

"CAN SURVIVE, LA"

Cottage Industries in
High-rise Singapore



Margaret Sullivan

Photographs Henry Wong Michael Neo

**Goldsmiths:
G. Pakkirisamy Pathar, N. Seenivasan,
Tiang Wah Jewellers,
On South Bridge Road**



The two twenty-cent sized gold disks are stuck to each end of a short stick with brown wax. With total concentration, goldsmith G. Pakkirisamy Pathar sets the holes in them with what appear to be rubies and diamonds: a sparkling outer rim, a glowing red circle, then another ring of sparkle. The tiny stones still to be set nest in a small folded paper packet in the drawer of his table. Two larger stones will center the earrings, for earrings they will be.

One of Singapore's dwindling number of practicing Indian goldsmiths, Pakkirisamy, sixty-five, plies his trade and lives in the front room of a shophouse at 16 Buffalo Road, in a part of town known as 'Little India'. He shares the space with three other goldsmiths, each working individually. His corner is dominated by a tool-strewn work bench surrounded with pictures of Hindu deities and nail-hung plastic bags holding his personal belongings. The iron-gray-haired man clad in a *dhoti* (a man's white cloth wrap-around), his *poonal* (strings worn as a religious symbol) draped from left shoulder to right hip, replaces the earrings and starts work on a part completed ring.

Across the room, a colleague works in even more traditional fashion, seated cross-legged on a mat on the floor. A charcoal brazier and bellows as well as a torch are among the tools spread around him. On the wall behind, among the calendars and pictures of deities, is a photograph of a little girl proudly wearing a black cap and gown. In the back are trunks labeled 'Madras to Singapore, K. Somasundaram', the belongings of another goldsmith currently visiting his family in India. The room smells overwhelmingly of jasmine; a flower-stringer occupies the front corner.

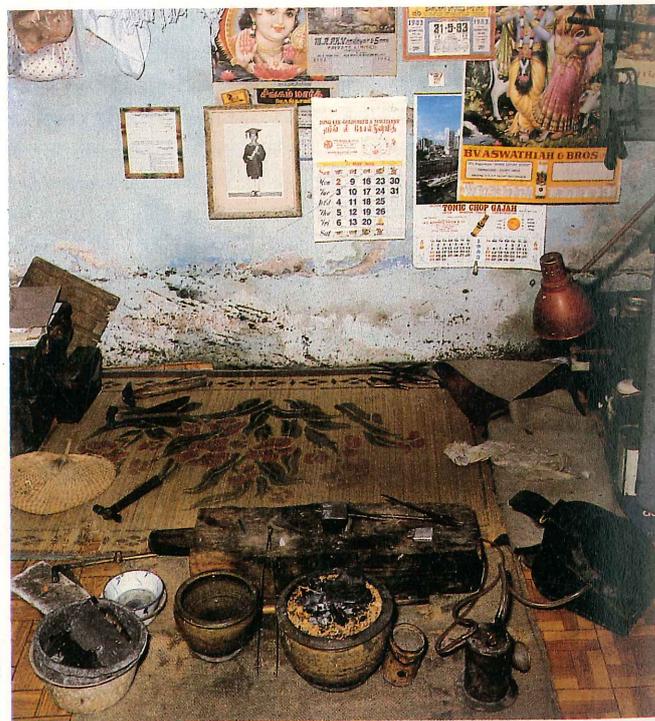
Among Hindu Indians, goldsmithing is a hereditary skill, a sub-set, or, as the Tamils say, *jati*, of the artisans, one of the hierarchical occupational divisions that traditionally structure Hindu life. Beyond a work designation, the *jati* are religious groupings within which its members fulfill their God-given *dharma* or duty to carry out a particular role in life. Although they are artisans, not priests, the goldsmiths are among the most respected *jati* because they handle gold — a 'pure' metal — forming it into religious symbols as well as decorative items, and

because only they, the *asharis*, may 'open the eyes' of images of the gods. Many Hindus, affected by changing social and economic circumstances, no longer follow all the strictures of their *jati* or perform its occupation. Pakkirisamy, however, holds strictly to the practices of his, not only in following his inherited occupation but also using *Pathar* at the end of his name and wearing the *poonal*.

