The Homeland: Thinking About the History of Chinese Overseas

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Is there a history of the Chinese overseas? If there is such a single history, how does it square with the fact that migration has brought Chinese into numerous non-Chinese societies, where their "history" is being diffracted into the separate histories of their host societies? Any attempt to write "a history" of Chinese overseas will arouse some understandable skepticism.

Someday we may reach a point in migration history when one can no longer speak of "persons of Chinese descent" (or any other descent) as historical actors—if their identities are wholly subsumed by their adopted countries. There is reason to believe, however, that we have not reached that point yet. First, defining "Chinese" has not been left up to those most affected (the people of Chinese descent themselves) but has busied others as well: whether in Indonesia, Malaysia or elsewhere, "Chineseness" remains on the mental map of majority (sometimes called indigenous) peoples and is projected back onto the minds of the Chinese minority. This situation has been described as "prescribed otherness".[1] Second, Chinese are still emigrating to some areas of the world, forcing older Chinese communities to examine the meaning of "Chineseness" in their lives.

Perhaps one way to think of a single history is to propose that Chinese and their descendants overseas have been continuously affected by their "homeland". I realize that "homeland" seems hopelessly ambiguous. Do we mean the "home" of one's ancestors, or one's adopted home? I shall use the term here anyway, without begging the question of whether or not China actually induces "home-like" feelings in the minds of particular migrants or in the cultures of migrant communities. At least "Homeland" has the merit of leaving open the question of whether Chinese abroad are aware of China as a civilization, a state, or a native region.

Although I offer "Homeland" as a point of departure for understanding Chinese overseas history as a single process, there are two ways I believe the term ought not be used. The first involves "ethnic essentialism", the idea that "ethnic" Chinese possess characteristics that are built into their natures and do not change with place, time, or context. It assumes that there is something inborn in Chinese migrants that keeps them culturally special, so that they can never be assimilated into the national cultures of their host societies. Essentialism has often been linked to an imputed nationalism: the assumption that Chinese outside China continue to focus on their Homeland, whether historically, culturally or even politically.

The second involves the fashionable catch-phrase "Greater China", an idea that began innocently enough to refer to the economic links among southern China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but which has taken on some very unpleasant overtones. The idea is that people of Chinese descent outside China constitute an expansion of the Homeland into a worldwide arena through their ethnically-based economic links. At its worst, "Greater China" sounds racist in the "Yellow Peril" mode. According to one "Greater

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[1] Ien Ang, "To Be Or Not To Be Chinese: Diaspora, Culture and Postmodern Ethnicity", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 21 No. 2 (1993), p. 9, citing Rey Chow, *Women And Chinese Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

China" pundit: "unscrupulous", "canny", and "secretive" Chinese entrepreneurs are busily building "Greater China's new world order".[2] Granted that this is a particularly virulent example, it suggests how dangerous the "Greater China" spectre may become for Chinese living overseas, particularly in new nations that have a history of doubting the national loyalties of their Chinese minorities.

We need to keep these reservations firmly in mind if we are to consider the "Homeland" as a reference point, rather than a stereotype. Another caution: If the "Homeland" is to play a part in the story, we have to take account of the momentous changes going on within it: both as objective facts (the Chinese revolution and the modern Chinese state); and as subjective visions in the minds of Chinese overseas. These changes are the essence of the "Homeland's" historical meaning outside China.

I'll consider first the Homeland as it shaped the people who emigrated from it; then the Homeland as a transformer of Chinese consciousness overseas. In brief, my argument will be that historical experience taught emigrants valuable skills for survival overseas; but that the emergence of a modernizing nation-state in China, beginning in the late nineteenth century, had the effect of exposing Chinese overseas to dangers that threatened them in unexpected ways.

China as a School For Emigrants

Chinese society since the sixteenth century furnished generations of emigrants with common historical experiences that enabled them to survive and sometimes to prosper in lands far from home. This period continued a long cycle of commercial growth, going back to medieval times. Nevertheless, the period from the late sixteenth century was shaped by contact with European trading empires. It is by now a well-known theme, among historians of China, that trade with the West powerfully stimulated economic and demographic expansion within China.

By the time of the Manchu conquest in 1644, an intricate synergy had developed among foreign silver, foreign crops, population growth, and commercialization. Land-shortage drove millions of families to seek economic survival through home handicrafts made for market. Other survival strategies, such as labour-export and internal migration, were typical of late-imperial times. All these lay in the background of Chinese emigration to the "southern seas", or Nanyang.

