

Records and Voices of Social History: The Case of the Great Depression in Singapore*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the roles of written and oral records in the writing of the social history of Singapore. It takes the case of the early 1930s Great Depression, which has hitherto been treated as a subject of economic history, written from the colonial records. This paper examines how using in conjunction colonial, newspaper, coroner, biographical, and oral records provides a window into the social history of the slump, enabling fresh perspectives into how people were affected by the crisis and how they sought to negotiate it. While a global economic slump might be thought to have severe effects on the residents of a colonial city reliant on entrepot trade, evidence drawn from the wider range of sources suggests that the slump's impact was not uniformly harsh and that people in Singapore were not hapless victims. Many of them actively negotiated the Depression's worst effects, utilising family and kinship ties which had developed among the island's migrant communities.

Keywords: Singapore history, Great Depression, social history, oral records, coroner's records

The writing of social history in Singapore has undergone considerable development in recent years. Much published social history between the 1980s and the present was influenced by the politics of nation-building and belonged to the realm of public and popular history. Such works, which tended to focus on the island-state's migrant communities, their customs and associations, and the places where they stayed, were conceived typically in ethnic and subethnic terms and framed within the matrix of the multiracialism ethos of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government [see Archives and Oral History Department 1983; Siddique and Shotam-Go 1983; Tang 1993]. While fleshing out the lives of ordinary people vividly in photographs and oral history interviews, these histories focussed not on the people per se but their supposed "entrepreneurial spirit, values and adaptability" [Singapore 1988: 38], which were held to be an important adjunct to nation-building:

The time period since 1819 . . . was what made the country and its people today. And this would

* I am grateful to Erik Holmberg, Hong Lysa, Albert Lau, and Jim Warren for their comments on drafts of this article.

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be what will shape its future and furnish the ingredients of a national identity [Rajaratnam 1987].¹⁾

Only in the late 1980s did a more sophisticated social history emerge that attempted to examine the communities of Singapore on their own terms and independently of the nation-building programme. James Warren [2003a; 2003b] provided the impetus with two bold, striking works of “people’s history” — on rickshaw pullers in 1986 and on Chinese and Japanese prostitutes in 1993. Both books represented an important advance in focussing on occupational group and gender rather than ethnicity and showing a critical view of the colonial system. Warren also introduced an exciting new source for the history of the “underclass”: coroner’s records. Katherine Yeo’s M. A. thesis [1989] on hawkers also emphasised occupational group and utilised the coroner’s records and police court notebooks. The endeavour to write history from below continued with *The Underside of Malaysian History: Pullers, Prostitutes, Plantation Workers*, which sought to “reconstruct the everyday lives of the people” in Malaya and Singapore [Rimmer and Allen 1990: 8–11], and Stephen Dobbs’ book [2003] on the Singapore River, which drew upon the interviews of lightermen operating on the river. The Second World War, an important episode in Singapore’s political and military history, has also come under the lens of social history. Paul Kratoska’s social and economic history of the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore examined the event from a Malayan perspective by drawing from official and oral records [1998: 1], while the late Henry Frei [2004] retraced the Malayan campaign from the perspective of the Japanese attackers, utilising the memoirs and oral recollections of six Japanese soldiers.

Around the same time, social history also began to attract scholars from other disciplines at the National University of Singapore. The field of historical geography has engaged human geographers such as Lily Kong, Victor Savage and Brenda Yeoh [Kong and Savage 1999: 102–104; also Yeoh and Kong 1995]. Noting that space has been portrayed merely as a “backdrop” in most historical narratives of Singapore, Yeoh argued that to “reclaim ordinary people’s historical trajectories through their own experiences, it also becomes necessary to reconstruct their spatial mappings through their own eyes” [2003a: 32–39]. Yeoh’s book on the efforts, both violent and subtle, of the Chinese community in contesting space in colonial Singapore, is an important work in showing the intimate world-view of the Chinese, as shaped by their traditional culture and religion [2003b: 9–10]. Due to the scarcity of materials on ordinary people, Yeoh utilised a critical reading of colonial and municipal records [*ibid.*: 18–20]. Sociologists have also turned to social history as a way of critically re-evaluating Singapore’s present. Chua Beng Huat has studied the history of housing to discern the politics of control in the PAP’s public housing programme [Yee and Chua 1999: 229–230, 240–241; also Chua 1994]. The multi-

1) S. Rajaratnam was then Singapore’s Senior Minister.

disciplinary approach can also be seen in the 2003 coffee-table book on social and cultural change in Singapore, *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore*. Its reader-friendly style with short, photograph-laced chapters belies its theoretical sophistication. Contributors to the book were told to “write a think piece with sociological and anthropological insights, and interweave it with archival photographs.” The editors stated that:

[w]e do not wish to reify the past but by drawing on the sociological imagination and the anthropological vision, to present it as a living culture, always mindful of its inherent contradictions and tensions. [Chan and Tong 2003: 10, 14]

The recent social history, consequently, is marked by a diversity of methodologies and sources. This essay examines how the experiences of ordinary people might be better understood by examining sources on life in Singapore during the Great Depression. The paper is admittedly based on a single case study and how far its conclusions are generalisable is a matter of debate. However the challenge of writing about how ordinary people coped with change and crisis applies to many areas of Singapore’s history. The paper is also a preliminary discussion: due to the time constraints imposed on the research on which this paper is based, I have not been able to look at Chinese-language sources, or conduct interviews with people of Chinese-speaking backgrounds.²⁾ These materials are important, for the Chinese made up three-quarters of Singapore’s population in 1931 [Vlieland 1932: 126].

This paper is concerned with two important questions in social history: what was the slump’s impact on ordinary people, and how did they endeavour to negotiate it? It will argue that using different sources in combination helps us to understand the slump’s impact more fully than merely using one type of source alone. Colonial records, an indispensable resource in social history, are invaluable in charting the impersonal macroeconomic developments during the slump, which Bernard Bailyn called the “latent events — that is, events that contemporaries were not fully or clearly aware of” [1982: 9]. On the other hand, oral, autobiographical, newspaper, and coroner’s records, which are still under-utilised in much local history, provide a window into the “inside” of the past [Collingwood 1956: 213]. They enable us to recreate the past as it was experienced by ordinary people and to understand how they attempted to negotiate change and crisis.