"At the age of ten or twelve, we put the *poonal* on," he explains in his native Tamil. "We have a *guru* who does the *ubanayam* (ceremony). They tell the *mandaram* (ritual words) in Sanskrit and we have to think of it in our hearts. It is our family lineage tradition. It is imperative for us to wear the *poonal* to be virtuous."

Also, like many of his fellow goldsmiths and other men who came from India to work at their trade, he left his family in the home village in Tamil Nadu, a state in South India from which a substantial portion of Singapore's Indian community originates. "I came in 1951, December. I go and come every two years or four years," staying in the village for six months or so when he goes. "My two boys and a girl, are there. My wife has passed away. I am old but I go back once in two years. The sons, one works outside as an engineer in Madras, one is at home, managing the household. The daughter is married off. [The sons] don't want this profession. I asked the son to study when he was young but he couldn't study properly. You must have a good brain to be a good jeweler, good hand and eyes," he explains.

"I learned this at a small age. My father and grandfather worked at this job. I stayed with someone else and learned from them. If you stay with your father, the work doesn't come properly. If you stay with someone else, [that person] will be angry and the work will be better taught.



We don't take money from them. We have to do the work they tell us to. They will give us food, clothes. We live in their house. It was about four or five miles away [from my village]," he reminisces.

"I came to Singapore to work and earn money. I came alone. I had relatives here who gave permission. You can only come here after you get permission from them. When I came, I stayed about six months with my relatives and worked with them. They went back to India and I started working on my own. I was thirty-three years old. In India, I had a shop like this. I didn't [farm] because there wasn't time for anything else."

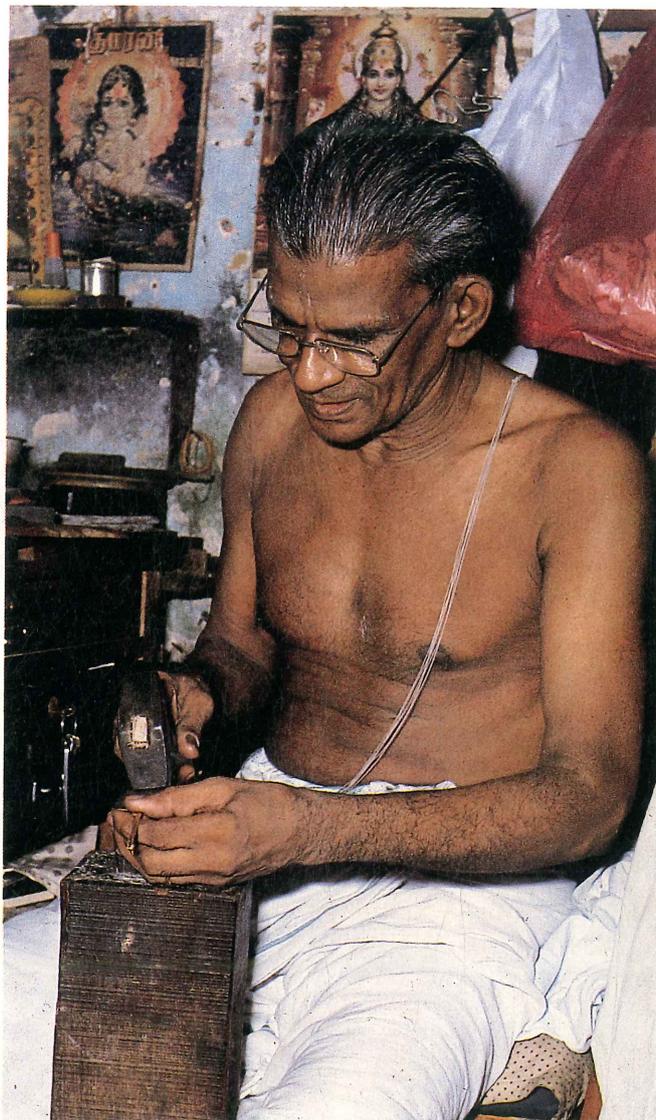
In Singapore there are many goldsmiths who no longer practice their trade but who belong to their association. "From two hundred, now become less, one hundred fifty," Pakkirisamy thinks. "From different parts of India. They are in different locales [around Singapore]. With the exception of being just one *matham* (religious group, not a substitute for *jati*), they are also in government jobs. They don't do this occupation, they are in jobs," he says, emphasizing the difference between the hereditary occupation and just a 'job'.

