

Profiles of Pioneering Individuals

1. Munshi Abdullah (1797-1854)

Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, also known as Munshi Abdullah, arrived in Singapore from Melaka in 1819. He was an influential teacher and writer who was widely recognised as the “Father of Modern Malay Literature”.

Abdullah was the first writer to depart from the traditional Malay literary style by writing in simple, colloquial Malay. He wrote realistic accounts of events based on his own experiences and those of others. His autobiography *Hikayat Abdullah (The Story of Abdullah)* was written between 1840 and 1843, and first published in Jawi script in 1849. It contains one of the most detailed records of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles’ arrival in Singapore and provides an invaluable account of other important pioneering figures, as well as, Singapore’s development in trade and commerce, infrastructure, population and culture. In the late 1830s, Abdullah taught at the Singapore Institution Free School (renamed Raffles Institution in 1868).

2. Henry Nicholas Ridley (1855-1956)

Henry Nicholas Ridley arrived in Singapore from England in 1888. He was the first Director of Singapore Botanic Gardens from 1888 to 1911, and laid the foundation for the rubber industry in Malaya.

Ridley researched extensively on the commercial possibilities of rubber trees and refined the latex extraction method from the “herring-bone” rubber-tapping technique which existed in Ceylon. His method allowed latex to be harvested from rubber trees at regular intervals without damaging them, and allowed the extraction of latex for over 20 years without the need for replanting. He also developed good agricultural practices that shortened the time to maturity from 10 to five years. He promoted rubber to all planters tirelessly, published articles on rubber, and presented displays on rubber at horticultural shows.

Through his efforts, Singapore was among the first to establish rubber plantations in 1898 and benefited from the rubber boom in the early 1900s.

3. Tan Kah Kee (1874-1961)

Tan Kah Kee came to Singapore from China in 1890 and rose to prominence as an outstanding community leader and philanthropist who set up schools and donated generously to education.

Tan was a strong advocate of education. He helped to set up schools like Tao Nan (in 1907), Ai Tong (in 1912), Chock Hock Girls' School (in 1915), Nanyang Girls' School (in 1918) and Nan Chiao Girls' High School (in 1947). Tan led the movement to establish Nanyang Chinese High School in 1919, the first Chinese secondary school in Singapore and the first institution of higher learning in Southeast Asia to be set up by the Chinese community. The school was one of the first to accept Chinese students regardless of their dialect affiliation and background. He also donated generously to two English-medium institutions, Anglo-Chinese School and Raffles College (which became the National University of Singapore).

4. **P. Govindasamy Pillai (1887-1980)**

P. Govindasamy Pillai, popularly known as PGP, came to Singapore from India in 1905. He was a devoted volunteer and philanthropist who contributed significantly to temple-building and community welfare.

Pillai is most remembered for his philanthropy in Singapore. He donated a large sum to the Sri Srinivasa Perumal temple's redevelopment works in the early 1960s. He also contributed generously to the construction of a new home for the Ramakrishna Mission. The Mission, which was part of the Ramakrishna Movement, aimed to alleviate the sufferings of people, and Pillai often volunteered his time at the Mission. Pillai also donated to other institutions like the Gandhi Memorial Hall and Indian Association.

5. **Teresa Hsu Chih (1898-2011)**

Teresa Hsu Chih came to Singapore in 1963. She was an inspiring social worker and humanitarian who devoted her life to caring for the destitute and aged sick, and is remembered not only for her contributions to society but also for her positive attitude towards life.

Born in China and trained as a nurse in London, Hsu arrived in Singapore in 1963 and became the matron of Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital. Two years later, she founded the Home for the Aged Sick, one of the first homes for the elderly sick in Singapore. After retiring as matron of the Home in 1983, Hsu continued to care for the poor and needy in her own capacity and through Heart-to-Heart Service, a non-profit, informal direct-help service that she established. Through the programme, she visited those under her charge, usually the single elderly and needy families, and provided them with cash allowances and food. She remained tireless in her humanitarian work even after turning 100 years old. She lived to a ripe old age of 113 years.

6. **Alice Pennefather (1903-1983)**

Alice Edith Wilhelmina Pennefather, better known as Alice Pennefather, was a pioneering sportswoman who won numerous honours in badminton, tennis and hockey. She participated in the Singapore National Badminton Championships and emerged as the women's singles champion in 1931, 1932, 1934 and 1937, women's doubles champion in 1931 and mixed doubles champion in 1947 and 1951.

Pennefather also won the Singapore Ladies Tennis Championship in 1936, 1937 and 1938 and was the first non-European woman champion since the women's singles event was started in 1933.

Pennefather was an advocate for sports. She was active in the Girls' Sports Club (GSC), formed in 1930 to encourage young women to participate in sports. Pennefather also excelled at hockey. From 1931 to 1958 (except during the Japanese Occupation from 1941 to 1945), she was the club's hockey team captain. Under her exemplary leadership, the hockey team became one of the top teams in Singapore.

7. **Adnan Saidi (1915-1942)**

Adnan Saidi, a lieutenant of the Malay Regiment's 1st Battalion, is best remembered as a war hero who fought with utmost valour in the Battle of Pasir Panjang in World War II.

He was entrusted with the defence of Pasir Panjang Ridge, which was the last British bastion before Alexandra, where their main ammunition and supplies, military hospital and other key installations were located. In the Battle for Pasir Panjang (13-14 February 1942), though grossly outnumbered and undersupplied, Adnan motivated his troops to fend off the Japanese.

As Adnan and his troops retreated to Bukit Chandu (Malay for Opium Hill), they showed utmost courage and determination, taking up hand-to-hand combat when their ammunition ran out. Even after Adnan and his men were overpowered, he resisted heroically and refused to surrender.

Adnan was posthumously awarded with medals for his courage and a memorial plaque was erected at Kent Ridge to commemorate the valour of Adnan and his men. The memory of Adnan lives on at Kranji War Memorial where his name is etched on the main memorial column wall of the Kranji War Cemetery.

8. **Ruth Wong Hie King (1918 – 1982)**

Ruth Wong Hie King was widely regarded as a leading educationist who transformed teacher training and raised the professionalism of teachers.

In 1969, Ruth Wong joined the Ministry of Education as the Director of Research. She was concurrently the first female principal of the Teachers' Training College (TTC), whose programmes she upgraded. The TTC eventually became the Institute of Education (IE) (now known as the National Institute of Education) in 1973 and she was appointed its inaugural director.

A visionary educationist, Wong restructured the teacher training curriculum and introduced a multi-disciplinary approach to teacher training in Singapore. She was also a strong advocate for collaborative learning, the use of objectives and research-based assignments to replace examinations. Her reforms had a dual focus of building the teacher's professional competence as well as the student's personal growth.

For her contributions to education Wong received many honours and awards during her 44-year career, including the Isabella Todd Memorial Prize and the Sir John Porter Scholarship at Queen's University.

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