2) I have, however, conducted interviews in Mandarin and Hokkien with former leprosy patients for a paper on the history of leprosy in Singapore. The paper, which is partly based on the experiences of those with leprosy, is in preparation; “They Called Us *Thai-ko*: Leprosy Sufferers in Singapore, 1819–2005.”

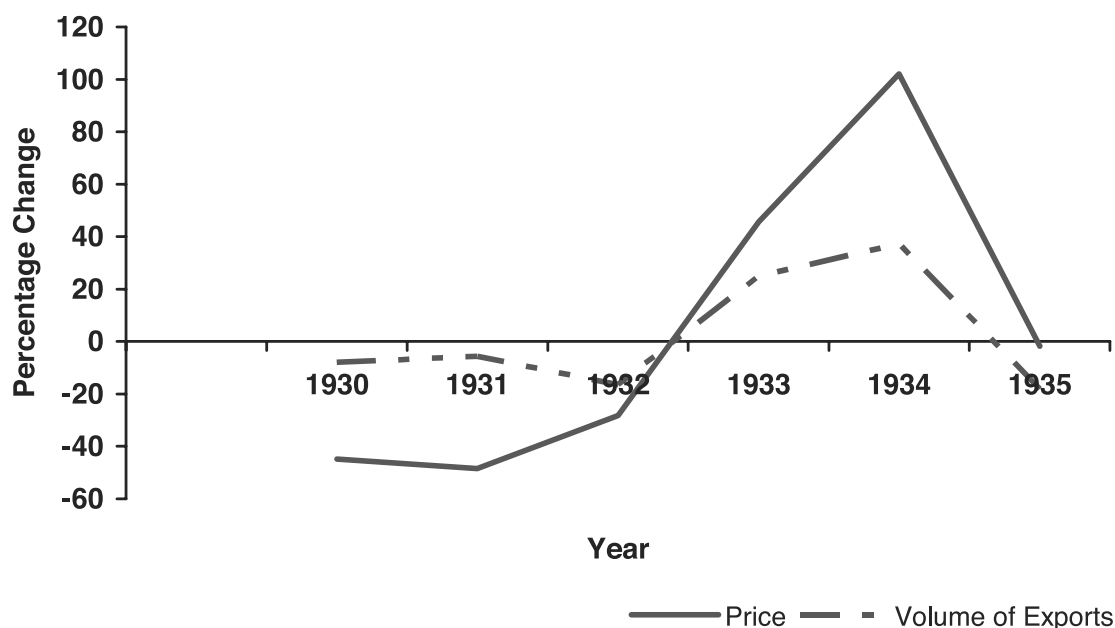
Colonial Records

Hitherto, the Depression has been studied within the confines of economic history, primary of which is the heavy reliance of Singapore's economy in the late 1920s on entrepot trade. The trade involved the collection of primary commodities from Malaya and the Dutch East Indies for export to the West, such as rubber (the most important item of trade), tin, tropical produce, and petroleum, and the import of Western manufactures and consumer goods to be distributed regionally [see Wong 1978; Huff 1994]. The "Roaring Twenties" in the United States — a period of boom marked by overproduction of consumer goods such as automobiles and radios — lifted Singapore's economy. However, the Wall Street crash in late October 1929, which precipitated the Depression, led to

Table 1 Rubber Prices and Exports in Singapore, 1929–35

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Price (cents/pound)	34.45	19.00	9.78	7.01	10.21	20.63	20.25
% Price change	—	-44.8	-48.5	-28.3	+45.6	+102.1	-1.8
Vol. exports ('000 tons)	253.9	233.8	220.5	184.3	230.4	316.0	258.6
% Volume change	—	-7.9	-5.7	-16.4	+25.0	+37.2	-18.2
Value exports (\$m)	183.6	100.5	50.0	28.5	45.5	124.0	112.4

Percentage Change in Rubber Prices & Export Volume in Singapore



Source: Compiled from SSAR [1998: Vols. 9–10, 1929–35].

Table 2 Foreign Trade in Singapore, 1929–35

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Value of foreign trade (\$m)	1,171	934	602	530	513	668	674

Source: Compiled from SSAR [1998: Vols. 9–10, 1929–35].

a heavy contraction of demand for the primary commodities and severe, protracted falls in their prices. Worst affected was rubber, which was badly hit by the downsizing of the American automobile industry (see Table 1). Both smallholders and the European estates in Malaya and the Dutch Indies continued to tap rubber despite the low prices, the former to make up for dwindling incomes, the latter to keep unit costs down [Dunlop Rubber 1930; Drabble 1991: 49–50]. This, in turn, further depressed rubber prices and caused a massive plunge in Singapore’s trade between late 1929 and 1933 (see Table 2). Only when commodity prices were substantially lifted by government intervention to curb production, improved business confidence and smallholders shifting from cash crops to subsistence agriculture, did the vicious cycle of overproduction and price collapses come to a halt. In 1933, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Cecil Clementi, declared that “the worst is now over, so far as we are concerned, and I pray that we may soon be once more in smooth waters” [SSLCP 1933: B 122].

In this framework, as might be apparent from the preceding discussion, colonial records are the chief source of information. On the basis of the evidence on trade, business and employment, the customary view has been that early 1930s Singapore was “a depressing place for all communities” [Turnbull 1989: 135]. A recent study by W. G. Huff [2001], an economic historian, utilised official records and assessed the Depression using the concept of “entitlements” (factors that help to cushion economic shocks). Huff’s detailed paper concludes that people in Singapore, with little savings and no land ownership, possessed few entitlements and were badly struck by the slump. This paper, on the other hand, argues that its net impact must be measured by looking at both economic and social aspects of life, including colonial policy, the macroeconomic forces and how people *responded* to the crisis within their social circles.

The records of the British government of the Straits Settlements represent the most readily-available source for social history. The amount and scope of information in the colonial records is impressive. The Straits Settlements annual departmental series on health, wages, immigration, cost of living, and crime, its monthly review of Chinese affairs, the annual reports of the Singapore Municipality, the minutes of the Legislative Council proceedings, special reports commissioned by the government on retrenchment, hawking, education, and various matters of trade, and the 1931 Malayan census cover a broad range of matters pertinent to life in the early 1930s. Colonial records, as Albert Lau noted, are indispensable for many areas of Singapore’s history, particularly since the majority of people were illiterate and often left behind no written records of their own [1992: 58]. In the 1931 Census of British Malaya, only 31.2% of Singapore’s population

were literate in a language, and for literacy in English, only 9.3% of the Chinese, 4.9% of the Malays, and 12.1% of the Indians [Vlieland 1932: 328, 353–355]. James Warren in *Rickshaw Coolie* observed that, despite their biases, there is “buried in the colonial sources a wealth of information on the rickshawmen” [2003b: 4].

