

Singapore HeritageFest 2009
“Our Neighbours’ Heroes” Storytelling Competition
2nd Prize Winner (Upper Primary Category)



Participant's Details

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Tan Tock Seng

Hello there,

Allow me to share the true story of the compassionate caregiver, Tan Tock Seng. Tan Tock Seng was a wealthy merchant and a great philanthropist. He is best remembered and respected for his efforts to build a hospital for the poor and the sick - the hospital that now bears his name.

Tan Tock Seng was born in 1798 in Malacca, to a family that had migrated to Malacca earlier. His family depended on agriculture for living.

Tan came to Singapore in 1819, at the age of 21. Like many, he saw Singapore as a virgin land with boundless opportunities for those who had foresight and willingness to work hard. When he first arrived, he set up a roadside stall and became a hawker. He bought perishables such as fruits and vegetables and some livestock such as chickens and ducks from the countryside. Then, he hawked them in the city areas.

In time, his fortune grew to include about 50 acres of land where the railway station at Tanjong Pagar was located and the plot of land from the Padang to High Street and Tank Road. He also had a block of shop houses in Ellenborough Building, a 14 - acre fruit plantation opposite St Andrew's Mission Hospital and a nutmeg plantation which he owned with his brother.

Tan was one of the few who made it big. Although many other Chinese began with the same goal in mind, they wasted away their lives soon after their arrival in Singapore due to the atrocious living condition then. But Tan Tock Seng was different. It was by his determination, strength of character, personal charisma, public-spiritedness and his ability to resist various temptations that he rose to the top, emerging as a respected leader of the Chinese community.

Allow me to share the incident which vividly explains that Tan Tock Seng had a heart for the sick. Early Singapore was plagued with many problems, one of which was the lack of proper medical facilities for the poor. Many colonial officials did not care about the local people, doing only the bare minimum and often little else. This led to inadequate

sanitation and medical facilities. Poor health problems that could have been contained were left unattended, resulting in widespread epidemics and rampant health problems.

Tan Tock Seng felt deeply worried about these problems. He decided to try and resolve them by donating \$7,000 to build a hospital that catered to the needs of the poor.

Again, let me share his acts of services to the community. Tan's benevolence extended to the people of all races, not just the Chinese or the Peranakans. He intended the hospital to cater to 'the sick poor of all nations'. Tan Tock Seng Hospital was completed in 1844.

His compassionate act did not stop there. Mr. Tan Tock Seng had been paying for the burial of the street beggars who died of sickness or starvation.

In 1845, about 75 beggars starved to death in the street. Tan Tock Seng kindly paid for their burial and funeral arrangements. He also distributed food to help relieve the hardship of Chinese. Hence, he was greatly respected by the people and the government.

In 1850, Tan Tock Seng died, at the age of 52. He left behind his wife, Lee Seo Neo, three daughters and three sons. The eldest son, Tan Kim Ching, became an established businessman, and is best known and remembered as a community leader of the Chinese.

Tan Tock Seng has been a hero in the true sense. The last time when I accompanied my grandpa for an appointment with the neurologist at Tan Tock Hospital, a month ago, I told him the story of our true hero which I had just shared with you today.

Community from which the hero came from: Chinese