China's long history of internal migration is essential background for understanding overseas emigration. Throughout history but with increasing momentum since the sixteenth century, Chinese have moved throughout China proper and into peripheral areas such as Taiwan and Manchuria. A population increase from 142.4 million in 1741, to perhaps 412.8 million in 1840, accompanied a huge drop in per capita land area nationwide. By about the year 1700, contemporaries realized that the migration they were observing resulted from population pressure on land.[3]

There are good arguments for considering overseas emigration as a special case of this larger migratory process. Internal migration in fact shared certain attributes with migration overseas. Both within China and without, labour export had become a

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[2] Andrew B. Brick, "The Emergence of Greater China: The Diaspora Ascendant". The Heritage Foundation, 1992, pp.5-8. Even the most judicious academic treatment of the subject flaunts a provocatively sensational title. David Shambaugh, (ed.), *Greater China: The Next Superpower?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] Guo Songyi, "Qingdai de renkou zengzhang he renkou liuqian".*Qingshi luncong* 5 (1984), pp.103-38. Figures cited are on pp. 104ff.

common resort of hard-pressed households: An excess of working hands at home meant that jobs had to be sought in distant places, jobs that might eventually furnish remittances for supporting the home family. Capital, too, was exported to distant places, both domestic and foreign, in search of new opportunities for profit.[4] Migrants were not just destitute farmers. Merchants looking for more profitable places to do business would move and take their money with them. Some areas, such as Huizhou (Anhui) had national reputations as exporters of capital and merchants. Institutions such as regional lodges, long-distance banking networks, and sworn brotherhoods (sometimes called secret societies) served the needs of men far from home. These institutions, transported overseas, formed the backbone of overseas Chinese communities.

The curriculum of this school for migrants included a well-attended course on urbanization. The great coastal emporia of Amoy and Canton taught former country folk how to make things and fix things, how to run the myriad facilities of a maritime city: from night-soil removal to cobbling, from furniture-making to ship-chandling. It taught them how to interact with others outside their customary ambits of village and lineage. It taught merchants how to organize civic institutions, commonly centred around temple cults, in which leadership was shared with prominent literati. By the eighteenth century the port of Amoy, the springboard for emigration to Taiwan and the Nanyang, had become a "migrant society".[5] There, uprooted people from all over southern Fujian had become internal migrants before they became emigrants.

The commercialization of late-imperial Chinese society was especially significant for emigration because commercial skills were not confined to a discrete "merchant class". Although the politically correct social classification in imperial China considered "merchants" a distinct group, late-imperial commerce actually reached deep into the social order and affected all strata—including artisans, farmers and literati. Even poor farmers gained experience in the handling of money, which included skills such as borrowing and lending, investment, market estimation, and wage labour. Gambling (or risk-assessment for fun and profit) was a pastime of all social classes.[6] Whether an emigrant was a prosperous merchant or a poor farmer, he was to some extent schooled in the ways of commerce.[7]

Another important type of skill learned in this school for emigrants was how to do business in an environment where political power was held by others. The "others" in China were (and still are) officials who wielded state power on behalf of a ruling autocracy. Two guiding principles of our school's curriculum were those of buying protection and coopting officials. Late-imperial China offered many sorts of opportunities for buying official protection, ranging from outright bribery, to the

[4] Fu Yiling, *Ming Qing shidai shangren ji shangye ziben* (Beijing: Xinhua shuju, 1980, 2nd ed.).

[5] Ng Chin-Keong, *Trade and Society: The Amoy Network on the China Coast, 1683-1735* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983), pp. 194-200.

[6] Maurice Freedman, "Note on the Handling of Money", in *The study of Chinese society: essays by Maurice Freedman*, selected and introduced by G. William Skinner. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979).

