



# Singapore River Reminiscences

## Boat Quay in the 1970s

By Jerome Lim

Riverside food stalls in the 1960s; photo courtesy of H D Horton

I first set eyes on the Singapore River in my very early years when I accompanied my mother on her regular forays to the department stores in Raffles Place. To get to them, we would cross the river on the wonderfully designed Cavenagh Bridge. The open balustrades of the bridge offered an excellent view of the comings and goings on the busy river. It was fascinating to the curious child that I was, to watch the heavily laden wooden *twakows* (cargo boats) straining upriver with the cargoes that their much larger, steel-hulled cousins in the inner harbour had fed them. Even more fascinating to me was the spirited movement downriver of the boats whose bellies had been emptied by the industrious coolies at the many *godowns* (warehouses) lining the river.

Watching the coolies at work fascinated me more than seeing the passing of the *twakows*. I would stop and stare at the men as they took small but quick steps across the narrow planks that linked the boats to the stepped, concrete banks of the river. The planks would strain under the weight – not so much that of the bare-bodied men themselves, but of the load that each balanced on one shoulder. The loads seemed not just to outweigh the men who bore them, but to be larger than the coolies' lightly built frames. At times it looked as if the planks were too narrow, but I never once saw those men lose the ability to balance themselves and the offset loads that they carried.

In those days, besides the colourful distractions that the *twakows*, *godowns* and coolies provided, the waterway had a reputation for its less than pleasant smell. In fact, many visitors who arrived prior to the late 1980s remember



Cavenagh Bridge; photo by Jerome Lim

Singapore for the river's smells. It was an odour that I well remember myself and was reason enough for my mother to avoid stopping by the very popular Boat Quay food stalls. These had fitted themselves onto the narrow strip of land between the back of the buildings that lined the river (one was the Bank of China Building) and the river itself.

Much of what went on in and around the river had indeed contributed to how it smelled, as well as to the murky waters through which the *twakows* ploughed. A massive effort to clean the river up began in 1977 and meant that the old life of the river would soon be a thing of the past. The *twakows*, a feature of the river for over a hundred years, disappeared in the early 1980s, an event that I somehow missed. By the time I got around to visiting the river again, they had vanished from the waters that had once held hundreds of them. Soon, the river was to be cut off from the sea that had given it life, with reclamation work at Marina South and the construction of the Marina Barrage. The river did not go quietly, however, and is now entering its next life, integrated into the modern metropolis that has grown up around it, as a future source of fresh water for Singapore's people.

Nevertheless, the river will always evoke its colourful past for me. I still look at it through the eyes of the child, and what I see are images of the *twakows*, coolies and *godowns* that are today all but forgotten.



Chinese labourers at work along the Singapore River, 1960; photo courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

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Jerome Lim blogs on The Long and Winding Road ([www.thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com](http://www.thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com)) about his many experiences and impressions of life and has been featured on sites such as [Yesterday.sg](http://Yesterday.sg) and [asia!](http://asia!)

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