The colonial records contain official statistics which are valuable in both charting and explaining crucial developments at the societal level. On the one hand, statistics pertaining to trade, employment and wages naturally highlight the distressful side of life. As Table 3 shows, the wages of Indian estate workers (the de facto standard wage for labourers in Singapore) fell most heavily, by 39% for males and 40% for females between 1930 and 1933. The Labour Department’s records also reveal heavy retrenchment, affecting, among estate workers between 1929 and 1932, 57% of the Javanese, 45% of the Chinese and 75% of the Indians, and among labourers in mercantile firms, 14% of the Chinese between 1929 and 1931, and 23% of Indians and 39% of the Javanese between 1929 and 1932.

However colonial records also contain other quantitative evidence which, by measuring the mean, allow us to construct indices on the quality of life, such as mortality and crime. During the Depression, Singapore’s mortality figures were particularly high in 1930, but fell significantly in the next three years — the worst period of the Depression — before rising again in 1934, when the slump was ending (see Tables 4 and 5). Statistics on non-seizable and seizable crime³⁾ show a similar trend, with little evidence of the

Table 3 Wages of Indian Labourers in Singapore, 1929–35

	(cents per day)						
	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Male estate workers	50–65*	40–50	35–40	25–40	28–40	30–55	35–40
Female estate workers	45–50	35–45	32–35	20–30	24–30	28–35	32
Government employees	55–70	58–70	47–64	47–55	40–96	40–96	40–95
Miscellaneous employees	60–90	60–80	50–85	50–80	50–80	50–80	55–108

Source: Compiled from Labour Department, *SSADR* [1929–35].

* The lower figure denotes wages for morning work.

Table 4 Mortality and Reports of Crime in Singapore, 1929–35

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Death rate (per thousand)	25.84	27.62	24.20	20.40	22.51	24.07	24.32
Non-seizable crime	67,670	72,649	61,023	60,115	56,876	72,657	73,681
Seizable crime	4,598	5,101	4,996	4,905	3,829	3,307	3,725

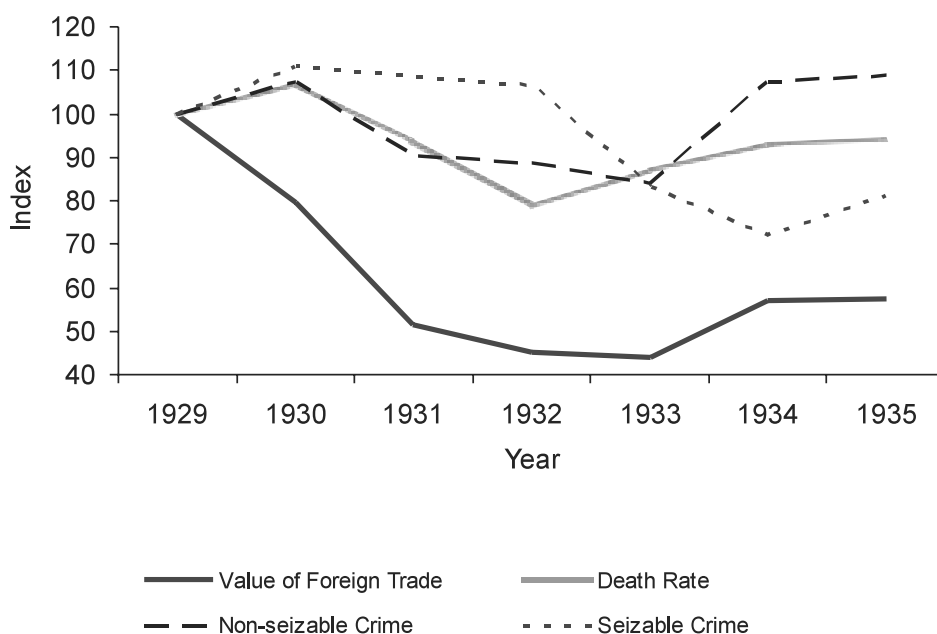
Source: Compiled from Registration of Birth and Deaths, *SSADR* [1929–35].

Organisation and the Administration of the Straits Settlements Police, *SSADR* [1929–35].

3) Non-seizable crime refers to minor punishable offences such as street indiscipline, while seizable crime refers to more serious offences such as murder and robbery.

Table 5 Foreign Trade, Mortality, and Reports of Crime Indices in Singapore, 1929–35
(1929=100)

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Value of foreign trade	100	79.8	51.4	45.3	43.8	57.0	57.6
Death rate	100	106.9	93.7	78.9	87.1	93.2	94.1
Non-seizable crime	100	107.4	90.2	88.8	84.0	107.4	108.9
Seizable crime	100	110.9	108.7	106.7	83.3	71.9	81.0



Sources: See the sources of Table 2, 3, 4.

Depression driving impoverished people to crimes of material want or passion [SSP 1934: 428]. The mortality and crime figures suggest that life was tolerable for most people after 1930. Indeed the cost of living and the mortality and crime rates gradually rose from 1934 as the economy recovered, contributing to the outbreak of strikes against the high cost of living and low wages in Malaya and Singapore in 1936–37 [Yeo 1976].

Besides assessing the quality of life, colonial records also offer a partial explanation for it. From August 1930, the British implemented and in some cases assisted mass emigration and repatriation of unemployed Indians and decrepit and derelict Chinese from Singapore to China and India, as the settlement was facing serious overcrowding due to the “invasion” of unemployed Chinese from the Malay peninsula [SSLCP 1930: B 130]. This led to the departure of many foreign-born to their home countries who lacked family and social support in Singapore. From October 1930, the administration also set immigration quotas, preventing unskilled workers from entering and easing the problem of unemployment. These policies are duly covered in the *Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings* and have been studied by Paul Kratoska and W.G. Huff, who

Table 6 Adult Male Chinese Arrivals in the Straits Settlements, 1929–34

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Number of arrivals	195,613	151,693	50,102	18,741	13,535	52,023

Source: Compiled from SSAR [1998: Vols. 9–10, 1929–34].