[7] Scholars have emphasized, quite properly, that the commercialization of late-imperial China was unevenly distributed among regions because of special historical conditions. The Amoy area, for instance, had been involved in overseas trade and shipping much longer than other regions. C. F. Yong, *Tan Kah Kee: The Making of an Overseas Legend* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 131. Nevertheless, the Fujian coastal trading ports were linked economically to other provinces, and there can be no doubt that during the course of the Ming–Qing period, Chinese commercialization was a widespread reality that affected families across the divide of both region and class.

purchase of nominal official ranks. Coopting officials was also practiced, however, as bureaucrats became silent partners in commercial enterprises. In late-imperial as well as modern China, we can see where Chinese merchants may have learned how to operate alliances between business and government, exemplified by the "Ali Baba" system of modern Southeast Asia, in which non-Chinese frontmen protect Chinese capitalists in return for a cut of the profits. Commercial enterprises in late-imperial and modern China has commonly required working through well-placed protectors, while keeping a low political profile oneself. In the emigrants' overseas homes, there were of course no Chinese officials to corrupt or coopt; that role was filled played by the European colonial authorities.

The Chinese "school for emigrants" thus taught skills and outlooks that enabled its graduates to become essential figures in colonial economies outside China, whether as capitalists, craftsmen, or wage-labourers. In the post-colonial age, they enabled Chinese to build the economies of developing nations, and in many cases to dominate them. These experiences I call "historical capital", rather than "cultural capital", because the term denotes the historical experience of a particular epoch, rather than a supposedly age-old and immutable "Chinese culture".

But are we to understand this "historical capital" as something that permanently defined the Chinese character? Is this an example of the "essentialism" I decried earlier? Actually, the history of Chinese emigration casts some doubt on the "inheritance of acquired characteristics". As new waves of immigrants arrived in Southeast Asia after the turn of the century, the older merchant elites gravitated away from commerce and toward professional and managerial careers, particularly when they could capitalize on their ability to handle the languages of the colonialists. New economic dynamism was supplied by relatively recent immigrants—often first generation men. Though the lessons of China's "school for emigrants" endured through generations of merchant families overseas, they were not imprinted on the gene pool. New historical circumstances offered new career choices and success strategies.

Social Structure and Elite Certification

I turn now to how the Homeland has shaped Chinese communities outside China since the late nineteenth century. I shall draw upon case studies from the Straits Settlements and Malaya under British rule to show how changing visions of the "Homeland" provided new ways for overseas Chinese elites to certify their status as community leaders.

Transmuting wealth into social status has naturally preoccupied the newly rich, in China as elsewhere. Chinese merchant elites overseas were first certified as community leaders by their colonial patrons (through the "kapitan China" system), but by the mid- or late-nineteenth century this system was already either abandoned or outmoded. In the Straits Settlements, the British abandoned it early on. In the Dutch East Indies, the old mestizo (or "Peranakan") kapitans could hardly retain much legitimacy among the flood of new settlers in the early twentieth century. Elite certification under the kapitan system had, of course, a built-in ethnic basis, defined by the colonial powers: the "Chineseness" of the kapitans (no matter how creolized their culture) suited the colonialists' needs. As immigrant society grew more complex, however, new modes of certification had to be devised. Increasingly, these modes projected new visions of the Homeland.

Early Chinese immigrant communities had a complex sense of their origins, in which the awareness of "Homeland" coexisted with a sense of "ancestral district", or *guxiang*. An example may be found in the 1850 inscription marking the construction of Singapore's Tianfugong temple. Although this was an institution founded by the Hokkien *bang*, or dialect-group, from southern Fujian Province, the inscription avoids any such restrictive regional terminology.

> We Chinese (that is, Tangren, or people of the Tang Dynasty, a conventional term used by southern Chinese emigrants) sailed from the China mainland and engaged in trade here. It is the Empress of Heaven who mercifully blesses our voyages ... We Chinese were grateful to her ... Thus we held a public discussion and decided to build the Tianfu temple.[8]

The self-designation "Tangren" was undoubtedly carried by the Hokkien leadership from Malacca, where it probably was shorthand for the Hokkien dialect group. And the same inscription refers to the Hokkien regional association (*huiguan*) as that of "us Tangren". Of course, the presumption of the Hokkien group that it would act as natural leaders of the entire Chinese community was reasonable enough, considering that the Hokkien *bang* remained Singapore's most powerful regional group right into the twentieth century. Even exclusive dialect-group institutions used "Homeland" rhetoric in their official writings. The founding of a Hokkien-dialect school in Singapore in 1867 stressed the superiority of Homeland culture, which was of course the basis of the curriculum: "Our sage emperor respects scholars and venerates the Way"; and "Although the culture of barbarian lands is vulgar and shallow, and thus different from the land of civilization", yet the school would preserve "the examples of King Wen and King Wu" even in a barbarous frontier outpost like Singapore.[9]

Although the dialect-exclusive regional associations served as primary identity-markers for emigrant elites, they did not project a pure regionally-based culture. To be sure, "Homeland" was probably an aspect of "home district", rather than the other way around. Yet we cannot understand these Homeland references as pointing only to a culture and not a country, because reign-titles (*nianhao*) of ruling Chinese emperors were routinely used on inscriptions.

