

# Singapore Through a Curiosity Shop

By Shalini Mukerji

"Some old things, they're not worth the money you spend on them," declared Keng Ah Tong, owner of *Tong Mern Sern Antiques, Arts & Crafts*, while returning the sentimental keepsakes he'd polished and repaired for me. Grinning, he added, "Aiyoh! But I understand, there's a lot of emotion attached", then told me about the boy who had come to look for an old typewriter. When asked why he didn't use a computer, he'd replied, "On a computer, I don't get that feeling when I write a letter to my girlfriend." Uncle Keng's three-storey shophouse in Craig Road, as alluring as a treasure hunt, holds the promise that you'll find whatever obscure piece you may be looking for and the chance that its proprietor might share his quirky insights if he finds you interesting enough.



Craig Road shop with owner Keng Ah Tong

There's a banner above his shop cheekily telling passersby that, "We buy junk and sell antiques. Some fools buy, some fools sell." As a young boy Ah Tong sold peanuts so visitors could feed monkeys at the Botanic Gardens, then he was a mechanic at Jurong Shipyard before setting up shop in Tomlinson Road 35 years ago. I asked him what his junk shop/antique dealer story was. "I like to collect old things. At that time, I didn't know what is antique; I just took what people threw away. Aiyoh, a lot of change since then. At that time, so easy to get things, you could go anywhere, you could knock on people's doors asking if they wanted to get rid of anything. But now people don't like opening their house to you, they will never talk to strangers. I got a lot of things from Sungei Road and Temple Street, mostly from Chinese and Indian families and from the Chettiar Temple in River Valley. Indian families had brass items, cooking vessels and copper pots and from the Chinese families, I sourced porcelain."



Inside the Craig Road shop

Uncle Keng's motley collection contains old bolts from the windows and doors of terraced houses in River Valley, an Ajinomoto advertisement, a box made of Zippo lighters, incense boxes engraved with lions, prettily patterned china, carved headboards, louvred shutters and coloured glass windowpanes, brass lamps, industrial spare parts, figurines of Indian gods and Lao Tze on his water buffalo, wooden moulds, filigreed silver belts, tiffin carriers, old photos, tiles, clocks, typewriters, altars, chairs, wooden and leather trunks, hat stands, old search-lights, rattan baskets in which vendors once sold *laksa*, a *jinricksha* (two-wheeled passenger vehicle) and bicycles hung high from the ceiling of his three-storey shophouse. When I asked what he considers the



Keng Ah Tong with the music box

most precious item, he fished out a rusty hammer. "This is the port history of Singapore," he said and showed me an old B&W photograph of a dockyard worker hammering a nail into a ship's skeleton. "It shows how coolies built ships in Singapore, now no more. Some people from the Indian Heritage Centre came and bought these from me.



A wall of porcelain pieces

It is good that there is interest in finding out about Singapore's past. Otherwise people forget... Like, do you know that *jinricksha* came from the Japanese word *jinrikisha* and they were once Singapore's biggest suppliers?" Where people might use the phrase 'restoration', Uncle Keng says simply, "I myself fixed the *jinricksha* you see hanging here."

As a treat, Uncle Keng wound up his wonderful "at least 100 years old" music box that I'd mistaken for a grandfather clock, which he'd tinkered with and repaired. As tinkling notes filled the air he grinned mischievously, "I open my shop and wait for the right people to come with the right taste and the right money... the right fool you can say!"

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All photos by Gokul Rajan