

# Plantation House, Comfort Station, and Family Medicine Clinics – Memories of a JJK Shophouse

by Tsap-keng Chu (十間屋)

**C**omfort Women of Singapore in *Memories and History*, a 208-page book published by Nanyang Technology University (NTU) historian Professor Kevin Blackburn in 2022, jolted my memory of a dark period from 1942 to 1945 when I was used for sexual slavery by the Japanese army. From historical documents, Prof Blackburn painted the stories of enslaved women from Korea, the rest of the region, and he believed local women as well in the many comfort stations in Singapore and elsewhere.

Yet to date, no woman in Singapore, unlike those in Korea, stood up to seek redress. Korean activists had in 2012 planned to install a memorial next to me just like the statue in Seoul (see Figure 1). The plan was aborted. If you still have the gumption to learn more of what went on inside a “comfort station”, read Prof Blackburn’s book.

But I have pleasant memories too. Pre-war, I was a plantation house contributing to the economy of rural Singapore and, post-war, a centre for education and healing. These I now narrate.

Who am I? I am a row of 10 double-storey shophouses at the edge of a large tract of land in Western Singapore granted by the East India Company to Won Mo Choon and Low Ah Jit on 2 May 1857. Subsequent owners were Singapore pioneers such as Aboobakar Alkaff. The land was bought on 13 May 1902 by Cheong Chin Nam, a wealthy landowner, to develop plantations. After Cheong Chin Nam died inter-state in 1924, a small parcel on which I stand was transferred to the wife of his second son, Cheong E Peng, in 1929.

## Pre-war Plantation House

Cheong E Peng built me as his “plantation house” to administer the family holdings (Figure 2). I was known as “Tsap-keng Chu” (Hokkien for 十間屋, ten-unit house), a majestic row of double-storey shophouses situated at the crossroad of Bukit Timah Road and Jurong Road, the gateway to the wilderness of the west of Singapore. There was also a railway station stop nearby in the rail connecting Malaya up north to the wharves in the south.

There were pig farms and vegetable and fruit farms around me supplying food for the city folks. What attracted poor labourers to “ong lai soa” (黄梨山, pineapple hills) to work here were the rolling hills, ideal for pineapple plantations.

The preserved pineapples were then exported as exotic food to the west in glass bottles. A boom came when tin canning was used instead. Fruits grown were transported from a railway stop nearby to the canning factories and then to the wharves in Tanjong Pagar. In the early 1900s, Singapore was the world’s largest cannery and exporter of canned pineapples.

## Comfort Station

This idyllic “peace” of old Singapore was disrupted by the Japanese invasion. On 27 April 1942, the Japanese Army forcibly turned me into a comfort station called “Chibune” as documented in records of the 15th Independent Engineering Regiment. The records were captured by the allied forces in New Guinea where it failed to invade Australia after Singapore (see Side Story 1).

## A Beauty World

A cluster of zinc sheds and attap houses organically grew around me. It later became known as “Beauty World”, rural cousin to “Great World” and “New World”. Famous local playwright Michael Chiang and composer Dick Lee wrote the eponymous musical. Their caricatures of “Towkay Neo” and the farmers cavorting with the girls from south Malaya who flocked here to work in the gambling dens and “half-way cabaret”, complete the sleaze of this amusement park cum market. It served an economic function too. Poor farmers would get credit for fertilisers and animal feeds from the traders around and pay back in kind on harvest.

## Post-War Years

After the war, my owner, Cheong E Peng, was appointed by the British colonial masters as a comprador and “Chairman of the Rural Board”. He set up his office and rural residence here. Behind his office were educators from Seh Chuan School. Businessmen who needed licenses and folks who needed intercession with the government passed through my doors. There was left-wing activism here too. Political rallies and Chinese high school students’ concerts were staged in the temple grounds next to me. The hustle and bustle around me ceased when Singapore became independent.