Although consciousness of the Homeland certainly existed, developing a more broadly-based elite was a slow process. Instances of dialect organizations' cooperation with each other have been well documented,[10] and these undoubtedly paved the way for levels of leadership that transcended dialect boundaries. To stand out as a community leader among the nineteenth-century Straits Settlements Chinese required acts of leadership above and beyond one's own dialect group. The entry-ticket to such a level of leadership was money, donated to charity and education.

Back in the Homeland itself, community leadership had been certified by the national system of academic degrees. The merchant elite accommodated itself to that system by purchasing titles and by cultivating gentry–official patronage. But for non-degree-holders, more was required: donations to "public" charities (that is, disaster-relief and education that transcended lineage or even dialect boundaries). In the colonial setting overseas, of course, there was no literati elite to which rich merchants could relate,

[8] Chen Ching-ho and Tan Yeok Seong, *Xinjiapo huawen beiming jilu* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), pp. 57-63.

[9] Chen and Tan, p. 283.

[10] Lim How Seng (Lin Xiaosheng), *Xinjiapo Huashe yu Huashang* (Singapore: Yazhou xuehui, 1995), pp. 28-62.

and no Chinese bureaucratic system that could certify the social worthiness of wealthy people.

Colonial authorities in the Straits Settlements filled this gap by providing alternative badges of certification. Titles such as Justice of the Peace and orders of knighthood were awarded wealthy Chinese who served the community as a whole by financing good works (such as a water system for Singapore) as well as by smoothing over inter-*bang* conflicts to preserve the public order on which commercial life depended. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, authorities in China lured merchant wealth from Southeast Asia by selling official titles and soliciting disaster relief funds. To this opportunity, rich Chinese in the colony responded enthusiastically. Certification in the Straits Settlements thenceforth flowed from both colonial and Chinese state authorities.[11]

As the Straits Settlements Chinese community grew larger and more complex, its leadership elite changed with it. The tone and intensity of "Homeland" symbolism was affected by events in the colonies and in China itself. As we have seen, such symbolism had been present in the rhetoric of strictly dialect-based groups. But immigrant institutions did not furnish a template sufficiently broad to certify a community-wide form of leadership. Nor did British and Chinese honorary titles impress anyone outside the circle of the elites themselves, and ordinary folk remained deeply divided along dialect lines. In both respects, the colonial templates proved less compelling than those now offered by China itself. Enthusiasm for the emerging China of reform and revolution created a pan-Chinese orientation for the Chinese community—meaning a sense of identity that reached beyond dialect-group boundaries to "China" as a nation-state; and a higher-level elite to go with it.

Several factors underlay the susceptibility of overseas Chinese communities to the pan-Chinese vision of the Homeland. These included political mobilization coming from inside China, such as the efforts of the expiring Qing Dynasty to drum up support, proselytizing by reformers, revolutionaries, and by new political parties. The social background in the colonies included the increasing numbers and wealth of new China-educated immigrants and the banning of the dialect-based "brotherhoods" (or secret societies) by the British.

Expanding the scope of elite leadership did not mean abandoning the dialect-group template. On the contrary, C. F. Yong has shown us how the emergence of a higher-level elite leadership went along with a revitalized dialect-group organization. In early twentieth-century Singapore, the crucial institutions were the new Singapore Chamber of Commerce and the revived Hokkien regional club (the Hokkien *huiguan* headed by the rubber and shipping magnate, Tan Kah Kee). Through these institutions, dialect-group ties were used to mobilize money and commitment for a pan-Chinese movement in Singapore, and even (briefly) a pan-Southeast Asian Hokkien movement to resist Japanese aggression.[12]

Although reform and revolution in the Homeland inspired higher levels of organization in the colonies, they were not the only sources of inspiration. Chinese colonial elites were energized by a new awareness of their vulnerability to European

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[11] A man such as the opium-farm proprietor and leader of the Hokkien *bang*, Cheang Hong-lim (Zhang Fanglin), for example, held concurrent titles from both the British and imperial Chinese authorities. See Cheang's epitaph, written by Huang Zunxian, in Chen and Tan, pp. 305-7.

