

Chinese Associations and the Making of Chinese Identities in Singapore (1819-1959)

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The identity of the Chinese in Singapore took more than a century and half to develop. During British rule it began with one's place of origin and dialect or *bang*. The Chinese identity remained ethnically fragmented until the mainland became a republic. The emergence of communism was the next turning point as dissatisfied Chinese began identifying themselves as Singaporeans. These stages in the evolution and development of Chinese identities took place under the guidance of Chinese associations and the schools they established and managed in the Crown colony.

Singapore under British rule enjoyed a relatively high level of autonomy in social and cultural activities. Although the colonial government promoted an English educational system and the English language, Chinese education flourished through the establishment of a considerable number of learning institutions. The majority of these Chinese schools were directly or indirectly under the control of Chinese associations.

Period of Chinese Regional Identity

In the early colonial period, Chinese communities were grouped according to their place of origin and dialect. The sub-ethnic groups are called *bang*. There were five major *bang* in colonial Singapore namely Hokkien, Teochew, Canton, Hakka and Hainan. Most ethnic Chinese in Singapore originally came from Southern China. Each *bang* had its own associations, temples, schools, hospitals and so on. They stressed the importance of their Chinese regional identity and seldom communicated with members from other *bang*. During this period, Mandarin was not yet as widely spoken as the standard Chinese and most Chinese spoke their own dialects.

The attitude of one *bang* towards other Chinese sub-ethnic groups is well reflected in its cultural and educational policies. Chinese schools affiliated with a particular *bang* tended to be exclusive, recruiting teachers and students from their own *bang*, using their own dialect in

teaching, and promoting the Chinese regional royalism in their textbooks and curricula.¹ For instance, the Hokkien *bang* established two Chinese schools, Chong Wen Ge School (1849) and Cui Ying School (1854), in which all patrons, teachers, staff and students were Hokkienese and Hokkien was the language spoken at school.² This practice had survived into the early 20th century, although it became less rigid. For example, in the Hokkien *bang*-affiliated Nanyang Supplementary School of Commerce and Industry (1924), about 10% to 15% of its teachers and students were non-Hokkienese.³ Although it can be considered a breakthrough, the exclusiveness of Chinese schools was still strong during this period.⁴

Likewise, the other *bang* carried out similar educational policies. The Hakka *bang* established the Ying Xin School in 1906, which used the Hakka dialect as the teaching language and recruited teachers and students mainly from its own *bang*.⁵ The Teochew *bang* founded the Duan Meng School in 1917, in which the Teochew dialect was used and Teochew teachers and students were recruited.⁶

It was untrue that Chinese schools did not indoctrinate students with Chinese nationalism and Singaporean nationalism. However, their primary concern was nevertheless Chinese regional loyalism. The first identity of students of a Chinese school was sub-ethnic Chinese, such as a Hokkienese or a Cantonese, rather than a Chinese national or Singaporean Chinese.

This kind of education failed to foster the spirit of China as a nation and consequently created the disunity among different Chinese sub-ethnic groups. The British colonial government saw no point in regulating or suppressing this Chinese regionalism, since it fostered neither anti-British sentiments nor a unified Chinese community.

Period of Chinese National Identity

Following the establishment of a first republican government in China in 1911, Chinese nationalism reached its peak in both China and Chinese communities overseas. Singapore was no exception. Chinese associations in Singapore began to change their stance and adopted a more open and nationalistic line, resulting in tremendous changes in the educational policies among Chinese schools during this period. Though still under the

control of *bang*-based Chinese associations, Chinese schools adopted Mandarin as the instructional language and used textbooks from China. They also recruited more teachers and students from other Chinese sub-ethnic groups. Chinese education emphasized that China was a unified nation and taught less about certain regions of China or Chinese in Singapore. The Chinese national flag was hoisted and the Chinese anthem was sung during school ceremonies. Tan Kah Kee, a Chinese leader from the Hokkien *bang*, stressed that the aim of education was to cultivate the sense of being a Chinese and therefore Mandarin instead of Hokkien should be used in school. Under his influence, Tao Nan School (1906) shifted from Hokkien to Mandarin in 1916. It was the first school to adopt a language change and was followed by the majority of Chinese schools in the 1920s to 1940s. The use of Mandarin thus became a rule rather than exception in the latter half of this period. The Duan Meng School (1906) abandoned Teochew in favor of Mandarin in 1931. Tao Nan School also made another revolutionary step in 1921 by appointing a non-Hokkienese as principal.

