

In the 1870s, for every woman,
there were 15 men.

Out & About 3

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Weekend

Peel off the multicoloured veneer of the restored 19th-century shophouses in Singapore's Chinatown, you'll unfurl tales of immigrant slaves, opium trade and the world's oldest profession. LEONG SIOK HUI took a walking tour at a place once known as 'Bu Ye Tian' (the place of nightless days).

Pictures by DINESH NADASAN

WHAT is the significance of hanging red lanterns by the door?" asked our guide, Helena Poon. For the Chinese, red lanterns indicate auspicious affairs like weddings, birthday celebrations and Chinese New Year.

But in this part of town, the red lanterns hold a different meaning. "They beckon the men into the brothels," said Poon of Journeys Pte Ltd, a Singapore tour company specialising in themed walking tours around the city. "Welcome to the Secrets of the Red Lantern walk. You will learn about the history of prostitution and entertainment in Singapore."

Our two-hour plus tour would take us along the different cross-sections of Chinatown, starting from Pagoda Street, past Trengganu Street, South Bridge Road and ending up in Keong Saik Road where remnants of the thriving 19th-century prostitution era remains.

Our group that evening consisted of 15 foreign tourists and a few staff from an airline company. Poon, using a small microphone, herded us along.

Bordered by Upper Pickering Street, Cantonment Road, New Bridge Road and South Bridge Road, Chinatown is known as *niu che sui* (bullock cart water in

Lure of the red lanterns



The tour guide showing a picture of a 19th century Chinese prostitute in Singapore.

Mandarin) and Kereta Ayer (in Malay). In the old days, the only source of fresh water in this area was from wells in Ann Siang Hill and Spring Street. Each household had to collect fresh water from bullock-drawn carts.

In 1821, immigrants arrived in junks from China and set up homes in the Telok Ayer area (watery bay). Then, Telok Ayer Street was the waterfront before land reclamation projects began.

In 1822, Sir Stamford Raffles, as part of his town planning, settled the Chinese community in this area.

Today's Chinatown elicits mixed reactions from different people. Some visitors find the touched-up shop houses, splashed in hues of bright yellow, ruby scarlet or emerald green, a tad too sanitised and gentrified. Refurbished 19th-century buildings with spotless five-foot-ways now house fancy restaurants, gift shops and trendy nightspots.

Yet, the place does retain some of its original aura. Mouth-watering aroma of dried BBQ meat, herbal-boiled eggs and steaming noodles waft by as you stroll along streets lined with traditional Chinese teahouses, herbal medicine shops, chicken rice shops and kopitians. Hawkers peddling sweetmeats, snacks or cheesy trinkets boller bargains at customers. Occasionally, you'll stumble on craftsmen fashioning their age-old trades like wooden clogs, paper effigies, joss sticks and paper lanterns.

On that balmy Friday evening, we were transported back to the late 1800s as Poon filled us in on anecdotes about the streets and spruced-up, old buildings.

More than a century ago, young, robust Chinese men set sail in "hell" ships (packed like sardines in barges) for a land paved with gold, or so they heard. When the barges pulled into Singapore port three weeks later, most of the men had perished from the

harsh conditions during the journey.

Some of these Chinese coolies were held at slave-holding stations while awaiting auctions. Those who came on their free will couldn't find jobs. They roughed it out as rickshaw pullers, earning 40 cents a day tramping the scorching streets. To deal with the hardship, they turned to opium, known as *fu shou kuo* (happiness and long-life cake).

In 1870s, for every woman, there were 15 men. Women were sold into the flesh trade. Those who tried to escape were abused. The prostitutes had to service an average of 10 men a night, earning \$52.40 a day.

Come Chinese New Year, a prostitute could expect up to 30 clients a day when the men got their bonuses. By 1887, brothels in Chinatown were as many and as close together as the teeth of a comb. Coupled with the glut of opium and gambling dens, Chinatown was dubbed the sin city.

Journey's staff team painstakingly researched and collected old, yellowed photographs of the 1800s to take us on this historical stroll. We gazed at pictures of a guy toting the "honey buckets" on a pole to collect human excrement from houses before the arrival of the modern sewage system, pretty portraits of the dewy-faced *oh ku* (Chinese prostitute) or *karayuki-san* (Japanese prostitutes).

One of our stops was a Chinese medical hall. A must-have for men before they head to the brothels. Chinese sexual tonics made from animals' sexual organs with names like "Strong Dragon Doesn't Fall," have been around for ages before the word Viagra was even coined. The choices for "lifting up your sexual mojo" are mind-boggling but ask the shop

proprietor to recommend something if you're at a loss.

Our fascinating saunter ended at Keong Saik Road, traditionally a red-light district. In recent years, most of the brothels have moved away to trendier and upmarket red-light areas like Geylang.

Keong Saik's old shophouses and funky, art-deco buildings built in the 1920s underwent a face-lift. Artsy companies like ad agencies, art gallery, cafes and boutique hotels have replaced seedy brothels.

Smatterings of brothels decorated with red lanterns still remain. Big, bold numbers and bright neon or fluorescent lights at the entrances greet prospective customers. Prostitution, brothels and soliciting are illegal in Singapore. However, it is tolerated in designated red-light areas like Geylang and Keong Saik Road. Prostitutes carry a yellow health card and must report regularly for health checks.

But at Keong Saik Road, there are two "kinds" of people not welcomed in these brothels - women and Malaysian men, Poon said. Police conduct raids in these brothels sporadically, and if a lady in the brothel has no health card, she will be arrested. Malaysian men are not welcomed to spare the awkwardness of bumping into their relatives or friends moonlighting in these establishments.

As we shuffled passed the brothels' entrances and peered in, our views were blocked by strategically-placed partitions. Guess we ladies will never have a chance to see what it looks like inside. Our tour revealed a rich history peppered with interesting anecdotes. But the walk could stretch longer than two hours if the crowd is large.

Just make sure you slip on a pair of comfy shoes. **W**