[12] C. F. Yong, Tan Kah Kee, Ch. 5. See also his *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992), especially Chs. 2 and 5.

economic competition, which dialect-group organizations seemed too weak to cope with. For example, one pan-Chinese activist decried the economic effects of rivalry among dialect groups, particularly the Guangdong and Hokkien. A socially divided Chinese merchant community gave European colonialists and traders an unearned advantage. He urged the formation of pan-Chinese chambers of commerce all over the Nanyang.

> Once chambers of commerce is established, the boundaries between Hokkiens and Cantonese will be discarded, and (the two dialect groups) will be united in spirit ... though we are of different occupations, different provinces, different prefectures ... all will belong to the Chinese race (*huazhong*) ... then we can compete with the foreign races in different arenas, and our commerce will suffer no obstacles.[13]

In 1914, a pioneer Singapore journalist wrote, "Our people have commercial ability but no political aptitudes. Thus "colonists" and "colonies" cannot be used in reference to the Chinese overseas. Is that not why we are only considered "sojourners"? So how can unity and economic power be seen as separable? If the Hokkiens and Cantonese could each be aware of their shortcomings and bring together their strengths, then their advance would be rapid indeed".[14]

Certification of elites above the dialect-group level had indeed been pursued during the nineteenth century, but the templates for inter-*bang* cooperation were socially very narrow and depended largely upon symbolism furnished by the colonial rulers. These templates were to be superseded by events of the late 1890s, following China's humiliating defeat by Japan in the first Sino–Japanese war. As new social and ideological forms emerged within the China homeland, Chinese communities overseas were quickly affected by them. The formation of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce in 1906, with representation from all dialect groups, is one example of how pan-Chinese movements furnished new templates for community leadership.

This leadership was certified in two ways, both oriented toward the Homeland. One was contributions to disaster relief in China, which by the late 1920s led naturally to supporting resistance against Japanese aggression. The other was support of Chinese education, now based on Mandarin instruction and thereby given pan-Chinese significance.

These new forms of certification, one political and the other cultural, were appropriate to an elite that was absorbing first-generation businessmen with purely Chinese education. The British had always favoured community elites who were more or less bicultural on the basis of English-medium education. The new leadership could express itself by promoting Chinese loyalties and Chinese culture. This development was accelerated by reform and revolutionary movements within China; by the changing immigrant population; and by the development of a Mandarin-based Chinese school system. As Chinese education in the colonies followed educational trends within China itself, Mandarin rather than dialects became the medium of instruction. This meant that support by community elites for Chinese

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[13] Huang Naishang, "Guang Nanyang Huaren yi dasi yi zibao shuo" (On the advantages of the Nanyang Chinese practicing 'larger private interest' to protect themselves) in Yeh Zhongling, *Huang Naichang yu Nanyang Huaren* (Singapore: Yazhou yanjiu xuehui, 1995), p. 58.

[14] Koo Seok Wan (Qiu Shuyuan), "Yu zhi Huaqiao guan", *Chennan bao* (20 May 1914). I am indebted to Dr. Wong Hong Teng for this reference.

education took on pan-Chinese significance. Money could still be raised through dialect-group organizations (such as Tan Kah Kee's powerful Hokkien group), but it served the educational needs of the whole community.

After World War II, Chinese education became the premier symbol of pan-Chinese consciousness in the British colonies, and the pet project of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. With China-oriented political organizations under the ban, Chinese schools became the rallying points for community elites. The appeal of education for these capitalist philanthropists may have owed something to a curriculum that emphasized respect for the ancient cultural values of family, hierarchy, and benevolence. The Malacca Baba millionaire and statesman, Sir Tan Cheng Lock, (who knew no Chinese himself) threw his support behind the Malayan Chinese education movement with such a curriculum in mind.[15] Yet it appears that even such conservative-minded men were prepared, when necessary, to make common cause with some rather radical educators and their students, in common defence of the pan-Chinese overseas culture of which they had become the champions.[16]