1954 was the year a young man, Dr Wong Heck Sing, set up his clinic after graduating as a doctor. In a privately published book, *The Batam Years*, he recounted the years he spent as a farmer in Batam during the war and the many experiences he had tending to illnesses even then. His clinic Wong Dispensary at no. 78 was the first medical clinic in this part of rural Singapore. He soon expanded his practice to Bukit Panjang. Dr Wong was later to co-found the College of Family Physicians in 1972.

Dr Koh Eng Kheng and Dr James Chang, past president and censor-in-chief respectively of the College, also set up their clinics, Chung Khiaw Clinic (1957) and Chang Clinic

(1965), in “new” buildings in the vicinity. Dr Tan Kok Soo, a past president of the Singapore Medical Association, started Jurong Dispensary (1970s) nearby. His father was a famous local merchant.

**A Road Less Travelled**

In 1980, Dr Cheong Pak Yean, Cheong E Peng’s son, chose to start up his practice at 76 JJK after successfully attaining the masters of medicine (IM) and membership of the Royal Colleges. In a twist of history, Dr Wong returned to his roots in 1992 and co-located Wong Dispensary with Cheong Medical Clinic (CMC) until he retired in 1996. Many sentinel events of the Family Medicine (FM) movement in Singapore were inaugurated in the offices above CMC, spearheaded by Prof Goh Lee Gan, Prof Cheong Pak Yean, and Dr Julian Lim (see Side Story 2 FM milestones in Tsap-keng Chu JJK).

The JJK area was thus known for its medical clinics serving the many private housing estates that sprung up around me. The names of nearby roads like “Lorong Pisang xxx” and roads named after persons provide clues that the area was once an orchard owned by Cheong Chin Nam and family.

The buildings in which the Dr Koh, Chang, and Tan practices were sited has since been demolished. I am saved from oblivion because of the dark heritage of the war (1942-45), which Prof Blackburn meticulously documented. “Singapore [...] had (in 2002) become the first country to conserve a comfort station because it had been a comfort station. China would not do so until the 2010s”. Now in my eighties. I hasten to provide this panorama to narrate my life and times before and after. Lest I forget.



Figure 1. Photo of a comfort woman statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul taken by Dr Wong Tien Hua. Note the etched “shadow” of the young girl as a wizened bent woman on the pavement.



Figure 2. Photo of the JJK shophouses now. Photo taken by Dr Julian Lim of the row of ten shop-houses now. Cheong Medical Clinic is at the extreme right hand.

**Side Story 1**

Announcement of Opening of Comfort station, 27 April 1942

1	Imperial Japanese Army Unit	Allocated Days
	Takaya Butai	Sun, Mon, Tue
	Imperial Japanese Army Unit	Thu, Fri
	Imperial Japanese Army Unit	Sat
	Imperial Japanese Army Unit	Wed will be medical exam day
2	Charges	Hours of Use
	Privates 1 Yen	1200-1930 hours
	NCO Yen 1.50	1200-2100 hours
	Imperial Japanese Army Unit	Imperial Japanese Army Unit
The Chibune relaxation house will be closed on the first Wed of every month.		

**Side Story 2**

Milestones of Family Medicine in Tsap-keng Chu

1954	Wong Dispensary by Dr Wong Heck Sing at 78 JJK
1980	Cheong Medical Clinic by Dr Cheong Pak Yean at 76 JJK
1989	Founding of FM PCN Health Maintenance Office PL by 40 GPs
1994	FM posting for trainees of MOH to CMC
1995	Master of Medicine FM private practitioners’ stream weekly classes started above CMC. Dr Tan See Leng, then FM trainee, provided the headline “No frogs in well. Doctors go back to school” as quoted in “Life at Large”, page 6 of <i>The Straits Times</i> , 27 Sep 1996
1998	Opening of the Graduate Family Medicine Centre and the inauguration of the Fellowship FCFP on 9 Oct 1998 with inaugural lecture given by Professor John Murtagh
2020	Hosted the first online GDFM workshop via Zoom on 8 Feb 2020, one day after DORSCON Orange for the COVID-19 pandemic was announced