Part of Pakkirisamy's work is ordered through Indian and Chinese jewelers in the neighborhood, but "when customers come and give, I do jobs for them. They give a deposit. Then after I work on it, when I tell them the amount, they give the rest. The deposit is not to buy materials but if they give it to me and I work on it, they have to come back, isn't it? If not, and they don't come back, how? They give the design and I make the design also. Earrings take about one week to make. I do various things, I don't concentrate on one [piece of jewelry] alone. Most of my customers are Tamils (meaning Indians). Business is the same as before. I charge more but expenses are more also. I work every day but take Sunday off."

He has style books from which customers can choose. The jewelry is "for weddings and just to wear." According to a goldsmith quoted in *Singapore's Little India* (Siddique and Shotam 1982: 99) wedding jewelry is often both ordered and picked up on astrologically auspicious dates. Frequently, jewelry will be set with the traditional nine stones which are worn to counteract the influences of the nine visible planets.)

Pakkirisamy expects to return to India and come back one more time. Meanwhile, he keeps contact with his family by letter. "They tell me what they need and then I send it. Every once or twice a week, they send a letter. Yes," he says, silent a moment, a faraway look on his face, "it is difficult to be away from my family."

But worth it? "What worth? If you are just within your family, you get fed up. When you are alone, you can be peaceful. Your heart, too, must be a little bit difficult. Because of the children alone, I don't worry. The children don't know my worries." When she was living, "my wife, she will have worries about us in her heart, but because she is with the children, the worries fade a bit. If she didn't have the children she would be worried about me always." He returns to the ordained work of his father and grandfather, carefully placing a stone in a ring.



"I don't use 'Pathar'. What for? It's enough to put N. Seenivasan," explains the stocky sixty-one year-old goldsmith who also does not wear the *poonal*. "I don't believe in it. Some wear, some don't. I am a member of the [goldsmith's] Association and pay my subscription. One time, there was a mass donation to build a building. I gave one or two hundred dollars, but I haven't heard about it till this day."

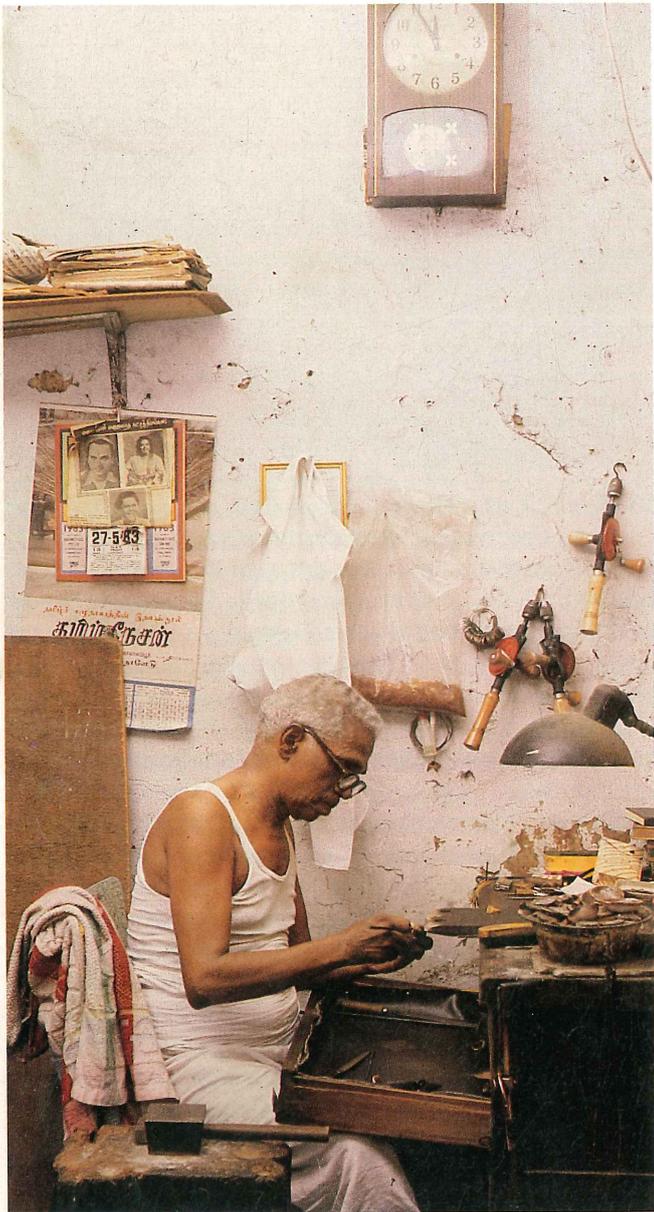
Although many Indian goldsmiths do, Seenivasan does not live in his work cubicle, a small bare room with a single window opening onto a narrow passageway inside a building on Serangoon Road. "I am a family man. My family is in Jalan Tentaram. I went back to India last February for one month because my elder brother passed away. I went to marry off his daughter. It was the first time I went back. I couldn't [live there], my body did not agree with it.

