

Reminiscing About Orchard Road

A 1960 view of Singapore's trendy shopping street

By Florence Tay-Phuah

As a post-war era child who grew up in Singapore in the 50s and 60s, the Orchard Road of my youth is indelibly embedded in my heart and mind. I share feelings of sadness and longing each time a vintage building or neighbourhood I frequented is transformed into some modern glass and steel complex.

From where Orchard Road meets Orange Grove Road all the way to Scotts Road stood two-storey shophouses and large bungalows. Orchard Road was a dual carriageway lined with trees and bordered by monsoon drains that overflowed into the roadway during exceptionally heavy rains.

Until the construction of the new C K Tang Department Store, this section of Orchard Road contained no structures taller than three storeys. With its trees and large gardens, it was a reminder of the area's origin as a nutmeg plantation. The property that is now the Thai Embassy was a lovely flower nursery, and a vast Chinese cemetery occupied the land on which Ngee Ann City now stands.

Notwithstanding its relatively laid-back atmosphere, Orchard Road, then as now, was the trendy place to shop. The main 'action' was between Scotts and Killiney Roads. Antoinette's was a delightful shop that sold exotic Thai silks, hats, buttons and haberdashery imported from England and Europe. In the same row of shops was the Cozy Corner Café, serving western-style meals, where many young couples had dinner dates. The former Prince Hotel Garni, just after Bideford Road, held afternoon tea dances where swinging teenagers jived, rock 'n rolled and cha-cha'd the afternoon away.

Amazingly, Singapore had a furrier, Ali Joo, in the original Heeren Building on Orchard just before Cairnhill Road. We liked to ogle the fur jackets and stoles in the window displays as we walked by on our way to the Singapore Chinese Girls' School on Emerald Hill.

The space that is now Centrepoint held our beloved Magnolia Bar. My friends and I would set aside some of our weekly pocket money for Magnolia's rich ice-cream sundaes,



The Mandarin Peak of CK Tang's Department store is one 1960's icon that survived the upgrade of Orchard Road; photo courtesy of Memories of Singapore



There's still a Lido cinema in Orchard Road, but it's now encased in a shopping mall; photo courtesy of Jerome Lim

shakes and banana splits. We felt very grown up there, even in our conspicuous blue school uniforms.

The recently opened Orchard Central was a car park in the mid-60s. As vehicles left by the 5:00 pm limit, food vendors rolled in their carts. Under kerosene lanterns, the open-air dining area took on a magical atmosphere as hawkers clanged metal spatulas against their woks and the aromas of a thousand spices filled the air. In 1978, citing hygiene concerns, the government moved the hawkers to food centres.

A beautiful row of three-storey Peranakan-style shophouses filled with grocers, tailors and florists stood between this car park and Killiney Road. One barbershop served Singapore's top brass, including the then-Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. But it was fashion designer and hair stylist Roland Chow who made this stretch truly famous as he primped, dressed and styled Singapore's rich and famous in his candy-pink salon.

Just before the Killiney Road Post Office was a classic *kopitiam* (coffee shop) with the musical name of *Dong Log Wee*. With its clay-tiled floors, marble-top tables and bentwood chairs, it was a wonderful place to nibble calorie-laden cream cakes or kaya toast and half-boiled eggs while sipping rich roasted coffee or fragrant tea. I wonder if anyone in the family kept the owner's recipe for the wonderful curry puffs filled with potato, onion and minced meat?

Today, the landscaped gardens and imposing, guarded gates of the Istana, official residence of the President of Singapore, lend the former colonial Government House greater pomp and dignity than when it faced a traffic circus surrounded by car repair workshops and automobile showrooms. In the 1960s Wearne Brothers and Champion Motors sold popular Ford, Austin and Morris models here.

All that is behind us. Few now recall the old world charm and gentler pace that preceded today's gleaming malls.

Florence Tay-Phuah, a former teacher and Vice Principal of Singapore Chinese Girls' School, is a docent at National Museum of Singapore.