Table 7 Cost of Living Index in Singapore, 1929–35 (1929=100)

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Asian	100	94.8	80.3	69.8	63.8	66.3	69.5
Eurasian	100	94.7	84.2	74.9	70.0	71.9	72.2
European	100	96.5	90.2	83.3	79.0	80.2	80.4

Source: Compiled from Labour Wages and Cost of Living, SSBB [1929–35].

Table 8 Real Wages Index for Male Indian Labourers in Singapore, 1929–35 (1929=100)

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Municipal	100	105.5	113.8	112.6	214.9	206.8	195.3
Estate	100	81.1	76.6	88.1	96.4	127.6	88.5
Rubber factory	100	79.1	93.4	98.6	107.8	103.8	99.0
Manufacturing	100	105.5	117.6	127.4	139.3	134.1	172.7

Source: Compiled from Labour Wages and Cost of Living, SSBB [1929–35].

concluded that “only mass emigration prevented the depression from turning into a disaster” [Huff 2001: 313; also Kratoska 2000]. The effect of the immigration policies was to significantly reduce the number of male adult Chinese arrivals between 1930 and 1933 (see Table 6). Following the outflow of unemployables, particularly the foreign-born, the mortality and crime rates fell between 1931 and 1933 (see Table 4). An official report attributed the fall of the death rate in 1931 to the “weeding” of “most of the decrepits and unfits” [HD 1931: 49–D]. From a larger perspective, the mass emigration, as Paul Kratoska noted, had the positive effect of making Malaya more autonomous and less dependent on foreign labour supply; it prompted the British government to accept that “Malaya should abandon the practise of importing labour and instead develop permanently domiciled Indian and Chinese workforces” [Kratoska 2000: 287].

The second factor affecting life during the slump was the cost of living, which fell substantially from 1931 and helped ease the problem of unemployment (see Table 7). The colonial records allow us to calculate real wages for different groups of Indian labourers. Table 8 shows that while estate and rubber factory workers suffered a loss in purchasing power, labourers employed in the Municipality and manufacturing industries enjoyed an *increase* in real wages. Although the statistics are available only for Indian labourers, the positive effects of the low cost of living for other ethnic and employment groups can be seen in other sources like newspapers, oral records and autobiographies.

Gwee Peng Kwee, a rubber broker, remembered because “[t]hings were cheap in those days,” “in spite of that slump, although we felt the pinch, we managed to carry on” [OHI 1981: 61–62]. Government employees, who formed 8% of the active workforce in 1931, enjoyed an increase in real wages. Soh Wah Seng, a civil servant on a stable salary, recalled the affordability of leather shoes from England at \$4–5 a pair, suits at \$2.50 and silk socks at 60 cents a pair [OHI 1983].

Recent scholarship on the Depression’s impact on Southeast Asia has substantiated the usefulness of the official record. A group of economic historians led by Ian Brown have carefully studied statistics on commodity prices, trade, income, taxes, food consumption, crime, and infant and adult mortality in the official records to discern the slump’s impact on the region’s cities and rural areas. On the basis of these studies, they have overturned the old perception that the crisis was a disaster for all. Brown has argued that “the economic crisis of the early 1930s may have brought only a relatively modest deterioration in material conditions, even in those districts where the depression appears to have had a more severe impact” [1997: 222–223]. Brown [2000] found that Burmese farmers spent increasing portions of their incomes on imported cotton piece-goods during the Depression, while Daniel Doeppers [2000], by examining the payment of the *cedula* (the head tax) in the Philippines, surmised that the slump had a varied impact on households in different regions.

Nevertheless colonial records can also err, confuse or are incomplete. A strength of official records is customarily seen to be impartiality, ensured by in-built checks within the administrative apparatus. Such rigour, however, might be less than usually supposed amid the Depression, an economic crisis which in its severity had no precedent. The government’s *qualitative* evaluations of the slump’s impact were sometimes hazardous and subsequently proven to the contrary. The health authorities, for instance, having claimed in 1930 that the rise in mortality that year was due to the lower standard of living induced by the slump [SSAR 1998 Vol. 9 (1930): 1], noted apologetically the lower death rate the following year as “remarkable” [MR 1931: 1010]. In addition, not all relevant information can be found in the colonial records. Not anticipating the severity of the crisis, the Colonial Secretary stated in July 1930 that “to collect detailed statistics . . . is not necessary: the time for that has not yet arrived” [SSLCP 1930: B 83]. As noted, the statistics on wages and employment cover only Indian and to some extent Chinese and Javanese labourers [LD 1929–35]. Sometimes the information is piecemeal. The authorities, for instance, recorded that 500 Chinese shops closed down in Singapore between June and September 1930 [SSLCP 1930: B 130], but how significant this number was is difficult to say without a quantitative survey of business before the Depression.

The greatest problem with colonial records, however, lies in the danger of writing what Anthony Milner called “colonial records history.” Milner warned of a “circular process at work” in relying on colonial records, when the “disputes, preoccupations and even the system of classification encountered in these records set the agenda for research

and often determine the structure of the historical account itself” [1987: 782]. Yeo Kim Wah has counterpoised that colonial records, if “critically read, analysed and assessed,” are indispensable to the writing of history of the colonial period [1987: 4]. While this is generally sensible, my work suggests that the limits of colonial records are also the limits of their authors’ interests and preoccupations. During the crisis, the British were chiefly concerned with Singapore’s economic mainstay — international trade. They kept systematic information on the local economy only occasionally, such as when it was feared that the police campaign to persecute itinerant hawkers would deprive the poor of their livelihood and force them into crime; a commission was subsequently appointed to investigate the problem of itinerant hawkers [HQ 1931]. Yet the local economy was an important source of temporary, non-salaried employment for the jobless, a study of which will show how ordinary people responded to the Depression.

This underscores a fundamental failing of the colonial records: from their vantage point as alien rulers, the authorities generally viewed their Asian subjects as passive non-entities. The British officials believed that ordinary people “simply had to tighten up their belts” during the Depression [HD 1932: 38-D], and the “charity of friends” was grossly inadequate to help them tide the crisis [SSLCP 1930: B 130]. However Asian migrant communities in Singapore, particularly the Chinese, had a notable tradition of mutual help based on family and kinship ties. Mutual help was important at the individual level, allowing *sinkehs* (newly-arrived immigrants) to find work through local contacts, typically a family member or fellow villager. Chew Choo Keng, who arrived in Singapore a penniless migrant in 1934, recalled that “[a]s soon as I stepped out of the Immigration Office, I was received and taken away by a relative to the first floor of a house in Jalan Besar which he rented.” The relative was a maternal uncle from his home village in China and a nephew of the prominent businessman Tan Kah Kee, who, based on the uncle’s recommendation, gave Chew a job at his Khiam Aik biscuit factory [Chan and Chiang 1994: 90–92].

