels were located at Smith Street. By 1930, however, the street ceased to be a red-light area after the Women and Girl’s Protection Ordinance was enacted in the Straits Settlements. This law brought prostitution under control.

In the years after World War 2, the street was home to hawkers and traders selling household goods.

In the annals of Chinatown’s history, it’s worth noting that Smith Street is the only road in the area to be named after a European – Sir Cecil Clementi Smith, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements from 1887 to 1893. Smith was a Chinese scholar and responsible for neutralising the secret societies that were rampant at the time. He is not to be confused with his nephew, Sir Cecil Clementi, who was also Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements between the years 1930 and 1934.

Today, a 100m stretch of Smith Street is wholly pedestrianised and permanently closed to traffic. Known as Chinatown Food Street, it is home to multiple hawker stalls and shophouse restaurants, with al-fresco dining style along the street. This transformation was part of the Chinatown redevelopment project spearheaded by the Singapore Tourism Board.

Sir Cecil Clementi Smith

Born in London, England, Smith started his career in Hong Kong, where he worked as a student interpreter and later Colonial Treasurer. During this time, he learnt much about Chinese culture and was soon recognised as an accomplished scholar of Chinese culture. Prior to becoming Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements, he worked in Singapore as Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements (1878-1884) and Acting Governor (1884-1885), and Lieutenant-Governor and Colonial Secretary for Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

Clamping down on vice

Secret societies were a big part of life in Chinatown in the late 1800s. Comprising ethnic Chinese males, these groups controlled and regulated the emigration of Chinese coolies (unskilled labourers). They helped the immigrants pay for their journey to Singapore and sought employment for them, and thus acted as agents on behalf of them. Secret societies often recruited members among the newly arrived coolies, who had to pay subscription fees as members. In return, the societies offered to support the coolies financially in times of illness, defend their livelihoods, and organise their funeral rites.

Many of the practices of early secret societies in Singapore were legitimate ways of helping Chinese immigrants to settle down, and, for much of the 19th century, the British government allowed them to function in order to keep the Chinese immigrant population in check. However, towards the end of the century, secret societies had caused so many problems for the colony that they soon became a public menace. For example, they evolved into crime syndicates and controlled brothels and gambling and opium dens. In addition, intense rivalries within and between secret societies, and the virtually unchecked influence of the secret societies contributed to a state of disorder with clashes amounting to public riots in the Straits Settlements between 1845 and 1885.

Smith stepped in to quell the activities of the secret societies and in fact, eliminate them altogether. He did this by passing a law, the landmark Societies Ordinance, in 1889. That same year, he also set up the Chinese Advisory Board in Singapore to facilitate communication between the colonial government and the Chinese community living there.

The ordinance came into effect on 1 January 1890. Under its provisions, societies of more than 10 members were deemed illegal unless they had obtained official approval and were registered with the government. Furthermore, the government was authorised to ban and dissolve any society it considered unlawful. The ordinance dealt a critical blow to the secret societies as the 10 major ones in Singapore were declared dangerous and were subsequently dissolved.

Initiatives and contributions

Besides addressing the problems caused by secret societies, Smith contributed to the colony in other ways. For instance, in 1885, he initiated and established the Queen's Scholarships, which enabled outstanding local students to attend British universities, funded by the British Government. Over the years, Queen's scholars returned to Singapore as doctors, lawyers and teachers.

Smith was respected and popular with all of Singapore's ethnic communities, especially the Chinese. His understanding of the language and culture endeared him to the leaders of Singapore's growing Chinese community. In fact, the Chinese petitioned for his continued leadership as Governor for another term following his retirement in 1893.

Upon his retirement in 1893, the Chinese community founded a Sir Cecil Clementi Smith Scholarship in honour of his contributions. The scholarship was awarded to bright Chinese students. Today, the scholarship, known as the Cecil C Smith Scholarship, is awarded to first-year National University of Singapore undergraduates with excellent academic results.

Clementi New Town and Cecil Street in Singapore are also named after him.

Smith was knighted in 1886 and died in England in 1916.

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