

# Finding Hidden Treasures

## At the Changi Junk Store

by Anne Pinto Rodrigues

How often is it that a casual evening stroll turns into a lesson in Chinese history? Walking down colourful Joo Chiat Road, I chanced upon a store that stood out from its neighbours. Tucked between inviting eating places and other quaint stores, was a shop that appeared to be stuffed to the ceiling with furniture. The sign read 'Changi Junk Store'. The name had me fooled for a second, but a walk around the crammed store quickly changed that. I was mesmerised by the eclectic mix of antique furniture, curios and whatnots – remnants of a time long past. The owner, 74-year-old Haji Basman, spoke with great passion of the four decades he had spent collecting, restoring and selling antiques.

Haji Basman came to Singapore from Malaysia as a teenager and served as an RAF storekeeper. During his tenure there, he saw the potential in 'upcycling' unwanted items. He quickly became convinced that one man's junk was another man's treasure. So in the early 1970s, with the princely sum of \$800 saved from his RAF service, he started his own business, collecting discarded items that retained some intrinsic value.

Today, the 1,200 square foot Changi Junk Store is bursting at the seams with Peranakan, Chinese and other Asian furniture and artefacts. Nestled safely in a wooden display cabinet are the owner's prized possessions – a Ming dynasty plate, Song dynasty mini-jars, a King Edward era crockery set, the Johor coat-of-arms from colonial days and an endless array of porcelain items. This treasure trove also houses clocks, vases, birdcages, typewriters and many other collectibles. Amused, I watched as one of his regular patrons poked around with a torch, hoping to unearth an item of value.

I asked the unassuming Haji Basman about his favourite item. From the back of the shop he pulled out a shiny,



A precious Yuan dynasty celadon at the Changi Junk Store, photo by the author



Haji Basman, the store owner, photo courtesy of Haider Sayuti



The Changi Junk Store in Joo Chiat Road, photo courtesy of Haider Sayuti

green plate. His eyes lit up with pride as he explained that it was a Yuan dynasty celadon. Despite being over 700 years old, it was intact and the glaze glistened beautifully in the sunlight.

The Yuan dynasty was formally established by Kublai Khan (the grandson of Genghis Khan, the Mongol) in 1270 and its rule extended from modern-day China to parts of Eastern Europe. During the Yuan regime, which survived until 1368, diplomacy and trade with foreign countries flourished and Chinese ceramics (such as this celadon) were exported in large quantities to Europe and West Asia.

The word 'celadon' refers to the green glaze on pottery. Celadon production originated in China, but the roots of the term 'celadon' are anything but Chinese. It is theorised that the word first appeared in French novelist Honoré d'Urfé's pastoral romance *L'Astrée* (circa 1627) in which the hero, a shepherd by the name of Celadon, wore pale green ribbons. Another popular theory proposes that the term 'celadon' is derived from Sanskrit – a combination of the word *sila* meaning green and *dhara* meaning stone.

When fired in a kiln, the glaze can produce a range of shades – from a pale, sea-green to a deeper, richer green. The iron oxide in the glaze recipe lends the much sought-after colour. A celadon dish was considered auspicious by the Chinese because of its close resemblance to jade. It was also believed that the dish would break or change colour if poisoned food were put onto it, thus making it very popular in those times.

I had only seen celadons in museums, so to come across one in this manner was very exciting. It would be interesting to get an expert's opinion on Haji Basman's celadon. I left the Changi Junk Store wondering what its fate would be. One thing is certain, Haji Basman will ensure the celadon finds a good owner.

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