As records “from above,” the colonial records stumble at the individual level of life. The revisionist literature on the Depression in Southeast Asia has “stressed the sharp responsiveness of the Southeast Asian cultivator to rapidly expanding market opportunities” [Brown 1997: 279]. Brown has, for instance, observed that many Burmese peasants increased rice production during the slump, and successfully resisted tax and rent payments to the government and loan payments to moneylenders and banks [*ibid.*: 223–227; also Brown 1986]. These claims are sound and based on statistics in the colonial records. But what if no such statistics exist, if the authors of the records did not think them relevant to compile? We need to go beyond inferring about life at the individual level from the statistics, to examine directly the non-official sources which contain the perspectives of people who lived and struggled through the crisis. This allows us to recreate life at the individual level with a depth of detail not usually possible in the colonial records. There are four types of records which contain ordinary people’s

perspectives, defined by the nature of the source and the profile of the author: letters to the press, coroner's inquests, biographical accounts, and oral records.

Newspaper Correspondence

Like colonial records, newspapers are an easily-accessible source of information for social history. Of much value are the letters to the press, which are often, although not always, motivated by an unhappiness with the existing state of affairs. The *Malayan Tribune* (*MT*) represented the views of the English-educated Asian elite in Singapore. The *Tribune* was a better gauge of public sentiment than the *Straits Times* (*ST*), which was closely associated with the British regime, and in the early 1930s, it was hailing itself as "The People's Paper: Independent and Progressive" [*MT* 12. 01. 1931: 16]. Public distress with various aspects of life during the slump was a major thread running through the *MT*'s letters in the early 1930s.

Some of this discontent corroborates what is noted in the colonial records, such as complaints over retrenchment, reduction of salaries and the difficulty of finding employment. Remarks such as "educated Europeans and Eurasians, shabbily dressed[,]... hanging around eating-houses and coffee-shops, and walking about the streets for unemployment and unable to find it" reflect the severity of the Depression [*MT* 02. 10. 1930: 11]. Letters lamenting the high cost of rent, school fees and transport provide useful reminders that although quantitative evidence calculate the typical, they do not apply to every socio-economic group. Some people were caught on the wrong side of the cost of living index, such as the "very poor people" staying in the Singapore Improvement Trust's two-room houses at Henderson Road, where the monthly rent was raised from \$5 to \$7 in 1930 [*MT* 25. 07. 1930: 11].

However newspaper correspondence also offer fresh perspectives. They can disclose the mentality of ordinary people caught in a slump. Although some letters commented how some able-bodied unemployed men who missed the emigration net were turning to begging, others observed that many showed a remarkable resilience to their plight. "A silent sufferer", for instance, a family man with five children, wrote: "We want any job, Sir, if we can get one at a living salary" [*MT* 23. 04. 1934: 2]. Indeed many white-collar workers during the slump were reportedly willing to take on jobs "considered *de classe* in happier times" [*MT* 13. 07. 1932: 3].

The letters to the press also show that the struggle to find employment in an unfavourable job market drove wedges between various sections of the public. Many people viewed other social groups with distrust, such as unemployed men who had misgivings towards working women and accused them of a vain pursuit of jewellery, luxury and finery [*MT* 05. 08. 1932: 14]. Such correspondence revealed an important if irrational distinction between Self and Other during the slump. Some locally-born Asians had a similar complaint against Europeans and foreign-born Asians. In June 1931, the

dismissal of over a hundred Malay and Chinese employees, many with families to support, from Keppel Harbour led one individual to charge the Harbour Board of retaining Europeans on “fat pensions” [MT 04. 07. 1931: 11]. Others wrote angrily that “[m]ost of the people employed appear to be from India and Ceylon, while our educated Straits-born young men are unemployed” [MT 16. 05. 1932: 11].

The *MT* also contained considerable evidence that, despite the generally falling cost of living, families with multiple dependents suffered during the Depression. A father of three, for instance, found the fare of 60 cents for a two-way trip from Serangoon village (north-east of town) to the city prohibitive [MT 08. 05. 1931: 2]. The burden of supporting a large family can also be seen in the case of a family of 10 children, where the father had passed away, the oldest child, a fresh school graduate and the family’s sole breadwinner, had no luck finding a clerical position, and the family relied on a \$57-monthly allowance provided by the Widows’ and Orphans’ Fund [MT 19. 02. 1932: 5].

Nonetheless the researcher ought to be mindful of the nature of the source. Because of the overwhelmingly critical nature of newspaper correspondence, the other side of family and social ties — when they enabled people to cope with the Depression, is often difficult to uncover. Rare is the occasion when a salesman with a large family, whose youngest son had died from illness, wrote to the *MT*, thanking the child’s principal for a gift of \$10 to pay for the funeral expenses [MT 17. 07. 1930: 7]. It must also not be forgotten that both the English and vernacular newspapers are the domain of the literate, who, as already noted, constituted less than a third of Singapore’s population in 1931. The *MT*’s letters were the expressions of English-educated, middle-class Asians, a small minority in 1930s Singapore. Not surprisingly the paper focussed on the plight of businessmen, clerks, Europeans, and Eurasians, touching only on the lower-income group as part of the general evil of unemployment. Clerks formed merely 7% of the active work force in 1931 (although the percentage was reduced by heavy retrenchment), while labourers, including general coolies, lightermen and dock labourers, made up 14%, domestic servants 9%, hawkers 8%, and rickshaw pullers 4% [Vlieland 1932: 252–255].

Coroner’s Records

To delve into the lives of the lower-income members of society, the Coroner’s Inquests and Inquiries, used first by James Warren in his studies of rickshaw pullers, are useful. Warren is quite right to say that the records represented the “living testimony of Chinese people who did not know how to express themselves in print and who did not have access to people in power” [1995: 251]. Although the subjects in the coroner’s records used in my research included businessmen and clerks, 55 of the 69 cases belong to the lower-income group, mostly labourers, unskilled workers or the unemployed.