("I came to Singapore with another boy in 1936 when I was thirteen. I did not come with a ship's ticket. If you came through the *pandari* (a man who arranged passage) you didn't need a ticket. I left from Karikal where we were taken secretly in a little boat to the ship.)

"My father and elder brother were [in Singapore] then.

My father came two or three years [earlier]. I only saw my father once when I was a small boy, then he came to this country (Singapore). I didn't know him when I was born. Only after I was told, I knew he was my father. He was here for a long time as a laborer. When I was ten, my mother left me (died). I stayed in a place in India for one year and learned this job (goldsmithing). [But] it did not come properly."

(The owner of Silva Segara Jewelers across Serangoon Road from Seenivasan's work space, "is my *peria appa muga*n ('big father's son', father's older brother's son). I learned again from this uncle. My father doesn't know this occupation. Only this *peria appa* knows. I didn't know my grandfather, but I think he would have done this occupation because they used to call him *sinna appa ashari* (Tamil, small father goldsmith). My father worked in the fields. I didn't become a farmer because I didn't like. My elder [brother] studied this job before but he didn't do it well. He tried to be an ironmonger and it didn't come too



well. Then he stayed in the country to be a farmer but that didn't work too well [either]. There are people in the generations who carried on the occupation but now there are people who are studying and going into jobs."

When Seenivasan came to Singapore, he didn't live with his father. "I was studying [goldsmithing]. At the start, there were no wages. After I started working properly, they paid me six dollars a month."

(Later, during the Japanese time, "no jewelry work. We all worked as laborers. I forced my way into the INA (Indian National Army). We joined to fight the British. I was sixteen, seventeen years old and I just wanted to join the army.) I had a lot of friends. And then there was Subhas Chandra Bose." In 1943, Bose, a compelling Indian nationalist, came to Singapore and, according to historian Mary Turnbull, 'stirred the Indian community and brought new life and force to the [Indian] independence movement.' (Turnbull 1977: 215) "The food was bad," reports Seenivasan. "In the morning, hardly anything. A little rice in the afternoon. Hardly anything for night. We never had to fight. I was there for a year. I haven't been involved in other Indian independence activities because I was in this country. After this, I was through with the army.

"I worked [as a goldsmith for the *peria appa's* son] more or less twenty years. That's about the time I got married." During that time, his salary had risen to one hundred dollars. "I had saved. I had learned the profession well and I had gotten to know more people. At thirty, I came to this shop and started doing it on my own."

In addition, "I was working outside for a while. I worked as a laborer, as a driver. When it was difficult I saw (had) a job at Rediffusion, then nine years at some electroplating. I saw a job at Marconi (an international radio company). After I got wages, I came into my own profession. In the evenings, I worked at this occupation because I have a wife and children. At five, when I finished my work, I came here, after that, I went home.

"My wife is from Kluang, Johor (now Malaysia, then Malaya, like Singapore, a British colony). Once [in 1947] I had to go to Klang (Selangor, Malaysia, further north) for an ear piercing ceremony for one of my relative's daughters. I went together with a married man with whom I was working. As I was [returning] it happened we had to stay back at Kluang. I was scared to come back by train so I stayed there four or five days. He asked me to get married to that girl and I said I didn't want. I want[ed] to go back to India. There were girls in K.L. (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), a few girls in Singapore. They asked (someone asked on their behalf) to be married and I said I didn't want. About this particular girl, a lot of propositions came. [Friends over-recommended], they disturbed me into getting married.

"There are five or six women around [Singapore] whom I have been asked to marry. They are married with children and now my wife is quarreling with me because [one] came in and asked to have jewelry made and my wife heard about it.