The British colonial authorities distrusted pan-Chinese cultural activism and tried to suppress it. From the colonial point of view, such distrust was well-founded, because of the evident connections between the new pan-Chinese elites and anti-imperialist ideas emanating from China itself.[17] Chinese colonial elites no longer seemed to be "merchants without empires" (as Wang Gungwu has described the early Hokkien seafarers). To the colonial mind, a rival imperial presence was emerging in China, of which "their" Chinese might become the willing instruments. Chinese patriotism, exercised through pan-Chinese groups, complicated Britain's relations with other powers, notably Japan, and by extension was seen as threatening to British rule as well.[18]

Beginning in the nineteen twenties and continuing up to the present day, one can trace a determined suppression of pan-Chinese activities by the British and by their successors in Malaysia and Singapore. The British banned the Guomindang in their dominions and repressed the anti-Japanese "national salvation" movement right up to the threshold of the Pacific War. After World War Two, pan-Chinese cultural activism (expressed through the Chinese-medium school system) seemed also to threaten the delicate balance that the British had tried to maintain between Chinese and Malays.

In British resistance to these new elite organizations lay the origin of later trouble for the Chinese communities in independent Singapore and Malaysia after World War II. The more the "Homeland" became essential to the social status of colonial Chinese elites, the more vulnerable these elites were to suppression, first by the colonialists and later by their successor states.

Chinese-medium Education and Pan-Chinese Consciousness

Chinese-medium education aroused suspicion and even hostility among colonialists and their successor governments. Take for example the Chinese education movement

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[15] Tan Cheng Lock, "Speech to Chinese Teachers' Conference", Nov. 9, 1952. *A Collection of Speeches and Writings by Dato Sir Cheng-Lock Tan, K.B.E., D.P.M.J., J.P.* Printed by the Craftsman Press Ltd., Singapore (1952?) pp.24-5; Tan Cheng Lock Papers, ISEAS, Singapore, TCL 26.14.

[16] I refer here to the case of Tan Lark Sye and Nanyang University, discussed below.

[17] C. F. Yong, Chinese Leadership and Power, Ch. 1 and 2.

[18] C. F. Yong, Tan Kah Kee, 222-4; the case of Hau Say-huan.

in Malaya and the ill-fated Nanyang University in Singapore. Both cases point up the importance of studying the effects of pan-Chinese activism upon non-Chinese populations and their leadership elites.

Chinese-medium schools in Malaya had existed since the early nineteenth century, on a dialect-group basis. The New Culture movement in China hastened a trend toward a pan-Chinese education overseas: by the early twentieth century, new-style schools had started in Malaya and the Straits Settlements, and by the 1930s Mandarin was supplanting dialects as the language of instruction. Schools were entirely supported by community groups, led by the Chinese business elite. Indeed the school management committees they ran became their most important arena for community-wide action, outside their own dialect-group organizations. Thus the schools were a major integrating factor among the elite; and participating in the management of several schools was a way to spread one's influence broadly through the community.[19] In the postwar years, the school system served as the principal common ground among the various dialect groups.

How could such an educational system fit into a society that was precariously balanced between Malay and Chinese ethnic groups? Not well at all, thought the British, who, beginning in 1951, tried to supplant it with an English-medium system for Malaya. Their Malaysian successors followed substantially the same track, except that Malay and English were to be the designated languages. Although the English-educated Malay rulers had to compromise with their Chinese counterparts for a time, by the nineteen-sixties it was clear that a pan-Chinese educational system was an unacceptable challenge to Malay nationalism.

Both sides in this bitter contest had reason to fear. Chinese spokesmen defended their school system in terms that, for Malays, were a thumb in the eye:

> Malaya has no culture of her own worth talking about. Malaya must draw from the civilizations surrounding it for the best material with which to create the ultimate culture of her own. And without fear of contradiction, the greatest civilizations surrounding Malaya are Chinese and Indian.[20]

Such rhetoric was grist for the mills of Malay resentment.

The Malayan Chinese, for their part, had identified the survival of their schools with that of their communities and of their individual identities. Tan Cheng Lock defended Chinese-medium education as the foundation of Malaysian-Chinese community identity: "A man's native speech is like his shadow, inseparable from his personality"; and the teachings of Confucius and Laozi "largely form the substance of the Chinese consciousness the race-mould and type".[21] Malay ethnic nationalism was complemented by Chinese fears of ethnic extinction.