The importance of the coroner’s records lies in the light they throw on life at the

individual life. While they are a category of the colonial records, as the coroner interrogated the deceased's family, friends and business and work associates to ascertain the cause of death, the inquests gathered a great store of valuable information on the "demographic, social and economic opportunities and hazards" which shaped life in colonial Singapore [*ibid.*: 252]. I found in the records indicators such as age and health, occupation and income level, and one's relations with family, kin and friends to be particularly significant during the slump. These sources provide insights into the connection between economic conditions and suicide, which reflects the worst consequences of the crisis, and less frequently between economic conditions and crime.

The coroner's records help to explain why, in a situation characterised by mass unemployment, mass emigration and a reduced cost of living, life broke down at the individual level in certain cases. The information which enriches our understanding of the slump's impact, present in many cases of suicide, was the strain or collapse of family bonds prior to the suicide. People with young dependents (who formed 26% of the population in 1931) to care for often suffered the heaviest burden. An example was the case of Ong Kok, a kindly village headman who gambled badly on a loan from a *chettiar* to purchase a plot of rubber land in 1930, when rubber prices were plummeting. One night, in a fit of madness, he killed his wife, attacked his seven young children, two of whom survived, and set his house on fire before slitting his own throat [SCII 1930: 18–41]. Despair could also become unbearable when individuals turned away from the family, choosing to keep their inner torment to themselves, such as Narain Singh, a watchman who supported his love of drink by lending money. When he cut his throat in 1933, it was from the promisory notes and bankruptcy documents in his room that his family found the cause of his suicide: Narain's debtors had gone bankrupt, and he owed \$156 to another man, a big sum in those times [SCII 1933: 6–13]. The coroner's records show that familial obligations could also become unbearable burdens amid poor economic circumstances. Foo Ah Hai, an unemployed coffee-maker, was berated by his father in China for having "forgotten your responsibility in the family", since while "[y]our elder brother Liam remits home every two months; whereas you for half a year I have not even heard from you and you did not even care to inquire about us." After receiving the message, Foo jumped to his death from a hotel window [SCII 1934: 12–28].

There is, however, a danger in over-relying on the coroner's records. Just as newspapers present the view of the literate who had cause in life to complain, the coroner's records are essentially a collective biography of poor people who found life too difficult to continue. Based on cases of suicides of rickshaw pullers, Warren ventured that the Depression revealed "the dark side of urbanisation in Singapore" and that families of rickshaw pullers in the early twentieth century were "elemental in structure, small-scale in size, low in status, and therefore weak" [2003b: 219]. There is some truth behind criticisms that Warren has painted an excessively "grim picture" of the poor [Lian 1992: 100], and reduced them to "helpless victims of circumstances, with little wherewithal

to understand their own situation” [Hong 1996: 60–61]. It is natural that, in the death records of the poor, the evidence refers to the breakdown of their lives. While the coroner’s records highlight the collapse of family ties during the slump, this is largely due to the nature of the source. To achieve a balanced view, we need sources which reveal more positive experiences.

Autobiographies and Biographies

Insights into the more positive side of life can be found in two types of sources by people who lived through the difficult times of the past. The first is autobiographies and biographies, the number of which has been growing since the 1980s — I used 31 such publications in my research. The second type includes oral records, which will be discussed later. There are admittedly problems in using autobiographies and biographies. The first is of representation: the subjects, like the contributors to the press, usually belong to the elite — businessmen, professionals, public officials, and community leaders. It has been noted that “leadership,” both political and business, has preoccupied most biographies of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia [Lim 1998: 124].

There is also the issue of intent; A. J. P. Taylor commented that “[w]ritten memoirs are a form of oral history set down to mislead historians” [Cited in Thompson 1978: 104]. To some extent, autobiographies and biographies (insofar as the biographer was influenced by the subject) are a way for their authors to project their interpretations of the past. The author’s motivation might be personal. Rajabali Jumabhoy, an Indian trader, stated in the preface to his autobiography [1990] that “[m]y main purpose in writing this personal story is to provide a guide to my descendents, so that they may follow in my footsteps.” More seriously, autobiographies can also be influenced by political or ideological considerations: as they mirror Singapore’s “success story,” they have been seen to have an important relevance to its national history. For instance, Tommy Koh, a public official, enthused about how Victor Seah’s life, as “the story of a boy from a poor family who fulfilled Singapore’s dream,” “is also the story of Singapore” and the “Singapore miracle” [Seah 2002: 4–5, 10–12]. Consequently, written by those who were successful in life, it is plausible that certain accounts — with titles like *Destined to Survive* [Yeo 1993] and *Memories of a Golden Era* [Koh n.d.] — portray an elitist and overly triumphantist perspective of history.

Despite these difficulties, autobiographies, like the coroner’s records, can provide insights into the collective biography of a specific, while not majority, section of the population. They pertain plausibly to *an aspect* of the past, just as newspaper correspondence and the coroner’s records refer to other facets. Autobiographies are more plausibly reliable than biographies because they are “personal narratives” rather than that of the biographer: “[s]ince the narrator describes his own life as he sees it and in his own terms,

they provide the most intimate view of the individual's life and times and form primary sources of history" [Lim 1998: 130]. One should, for instance, treat Aw Boon Haw's biography more carefully: although it shows the ability of the "Tiger Balm King" to succeed in business during the Depression, the biographer suspiciously "recreated" conversations between Haw and his family word for word [King 1992: 265].

Most of the accounts suggest that life during the Depression was far from bleak, with one major exception. The business empire of Tan Kah Kee, Singapore's most successful businessman in the 1920s, folded in 1934 due to the low prices of rubber [Tan 1994: 329–335]. Elsewhere, there is a strong sense of people actively rising above the circumstances. Rajabali Jumabhoy was troubled by debts but found inner strength from the Jainist religion — which became his "soul force" — to set aside thoughts of despair and confront his financial problems [Jumabhoy 1990: 41–44].⁴ Some enterprising individuals did well during the early 1930s. Lien Ying Chow, owner of the modest Wah Hin, which sold foodstuffs to the military, was able to sustain his business with "good service" and "competitive prices" [Lien 1992: 68], while Yeo Tiam Siew reaped healthy profits from his English-Chinese telephone directory, which was popular with Chinese who were not English-educated [Yeo 1993: 70–73]. The narratives also tell us the reasons why these businessmen did relatively well — business acumen and networks, a more stable demand in the local economy, which was more insulated from the world slump, and lower overheads owing to the smaller size of the businesses.