"My wife is a seamstress. I gave [her] a little hand sewing machine and she spent her time sewing things. I



scolded her for wasting time and money. She learned to sew on her own and began taking in work to sew for others. I got her a proper sewing machine. I give her three hundred and fifty dollars a month and I don't eat [at home] so she manages," for herself. "I settled three thousand dollars in debts she had gotten for the children's education and books. This agreement (about monthly money) was reached after I settled the debt.

"I have seven children. I did not teach them this trade. You need to have the ability. You must have the capacity to learn. If not, you can't do anything. One daughter lives at home. She has an embroidery machine. Two daughters work in factories. I have no objections about daughters working. In Tamil Nadu, there is no progress because they don't allow women to work. That is why it is so backward. In Tamil movies, the heroines are always from surrounding states.

"I rented [this work space] from a 'Big Man'. Then it switched hands to another man who has passed away. Now it is his wife in India who has taken over. There is another person working here [as well]. At first, I was alone and then they asked me to keep him here. He's gone to India for nine months. I start work at nine-thirty after breakfast. I break for lunch and work until nine-thirty or so at night. What would I do at home?

"My customers are Indian and Chinese. I get orders from the Chinese shop [next door, on Serangoon Road]. A lot of Chinese come. More Chinese than Indian, through the shop," he says bringing out numbered packets to show the various orders. "Indians give orders in the Chinese shop, [too]. Those who know me come and give it to me. Both men and women customers come. They buy female jewelry more. [But many] because they see the shop is big, they go to the shop.

"The jewels come from India. I mainly work in twenty-two karat gold. I draw and cut and carve the design out. There are people who give me old stuff [to redo] but I don't like to take it. Wedding times, that is when they buy most of all. Other times, not much. That is during [the Hindu

month] Thaimasam (late January, early February), the harvest month. If married before that, very bad. This is according to the calculations in the country (India). Here they don't follow it. There they have to collect grain at that time. Here they don't," he observes.

"To be a good goldsmith, you need brains. You need artistic ability. If you don't have intelligence, you can't make the stuff. You have to be imaginative," Seenivasan says, carefully inspecting the necklace on which he is working. "They will knock this [building] down. If I get another place, I'll just have to leave. There is no such thing as retirement. I'll work till I die."

Bald-headed, "eighty-something," Tan Kee Hua sits quietly in a reclining chair at the back of the gold shop on Jalan Pinang. His face is repeated in many of the faces of the assistants' behind the jewelry-filled counters. Outside, the shop's name is given in Chinese, English and Malay: Tiang Wah Jewellers & Goldsmiths, Kedai Emas Botak (the bald one's gold shop).

"This is a family business started by my father which involves about ten persons in the family," explains the elderly gentleman's grown son, Hong Kee, who manages the shop. We used to have only one shop in Arab Street," he reports in Mandarin. "[It] was established fifty years ago. It has been demolished to give way to other things. But since I have lots of brothers, we split some time ago. [The] other brothers are not in the same line as I am because my father has three wives and the sons of each wife are not on good terms. Which is why our father let each have their own business.

"I have two brothers," by the same mother. "One is [also] in the shop. The other works with computers," explains Hong Kee whose wife, sister-in-law and some sisters also work in the business. "The children are coming in to help. [The two] who have graduated from schools help me because I think it is the same as working for others. The other two who are still in school studying

have to decide for themselves whether they want to come in the building or not. They seldom show interest in becoming a smith and I don't go out of my way to encourage. I used to be an electric contractor."

Although it is a public holiday, the shop is open. The younger brother who works with computers is helping out. "I like computers," he says, "but a family business is a good thing. You can always come back to it if things don't work out."

Hong Kee, who learned by observation, does some smithing, as did his father. "I am the only goldsmith in the shop. I have to do it because I was so furious with my workers. There was once when he asked for thirty dollars [payment for a piece of work], I asked to have the work redone by the next day. The worker said 'no, next month I will finish the work'," he recounts with disgust.

"The ordinary jewelry [we sell] is manufactured in a factory. We buy wholesale. I accept [special] orders from customers but most of the goods in the shop comes from factories. It is more convenient and popular. Some [of the factories' work] is fine but some is rough. If we make in the shop, we can make more patterns.

