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TRADING PLACES

TEXT WONG SHER MAINE PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE AND SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS

BEFORE SHOPPING MALLS, people bought what they needed from shops that lined the island's network of five-foot ways.

These broad stretches of walkways in front of all buildings were mandated by Sir Stamford Raffles. He insisted they were covered to provide shelter from rain and sun.

They also served as storage space for shopkeepers, an extension of living space for those whose homes lined these pavements, as meeting places and space for recreation. With so much going on, they were also the obvious place to sell necessities and provide a service.

Sometimes the stalls were semi-permanent, on other occasions, the trader operated from a niche in the wall, such as the small lobby housing a flight of stairs leading to homes above a shop.

Many of the five-foot way traders (known as *gbo kba ki*

in Hokkien) sold food. A popular item was *t'ng chang*, a piece of hard malt candy and ground candy wrapped like a *popiah*. So was *kacang puteh*.

A number provided services. There were the letter writers who helped the illiterate pen an official memo to the authorities or a note to the folks back home, barbers, fortune tellers and shoeshine boys.

More unusual was the pavement library, where you could borrow a book for a week for a fee of 50 cents, the trader who sold feather dusters and brooms, and the pot menders who would solder the hole in a wellworn saucepan.

Today, only a shadow of the original activities on five-foot ways remain. There are still eateries, such as the one behind the bus-stop outside Far East Plaza, and the ice cream man at the side of the building housing Lido cinema. Generally though, the sidewalk traders have more or less disappeared, a result of modernisation and laws.



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- 01 Pot mender
- 02 Letter writer
- 03 Modern-day *mamak* stall in Holland Village
- 04 *Kacang puteh* man

MAMAK STALLS

The *mamak* stall used to be found in many places, stretched out along a wall at the side of a shop. It was always run by Indians, who would also sleep on the premises. There one would find comic books, magazines, little essentials such as sweets, nail clippers, combs, face creams and toothpaste, and of course, snacks. There is still a major one at Holland Village.



CINEMA ON WHEELS

Before multiplexes and movie theatres, you could pay a few cents to peep through the slots of this "cinema-on-wheels" and view favourite legendary or cartoon characters in action. A projector would be wired to a generator and a battery, and a movie box with 16 slots. The device was a hit with the young.