This suggests that autobiographies and biographies have an explanatory role in social history at the individual level of life. This is true too of non-business accounts and is important in qualifying the views afforded by newspapers and coroner's records. At the individual level, we also find evidence of friends, kin and particularly the family helping ordinary people to negotiate the trials of the slump. Life in the early 1930s was often a daunting but enriching experience for many women and young people bearing the responsibility of finding work to support their families. T. C. Koh, who as a 17-year-old began work as a clerk at the Land Office in 1933, remembered his "fear and trembling" as he undertook the management of a team of five adults and his handling of "the issue of rubber coupons worth millions of dollars" [Koh n.d.: 16–17].

Used in conjunction with other sources, biographical accounts also suggest significant changes in the lives of women during the Depression, so offering fresh perspectives into an oft-neglected area of Singapore history. Tan Liok Ee has used biographies and oral history in conjunction with official censuses to chart important changes affecting Chinese women in Malaya and Singapore in the 1930s, such as the increased numbers of local-born women and their changing marriage patterns, greater involvement in work and enhanced literacy and educational opportunities [2003a: 121–124; 2003b: 360–377].

4) Jumabhoy's autobiography was based on his oral history interview by the Oral History Centre in 1981.

During the Depression, biographies, newspapers and official reports point to a period of social change for females. The *Malayan Tribune* reported that many women, who had typically been home-makers or had merely worked to supplement the family's income prior to the slump, took on new roles as breadwinners when their husbands, fathers or brothers lost their jobs [MT 29. 06. 1932: 7]. A Chinese newspaper observed that saleswomen were working in shops and female barbers were "commanding fair wages" in cities in Malaya, including Singapore [Cited in MRCA August 1934: 70]. Other women sewed, mended clothes, washed laundry, did domestic work, and worked in factories during the early 1930s.

In his biography, Lee Khoon Choy recalled how his family overcame the passing of his father, a coolie headman, in 1932, through the efforts of his mother, who started to sell sarongs and jewellery and also worked as a mistress of ceremony for Peranakan weddings. This was despite the fact that, Lee recalled, "[s]he had never stepped out of the house during Father's lifetime" [Lee 1988: 5-6]. Similarly, Elizabeth Choy, the eldest of six children in a middle-class family, had wanted to study at Raffles College, but had to work so that her siblings could study. She became a teacher at St. Margaret School where, despite lacking formal training as normal classes for teachers were suspended during the Depression, she gained a reputation for being able to handle difficult boys. Choy went on to become a principal and the first female member of the Singapore legislature in 1951 [Zhou 1995: 37-42]. Of course the question of representation remains: Koh, Lee and Choy were English-educated, and their families belonged to the middle-income group. The field of women's history will require more substantial research, particularly in the area of oral history, to uncover the experiences of working-class women during the Depression.

Oral Records

The positive side of life can also be found, much more substantially, in the oral record. Social historians may expect more from oral records than autobiographies because, in recent years, there has been much enthusiasm about using oral records to write history from below, alternative histories, or to take the words of Paul Thompson, to "give history back to the people in their own words" [1978: 265]. This is, unfortunately, not true of the existing records on the Depression years, found at the Oral History Centre of the National Archives of Singapore. The 52 records pertinent to the slump can be broken down by language, ethnicity, occupation, and sex: of the interviewees, 27 spoke English, while 25 used Mandarin or a Chinese dialect; 40 were Chinese, and 6 were Indians, with 3 Eurasians, 2 *Peranakan*, and 1 European (there were no Malays); 11 were businessmen or self-employed, 20 were white-collar workers in the middle-income group, 15 in the blue-collar, lower-income group, while 6 were unemployed or of unknown occupation; and 48 were male, with 4 females [Loh 2005]. This shows the dominant voice among the

records to be Chinese, male and fairly well-off — in other words, not as socially representative as we would have liked, particularly of women, and labourers, who made up 14% of Singapore's economically-active population in 1931.

For the lives of coolies, rubber tappers and others in the lower-income group during the slump, I often had to rely on the words of their economically better-off contemporaries. This can be seen in the interview of Ng Lee Kar, a shop proprietor, who explained how the low prices of rice and vegetables allowed rubber tappers to support their families despite the reduction of their monthly incomes from \$10–12 to \$3–4 [OHI 1982: 311]. Some interviews are “passably” of the lower-income group — some were poor when young but went on to make good, such as Tang Choon Keng, the future founder of the departmental store CK Tang [*ibid.*: 25]. There are only two first-person oral accounts by persons truly poor and unskilled — both rickshaw pullers interviewed in the “Chinese Dialect Groups” series. One of them, Quek Mui Khia, recalled that he earned less during the Depression and supplemented his income by finding casual work [OHI 1986: 49].

There are several reasons for the problem of representation. Part of the imbalance is due to the 15 interviews on business during the slump, drawn from the “Pioneers of Singapore” series; in other words, the imbalance might be topic-related. Moreover, while the voices of coolies are lacking, those of more modest profiles than in the autobiographies and newspapers are present, such as barbers, tailors, shop assistants, and clerks. Finally, with oral history, one has the advantage of conducting interviews with surviving members of the lower-income group.

Another problem of oral history is that interviews, like autobiographies, are reflections, rather than records, of the past [Morrison 1998: 6]. Although even official memoranda and correspondence contain some reflection (and presumably, bias) before the experience is committed to paper, oral history reminiscences are more likely to be influenced by the interviewee's experiences in the long stretch of time between the events of recollection and the occasion of the interview. This is particularly so for events which have been much publicised by the government or media, where the interviewee's memory runs a greater risk of being distorted such that the purported recollections might be merely repetitions of publicised material on the event [Seldon and Pappworth 1983: 25–26]. This seems to have occurred in the recollections of the much-covered July 1964 race riots, which the PAP government has deemed important for the policy of multiracialism in Singapore [Low 2001]. Fortunately the Depression period has not received the same sort of emphasis from above. We might then have reason to believe that reminiscences of the “unique event,” which made a strong impression on the interviewee, are fairly reliable [Seldon and Pappworth 1983: 18]. Indeed Fidahusein Tyebally, a humble rattan exporter, had to insist to a sceptical interviewer that his business “was a little affected but not much” [OHI 1982: 19–22].