"The majority of my customers are Malays, perhaps [only] forty percent are Chinese," he observes. The shop is on a quiet side street near Arab Street and the Sultan Mosque, the part of the city that has traditionally been a center for Malay life and economic activity. "Most of [the Malays] come from Malaysia: Johor, Malacca, K.L., Sabah, Trengganu. They don't come especially to buy gold and jewelry but they come to this area to buy things [generally]. The Malaysians think that the gold in Singapore has a higher percentage of gold and therefore will not be darkened very easily. The Chinese that come to buy are Singaporeans.

"The Chinese buy for special occasions such as New Year, weddings. The Malays buy to wear and to keep. Their [pieces] are usually bigger and more expensive. A Malay came to the shop today to order a bracelet. Eight thousand dollars. This will be ordered from a factory" which accepts special orders as well as mass producing jewelry.

"There are no Malay goldsmiths in this area but there used to be some." Hong Kee suggests that "Malay goldsmiths work in Serangoon Road and make jewelry for Indians. (This, however, it is doubtful.) The jewelry in our shop," he goes on to say, "is suitable for all ethnic groups. Even Indian goldsmiths are rare because their jewelry would also be made by Chinese goldsmiths."

His father, Tan Kee Hua, speaks in old-man soft Teo Chew. "I was born in Teo An (Guangdong Province). I was twenty when I came here. [In China], I had many lines particularly [porcelain] painting. My father owned a provision shop. The shop was closed down when I was fifteen. I thought I couldn't continue so I engaged myself in other lines. It was a hard life there, hard to look for jobs. Therefore I came [to Singapore] with friends. It took six days, by ship. When I came here, there was a person who needed someone in his electroplating shop so I worked for him about half a year. I left because the wage was too low. Then after that, I started to sell gold and silver jewelry. I wanted to learn from a Master but he said 'no need, don't have to, you can learn by watching.' I have always been independent and itinerate.

"I was very thrifty. I earned about ten dollars a day when I started my own little business. That's how I accumulated my capital while I waited for the right opportunity. That took three years. The first shop was in Arab street. [How I got] it was a coincidence. A friend came up and asked



me if I wanted to open a shop because he had a place in Arab street. The shop owner was a Hakka who wanted to open a goldsmith's shop but who wasn't familiar with this line. At the same time, he was very old. The shop already existed and he wanted someone to take over. I hired a clerk, a person to do the plating (electroplating, a part of the gold jewelry making process), and a *da tza* (worker who sweeps floors, makes coffee and does general jobs).

"I moved to the Tiong Bahru area when the war hit Singapore. When the Japanese occupied Singapore, I was given permission to continue my business in Arab Street. But I was heavily taxed by the Japanese."

To succeed in the gold business, he observes, "one must know the skill and [have] good honest workers: [ones] who won't run away with the gold you gave them to work, on the pretext that they need the money to feed their children. All you have to do is cheat once and nobody would ever trust you again. No hard work, no good return. I usually did a little bit of chores before the shop opened and when the shop was opened I had to take care of it. After the shop was closed [for the day], I had to do some work too. I don't work any more. I have weak legs."

What about good luck? "Listen to the heaven and let fate decide for you. Hard work is [what is] important. Luck, good fortune, is something that cannot be seen. As long as one has work to do, one must do it. Who knows whether good luck will come or not. In so far as one is honest, doesn't cheat ... you do whatever you have to, try your best and that will be good enough.

"I never cheated, that's why everyone knows me. It makes no difference whether you do business with Malays or Chinese. The [Malays] trust me, that is why they buy gold and jewelry from me. [They] favored me and called me 'Botak' (M., bald)."

It is just before the ten a.m. opening time. The expanded metal doors of the brilliantly lit gold shop, one of the row of them on South Bridge Road, are locked. The shop assistants, young and old, stand in a line behind the counters and pass along cardboard boxes, school bags, plastic boxes and large trays full of gold jewelry from one person to the next like so many buckets in a fire brigade. When the last piece of jewelry is in its place inside the glass-topped counter, the staff take their places, the Sikh *jaga* (M., guard) opens the door, and the day's work begins.