Gradually, the Chinese *bang* became less exclusive and more willing to cooperate with others. The best example of the cooperative spirit of this era was the founding of Nanyang Chinese High School in 1919, which received support from all major Chinese *bang*. In terms of administration, curriculum, teachers and students, the school was national in nature.⁸

A series of military incidents in the 1930s and 1940s provoked a strong anti-Japanese sentiment in China and in overseas Chinese communities. This anti-Japanese sentiment helped promote Chinese nationalism in Singapore. Chinese schools adopted anti-Japanese texts and organized anti-Japanese activities. For instance, Ai Tong School, established in 1912 by Hokkien *bang*, and Yeok Eng School, founded in 1911 by Hainan *bang*, conducted joint fund raising efforts for anti-Japanese activities.⁹

The rise of nationalism among Chinese in Singapore worried the British colonial administration, which decided to regulate the situation through ordinances. The ordinances in the 1920s allowed the colonial government to penalize and, if necessary, close down schools. All schools and their students had to register with the government. These ordinances reduced the autonomy of Chinese schools, but were not rigid enough to stop the currents of Chinese nationalism in Singapore.¹⁰

Period of Chinese Singapore Identity

At the close of World War II, still under British rule, Singapore saw the decline of Chinese nationalism.

Mainland China was controlled by the communists and most of the Chinese in Singapore disliked the new regime, because it supported communist movements in Southeast Asia and confiscated the property of overseas Chinese who left in China. The Taiwanese government was equally unpopular for its iron fist policy and corruption. Thus, the Chinese community in Singapore began to look inwards.

The British colonial government took steps to curb Chinese nationalism and communism leaving the growth of the local identity unchecked. The ordinances issued by government in the 1950s were meant to discourage Chinese nationalism and to promote English education. Government subsidies for English schools increased in order for the latter to outnumber Chinese schools.

Following the developments of Chinese schools in pre-war times, these schools became more open to other Chinese ethnic groups. They began to put more emphasis on Singapore's affairs and matters concerning the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Most of the Chinese schools established during this period included Singapore in their names to show their loyalty to Singapore. Some old Chinese schools followed suit, dropping the names which associated them with their hometowns in China. For example, Chinese Ying Xin School became Singapore Ying Xin School, and Guangdong Yeok Eng School became Singapore Yeok Eng School.

The establishment of Nanyang University in 1956 was a landmark in the making of Singaporean Chinese identity. The university was established and funded by various Chinese associations in Singapore with the mission of training Chinese in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Mandarin was the main teaching language and its teachers were recruited from all over the world. It took in Chinese students from Singapore, Malaysia and other Southeast Asian nations. Chinese education became comprehensive in this period. The students of Chinese schools were taught to be proud of their Chinese Singaporean roots. Lee Kwong Chian, a leader of the Hokkien *bang*, stressed the importance of cultivating a local identity. He

said: “If you live in Singapore, you have to contribute in matters concerning politics, economic growth, and culture in Singapore regardless of the situation in mainland China.”

Conclusion

The Chinese associations and their schools played an important role in transforming the identity of ethnic Chinese in Singapore. The transformation underwent three stages: from sub-ethnic Chinese to Chinese national to Chinese Singaporean. These identities did not necessarily conflict with each other. In many ways, it was only a matter of priority. For instance, a Chinese Singaporean of the 1950s might first identify himself/herself as Chinese Singaporean, than Chinese or Hokkienese. This indicates that the transformation of identity among Chinese in colonial Singapore was shaped by both inner and external factors. The Chinese associations and Chinese schools were quick to respond to these changing factors.

The unity and influence of the *bang* declined in the second half of the century. More and more Chinese schools were established by partners from different *bang* and even some by non-*bang* members (such as religious groups). The use of Mandarin as the teaching language and the rise of Chinese Singaporean identity also weakened the functions of *bang*.

The British colonial government basically gave Chinese education a free hand, as long as it did not undermine its administration. Although the rise of Chinese nationalism and local identity did cause the colonial government uneasiness, the British did not resort to high-handed measures to interfere with Chinese educational policies. Its ordinances aimed more at curbing Chinese Communism rather than Chinese nationalism.

It seems that the educational policies carried by the PAP government after Singapore's independence in 1965 has been a continuation, rather than a departure from, the above-mentioned early post-war developments. English is used as the teaching language, but the ultimate aim of national education is to cultivate the sense of being a national Singaporean. ❁

Endnotes

- 1 See Chen Meng Hong, *Chinese Education in Singapore as Seen from the Lah Pau Published between 1887 and 1911* (Nanyang University: Senior thesis, 1973).
- 2 See Ke Mu Lin, "Chong Wen Ge and Cui Yin School," in Lim How Sen, ed., *The Historic Spots of Si Lah* (Singapore: Nanyang Academy, 1975).
- 3 See *Bulletin of Nanyang Supplementary School of Commerce and Industry*, 1926, 1955 and 1980.
- 4 Chinese schools were exclusive in terms of ethnicity but were open to all social classes within the same *bang*.
- 5 See *Bulletin of Ying Xin School*, 1938, 1949.
- 6 See *Bulletin of Diian Meng School*, 1931, 1956, 1976.
- 7 See Yu E. Zhou, *Chinese Education in Southeast Asia* (Guangzhou: Jinan University Press, 1996).
- 8 See *Bulletin of Singapore Nanyang High School*, 1979.
- 9 See *Bulletin of Yeok Eng School*, 1925 and 1935.
- 10 See Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, eds., *Politics and Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995).