If the interviewee is reliable, the interviewer may not be so. Singapore's oral history programme originated from the PAP (People's Action Party) government's concern about

the lack of rootedness among younger Singaporeans in the early 1980s. A sense of the “lessons of history” derived from oral history, the authorities believed, would provide younger Singaporeans with the cultural ballast to withstand future crises [Lee 1981: 1202–1203]. In short, the interest in oral history was and remains politically-motivated. This has serious historiographical ramifications, because the interviewer structures the interviews and can shape them into narratives which flesh out the “lessons of history.” During the interview, as Hong Lysa warned,

a “default” ideology is automatically switched on and it is that of the status quo, which proceeds to decide on questions such as who qualifies as society’s pioneers, whose spirit and memories should be preserved as oral history. These tapes thus privilege the present over the future ... and even the past. [Hong 1998: 37, 41–42]

Oral history then becomes synonymous with the success story of Singapore. This is despite the insistence of the officials and former officials of the Oral History Centre of the National Archives of Singapore, the country’s primary oral history institution, that “[t]here is no attempt on the part of the OHC to impose a unitary national history on the accounts of the participants” [Chew 2005: 55–56, 60].

This problem can be tackled in several ways. It is less of an issue in interviews which followed the life-story approach, in which interviewees could talk freely about their everyday experiences [Chew 1998: 49]. This was the case for many interviews bearing on the Depression. The problem can also be reduced if we are not looking for revelations on the macroeconomic or political aspects of history, which can be more easily reshaped to fit the state’s version of history. The main contribution of oral, autobiographical, newspaper, and coroner’s records is to allow the investigator to piece together experiences at the individual level and establish a collective biography of various socio-economic groups. Indeed oral records have been useful in *qualifying* the official portrayal of the slump. The PAP government has conceived the event in public speeches and school textbooks as a disaster which caused serious retrenchment and hardship locally and which, on a global scale, led to economic nationalism and then World War II [Singapore CPDD 1999: 63–64; Lee 1993: 23].

Oral history, however, suggests that many people were able to utilise family and kinship ties to cope with the Depression. This is corroborated by demographic trends in 1930s Singapore derived from official statistics. The 1931 census reveals a more balanced sex ratio among the Chinese, with the result that 39% of Singapore’s total population and 36% of its Chinese population were locally-born. The nuclear family increasingly became an important component of life in Singapore. In 1931, 7 out of 10 persons were between 15 and 54 years of age, indicating a healthy proportion of people of working age. The young dependency burden (children under 15) was considerably heavy at 26%, although the old dependency burden (people aged 55 and over) was light at 4% [Vlieland 1932: 68–

71, 212, 232–233]. The severity of the Depression's impact at the individual life depends on whether a family was assisted by members of working age or burdened by elderly or, more likely, young dependents.

The oral records illustrate the role of mutual help in mediating the worst effects of the slump amid Singapore's transition to a more settled society. Natesan Palanivelu, for instance, remembered how, six months after his arrival in Singapore, he finally obtained a job as a ticketing clerk with the Singapore Traction Company. Natesan attributed his success to having the right contacts — a friend working at the company recommended him [OHI 1985: 64–68]. The importance of family ties is recounted by young Tay Meng Hock, who was unable to find an accounting job for nearly a year despite his accounting degree. Although depressed, Tay laboured as a cutter in a pineapple factory to support his widowed mother, and also collected gate fees for football matches at the Anson Road stadium, earning 50–70 cents daily. Tay's sister washed clothes for \$8–9 a month, while his uneducated brother worked as a coolie [OHI 1984]. The insight into mutual help at the family and social levels is the strongest asset of oral records. As Paul Thompson observed, with the use of oral records,

[t]he history of the family shifts from the statistical analysis of birth intervals to focus on child, mother, and father in the household economy and the family life cycle. Both the focus, and the texture, of history are changed in a way that only oral evidence could bring about. [1978: 137]

Conclusion

Collectively the sources discussed enable us to understand more fully the varied impact of the slump. On the one hand, colonial records, newspaper correspondence and the coroner's records show that unemployment and reduced incomes caused stress and despair, social tension and, in the worst cases, suicide, particularly for those with many dependents to support or no one to turn to for help. On the other hand, a study of the colonial records shows that immigration policies and the falling cost of living at the societal level eased the distress for many people. This is corroborated by the satisfactory trends in mortality and crime rates after 1930, found also in the colonial records. These developments had a positive effect on mutual help at the individual level. Oral records, autobiographies and biographies provide evidence of how family and kinship ties, important before the Depression as a means of doing business and finding employment, were equally vital during the crisis as a source of emotional and social support. Mutual support, arguably, represents the entitlements for the people of Singapore, particularly the domiciled and locally-born. Life for most people was more difficult than in the preceding years, but they did not despair but were able to turn to family, friends and kin to obtain jobs, or to procure some pocket money or temporary lodging and food. Oral and

biographical accounts allow the history of the slump to be written from both the economic and social perspectives.

There are considerable problems in the sources discussed, such as authorial bias, the state's influence on the evidence and the difficulty of capturing the experiences of the illiterate, lower-income group. However, to a large extent, they are outweighed by the usefulness of the sources in providing fresh perspectives into the past. Social historians seeking to study Singapore's past on its own terms can also better manage these difficulties by utilising other sources not discussed here. The records of religious organisations show how spiritual solace helped people come to terms with the reality of crumbling material conditions.⁵⁾ Also useful are the vernacular newspapers and sources of voluntary organisations such as Chinese *huiguans*, which highlight the concerns of the communities they represented. A recent work on social change among the Chinese in postwar Singapore has drawn usefully from Chinese newspapers and *huiguan* records to capture the perspectives and experiences of Chinese students, businessmen and workers [Liu and Wong 2004]. The police court notebooks, like the coroner's records, are enlightening with regards to the lives of lower-income people, particularly on the occupational hazards they faced and their interactions with the police [Yeo 1990: 206–207]. James Warren has suggested that a careful analysis of photographs can provide insights into the lives and physical environments of the “underclass” [1987: 105–122]. Finally, for information on members of the lower-income group coping with change and crisis, perhaps the richest and most-untapped source for social history are the memories of the present-day survivors belonging to that group. Their reminiscences can provide rewarding perspectives into marginalised aspects of life in the past.

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5) See particularly the records and publications of the Methodist Church and Diocese of Singapore.

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