

Biographical Notes

Wong Ah Fook (12 March 1837 – 12 September 1918) – Businessman/philanthropist

Wong Ah Fook was a well-known businessman in Singapore and Johor Bahru in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Wong was born Wong Fook Kee on 12 March 1837 to Wong Mau Chiu, a poor peasant in Taishan, Guangdong.¹ In 1854, at the age of 17, Wong came to Singapore to escape poverty and the upheavals caused by civil wars in China.² He apprenticed himself to a carpenter, who a few years later, gave Wong a share of the business.³

Wong later started his own business, Him Yuen & Co.⁴ By the 1860s, Wong had made the acquaintance of Temenggong Sri Maharaja Abu Bakar of Johor (later Sultan Abu Bakar) and went on to establish a business relationship with him. That relationship formed the foundation of Wong's expansion into Johor Bahru, where he eventually made his fortune.⁵

In the later part of the 19th century, Wong became one of the biggest government contractors in Johor,⁶ with several key buildings to his name. They included the Istana Besar (1864),⁷ Istana Zahara and Balai Zaharah (1889),⁸ and Senyum, the residence of Johor's first Mentri Besar (1893),⁹ among others. Wong was also involved in the building and maintenance of public works,¹⁰ including the jail in Johor Bahru.¹¹ Wong was also granted revenue farming (gambier and pepper) by the Johor government between 1886 and 1891.¹²

In 1892, Sultan Abu Bakar granted Wong a substantial tract of land in what is today's central Johor Bahru for "services rendered". That area came to be known as Kampong Ah Fook. There, Wong built roads that connected to his properties. The main arterial road was Jalan Wong Ah Fook, and the three other roads in the vicinity were named after Wong's older sons - Jalan Siu Nam, Jalan Siu Kun and Jalan Siu Chin.¹³ Between 1892 and 1908, Wong was granted the revenue farming concession for gambling houses and opium shops in Kampong Ah Fook.¹⁴

¹ ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection: a descriptive catalogue of a collection of research materials on an immigrant, builder and entrepreneur*, Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (2018), p. xvii; Lim Pui Huen, P., *Wong Ah Fook: immigrant, builder and entrepreneur*, Singapore: Times Editions (2002), p. 12.

² Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, pp. 23-27.

³ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, p. 34.

⁴ Song Ong Siang, *One hundred years' history of the Chinese in Singapore* (the annotated edition), Singapore: National Library Board (2016), p. 515.

⁵ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, pp. 36-37, 42.

⁶ "Death of towkay Wong Ah Fook", *The Straits Times*, 13 September 1918; Song, *One hundred years' history*, p. 512.

⁷ ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection*, p. xxi.

⁸ ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection*, p. xxiii.

⁹ ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection*, p. xxiii.

¹⁰ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, p. 70.

¹¹ 历史的两端, 《联合早报》, 12 July 2010.

¹² ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection*, p. xxii; *Wong Ah Fook*, pp. 77-79.

¹³ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, pp. 84, 89, 91; Lim Pui Huen, P., "Past and Present Juxtaposed: The Chinese of Nineteenth Century Johor", *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (April 1998), p. 130.

¹⁴ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, pp. 91, 93.

Wong also left his mark on Singapore, where he built Sultan Abu Bakar's palace and the Istana Tyersall (1892).¹⁵ He was also involved in the construction of the Victoria Memorial Hall (1905), being on the local committee raising funds for the project.¹⁶

Besides construction and gambier farming, Wong was also involved in banking. He was a founder, managing director and principal promoter of the Kwong Yik Bank.¹⁷ Established in 1903 to serve the needs of the local Chinese businesses, the Bank was the first Chinese bank to be incorporated in Malaya.¹⁸ The bank was liquidated in 1913 following mismanagement by some directors.¹⁹

Beyond business, Wong was active in philanthropy and community service. Wong donated to various charities and social organisations, such as Tan Tock Seng's hospital.²⁰ In 1904, the Sultan of Johor conferred the Seri Mahkota Johor on Wong for services rendered.²¹ He was also made a Justice of Peace.²²

Wong was also community leader especially among the Cantonese. He was one of the founders of the Cantonese clan association, Persatuan Kwong Siew Wai Kuan,²³ and was one of the first directors of the Foon Yew School established by the association in 1912.²⁴

He helped established the Kwong Wai Siu Hospital (1911)²⁵ and was the first president of the Board of trustees.²⁶ He also was one of the founders of the Cantonese cemetery grounds, the Kwong Wai Siu Pek San Theng (1906).²⁷

Wong had two wives, with whom he had nine children. Among them were prominent businessmen S Q Wong and S K Wong.²⁸

¹⁵ ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection*, p. xxiii.

¹⁶ Victorial Memorial Hall. *The Straits Times*, 19 October 1905, p. 5; Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, p. 127; 先驱人物黄亚福建维多利亚剧院, 《联合晚报》 2nd edition, 16 July 2000.

¹⁷ Tan Ee Leong, "The Chinese banks incorporated in Singapore and the Federation of Malaya", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (161) (July, 1953), pp. 113-114; ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection*, p. xxiii.

¹⁸ Tan, "The Chinese banks incorporated in Singapore", p. 114.

¹⁹ Tan, "The Chinese banks incorporated in Singapore", p. 115; "Kwong Yik Bank established", *HistorySG website* (2014), retrieved from <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/d79189ba-007c-4581-88ea-f33214266c8a>

²⁰ "Tan Tock Seng's hospital", *The Straits Times*, 3 January 1903.

²¹ "Death of towkay Wong Ah Fook", *The Straits Times*, 13 September 1918; Song, *One hundred years' history*, p. 512.

²² "Death of towkay Wong Ah Fook", *The Straits Times*, 13 September 1918.

²³ 新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会 《新加坡华人通史》, 新加坡: 新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会 (2015), p. 753; "About us", 会馆史略/创办人黄亚福, retrieved from <http://ksjbstory.gbs2u.com/bd/index3.asp?userid=64320043&idno=3>,

²⁴ "About us", 会馆史略/创办人黄亚福, retrieved from <http://ksjbstory.gbs2u.com/bd/index3.asp?userid=64320043&idno=3>

²⁵ ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection*, p. xxiv.

²⁶ Song, *One hundred years' history*, p. 515.

²⁷ ISEAS Library, *Wong Ah Fook collection*, p. xxiv; 新柔两地创辉煌 《联合早报》 17 December 2000.

²⁸ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, p. 166.

Wong died on 12 September 1918 in Singapore, and he was buried at the Kwong Wai Siu Pek San Theng.²⁹

²⁹ Lim, *Wong Ah Fook*, p. 148.