"This place has been open since 1936, Christmas Day. Maybe it was just a coincidence. My father didn't know it was Christmas." The eldest son is a professional who, since his father died in 1965, has helped manage the family business in his spare time. "I more or less became the watch-dog of the place. I don't deal with daily chores. My father never encouraged me to carry on this trade although in the beginning, he trained me to be in it. Later, he found that my interest was different. So he just encouraged me to do whatever I want. I am the first son. Traditionally most parents build up their business from nothing. Of course, [my father] valued his achievements



and he wanted [them] to be maintained. So you feel some sort of pressure and some obligations. But he noticed that we all can go on. We are the first generation to have the chance to go on to the university and graduate. So he was very pleased." All five sons finished the university and four work in their professions.

"The youngest brother is an accountant. Finally, I persuaded him to come back and carry on the business here. After all, if you are working for somebody, you draw a fixed amount of salary and we can afford to pay him that amount of salary to carry on the family business. And, of course, we give him an incentive to keep him here. He is working in an old traditional goldsmith's shop. He may feel it has less status and all. If you are working in a big firm, very famous — Shell or IBM — as an accountant, it is different than working in an old goldsmith's shop."

Although there are several goldsmiths in the back of the shop who can do repairs and make special orders, as in all gold shops in Singapore, most of their jewelry is made in small factories elsewhere in town. Because of the variety involved now, it is impossible to rely on a worker to make everything himself. "That has been the trend for the last ten, fifteen years. Previous to this, we had to rely on people to make by hand.

"The gold shops all belong to the Gold Sellers Association. We fix the price to sell — of course at a profit — based on the gram weight of gold multiplied by the market price of that day plus the cost of workmanship. Then we allow the customer to bargain. What they may bargain [on] is the cost of the workmanship. The gold manufacturers are good friends. They visit us [in the shop] and by visiting they look around at what we are short of. Some [make] bracelets, some rings, some chains. Most of them are family businesses. I think it is tradition. Of course, there is a lot of appeal from the government that we have to modernize, but that is very difficult, not easy. Also you must keep up the integrity of the family.

"The goldsmith bosses are very close friends. We dine together and of course we exchange information. We have monthly meetings at the association. In addition, we see each other socially: sons' weddings, daughters' weddings,

birthdays. There are two hundred eighty seven members of the association. Two hundred forty are goldsmiths. The rest are manufacturers because they want to be associated with us. Some are small and do not belong.

"The old goldsmiths shops set up a condition: if you buy from us, we will [buy back] if we can see our chop there. We put three chops. One is the shop name. Another is the worker's own chop — a cross, or a ring, or something so we can identify. And then if the type of gold is nine-one-six or twenty-four karat. If you want to sell back to us at a loss of fifteen percent [of the current gold price] minus the workmanship, you can be insured that even though you take a loss, you can sell it back to us one day. That is why people are quite willing to buy gold.

"We have a lot of Japanese customers. However, most of them are Chinese Singaporeans. But also a lot of Indian customers. There are differences in what they want: say the screw of the earring. We (Chinese) go anti-clockwise. [The Indians] want to go clockwise. I don't know why. Then there is the staining of the gold. Among Chinese, red gold [is popular] so we have to use some sort of powdery substance to give a reddish tinge. It all depends on if you are saving.

"In training me to take over, my father emphasized first the accounts and, of course, good personal relationships with the people around here. I must respect them as seniors, although they are employed by my father, and as my younger brothers. [I must] learn from them whatever thing they can offer me. And [he stressed] the buying and selling. That we *must* emphasize. I don't know much about craftsmanship. Basically, [my father] feels it is too difficult for me. But I observe them doing it. I know what is going on."

The craftsmen work behind a doorway at the end of the shop at a workbench against the wall in a long passageway. While the shop itself has been modernized, the back shows

the building's old shophouse origins with steep stairs to dwelling space above.

Singapore-born Lau Seng Guai, forty-eight, is the son of a goldsmith. "My father went to Hong Kong from China and learned the skill in Hong Kong. I graduated from primary school in 1951 and couldn't cope with school work. It was my father's suggestion that I learn this because he could teach me. I could pick it up quickly and earn a living. I was unlikely to take up heavy manual work. Goldsmithing suits me very much. It doesn't take too much physical strength. I have been in this line for such a long time — thirty-two years — I just have to like it.

"We were subcontractors of [this gold shop]. My father brought [the work] home. When he died, ten years ago, I came to work in the shop. It is better to receive a fixed salary. If I worked at home, it would be counted by the piece.

"We live in Chinatown where I grew up. I don't know when we will have to move but it is likely to be soon. If the government wants me to move [to an HDB flat] I have to go. The old apartment is very spacious but if it rains, it can drip very badly. But it's convenient to go to work. My wife works in a rubber factory with the raw sheet being manufactured for France. She has been working for sixteen years, since the youngest child was born.

"I have three sons and three daughters. I, myself, am very conservative and thought they were less likely to go astray [in Chinese schools]. I wouldn't allow them to become goldsmiths because it fluctuates very often. It is not a stable job."

Lau is not sorry to see the goldsmith's craft disappear. "In the new factories, they have division of labor. The work is divided into different parts and they have machines to make [it] easier. Well, I can't care so much [that younger people only know a part of the job. I'm] too old."

Of the shop's four goldsmiths, Woo Kok Chow, about



sixty-five, is the oldest. "In China, I was a farmer, helping my father," he says, looking up from the ring on which he is concentrating. "I came here in 1935 at sixteen or seventeen with friends from the village where I lived. Someone asked me if I would like to be a goldsmith. I saw that it was not bad, and I said yes. There were four of us learning in Weng Cheong's. We lived in that shop. I earned a dollar a month. What did I know? I was a child."

One of the older shop assistants who is listening explains "when they first entered the shop as an apprentice, they would help out, sweeping the floor. After a few months, they started on silver: simple rings, earrings. After one or two years, they started simple gold rings. For five years. [Then] they are finished and get a promotion."

"We learned until the Japanese invaded Singapore," Woo continues. "During the occupation, I did any job I could find. After the war, I went up to Malaysia, Trengganu, Johor Baru, working in various gold shops. I [have] worked in [this gold shop] for the last twelve years. I have five boys and five girls. None of my sons knows how to work gold."

"They all have Chinese education. Because I have so many children, I couldn't afford to send them to schools too far away" and was unable to send them to English schools. "I was the only one to 'find money'. I am poor. I still have so many children. I endure."

"I am tired of this work. I do not wish my son to come into this business because it is not the way to earn good money. Nowadays, the young choose to emphasize individualism. There is no point in forcing them into something they don't like. It wastes their 'golden time' when they could learn very quickly if they are given something they like."

"This goldsmith business, if it is good it is really very good, if it is bad, it's horrible. 'These are objects of vanity, they have no value; the craftsmanship is good,'" Woo observes, quoting a proverb. A good craftsman uses "one's capability to do whatever the boss gives you. One must be fast and dexterous, careful not to spoil the object. The customer wants the things finished quickly so you have to meet the demand. If one is unlucky and spoils the jewelry, it raises problems between the customers and the boss. I would feel very uncomfortable with that because it is my fault," explains Woo who values concentration and skill.

"No use nowadays. People use machines to do the work. Working by the piece in a small shop, it's hard to earn big money. It is easier if you have a factory and machines to do them in quantity. If you want to do good business, you must have capital; there are lots of things you must take care of," he continues, implying that he must be contented with his present worker status. "*Suen loh* (C.). That's the way it is."

"At the most, we are thrifty in order to get over the more difficult times. When it is bad [one is] like an Immortal: emaciated. When the customers are rich, they buy jewelry from you. When they are not, they won't feel like it. I was just about to give up this skill but someone came to me and asked if I would like to work [at this gold shop]."



Because I have too many children to look after, I had to look for something to earn more so I also worked as a mechanic. Since I am a father, I have the responsibility of bringing up my children. I work to fulfill my obligations. That's why I am unable to provide my children with a tertiary education.

"One has to be satisfied with what he has and what he can have. This is the only way to survive in a society. Everyone has his own obligations to fulfill. If I am irresponsible, then my children would be affected unfortunately. I do this kind of 'ox' labor because I am uneducated. Education will lead one to an office which is easier and more comfortable than this labor. My job depends a lot on the whims [of others]. I have always wanted to switch jobs. [But] I couldn't find a better job because I had an obligation to bring up my children. So, I am stuck. I think this skill is redundant, therefore I do not force my children to learn. But I have never thought of retiring. I will retire when I am not able to work any more."

*G.S./J.S./Tamil/5.24.83/LCL/Mandarin/Teo Chew/
Cantonese/5.27.83*