That the postwar pan-Chinese movement in Malaya had placed its bets on culture, and particularly on education, had led it into the shadowy area where culture, ethnicity, and race are mingled. The English-educated Tan Cheng Lock was an intercultural colonial man to whom a purely ethnic definition of culture might

[19] Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaya, 1945-1961* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 28.

[20] Tan Cheng Lock, *Memorandum on Chinese Education in the Federation of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1954). Tan Cheng Lock papers, ISEAS, 13.25. Tan Liok Ee writes that the actual authors were H. L. Tan and Wen Chung Tian of the Malayan Chinese Association. Tan, *Politics*, p. 145.

[21] Tan Cheng Lock, "Speech to Chinese Teachers' Conference".

logically have seemed uncongenial. Yet his need for political support among the wider Chinese community, along with his sentimental attachment to Chinese culture (which he could read only in English translation) led him at the end of his career to a position in which race and culture were indistinguishable. The end of this story is yet to emerge, but the Malaysian government has persevered in its policy to disallow Chinese as a medium of instruction in government-aided schools. Malaysian Chinese now support a separate, privately-financed Chinese secondary-school system; whose graduates (for linguistic reasons) are somewhat disadvantaged as applicants to public universities in Malaysia.

To this story, add the unique case of Singapore, where an English-educated Chinese elite oversaw the destruction of a Chinese-medium educational system in the years after independence. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew himself was English-educated, and his benign neglect of Chinese-medium schools contributed to their decline and eventual extinction during the 1960s and 1970s, as parents channelled their children into the English-medium system, which seemed more likely to get them good jobs. In the 1970s, the government made Chinese one of several second languages in a universally English-medium school system.[22]

More dramatic, however, was the case of Nanyang University, a Chinese-medium institution founded in 1956 and finally abolished in 1980 (by being merged into the National University of Singapore). The cherished project of the leaders of the Hokkien *bang*, Nanyang was supposed to draw the best Chinese-educated talent from secondary schools all over Southeast Asia. It was particularly important to graduates of Chinese-medium schools in Singapore and Malaya, who had difficulty qualifying for English-medium higher education. Nanyang's sponsor (and benefactor) was the Hokkienese rubber magnate, Tan Lark Sye, following in the tradition of his elder and one-time employer, Tan Kah Kee.

Lee Kuan Yew's hostility to Nanyang was sharpened by a political crisis in 1963: some Nanyang students were clearly inspired by Beijing, and some of its graduates were active in the left-wing Barisan Sosialis, then the principal rival to Lee's People's Action Party. But Lee's suspicions toward Nanyang may have had deeper roots.

In the Nanyang case, Lee stood firmly in the British colonial tradition. When Nanyang was first proposed, it had the backing of the Americans (who saw it, mistakenly, as a bulwark against Communism); but not of the British, who regarded it as a politically-inspired reaction to an imagined attack (by British and Malays) against Chinese "cultural integrity" and "racial heritage". British intelligence officers reported that "the main motive behind the proposal is political and racial prestige ...", not the promotion of education. Non-Chinese, they reported, ever sensitive to the China threat, had been "quick to protest against the 'establishment of little Pekings or Nankings in Malaya'".[23]

Like the British, Lee seems to have feared and distrusted the magnates in the Hokkien *huiguan* and the Chamber of Commerce. Perhaps it was Oxbridge disdain

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[22] Sally Borthwick, "Chinese Education and Identity in Singapore", Wang Gungwu and Jennifer Cushman, (ed.), *Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese Since World War II* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988), pp. 35-59.

[23] "Malayan Political Intelligence Report for 1953", in CO 1022/346, PRO, London. The report also calls attention to possible influences from the Guomindang on Taiwan, a reminder of the old British watchfulness against any GMD interference in the colonies.

for immigrant bigshots who spoke little English and less Mandarin, and some of whose richest men (such as Tan Lark Sye) had received scant education in any language. The sentimental Homeland activism of such men seemed an open invitation to meddling by the Chinese state. Lee may also have considered them culturally arrogant and inclined to dominate other races economically. At any rate, like the British before him, he seems to believe, to this day, that peace and order in Singapore require that such men be kept out of political power.

Before the war, the British had been exceedingly wary of the Hokkien *bang*'s China orientation, particularly that of its leader, the rich and charismatic patriot Tan Kah Kee. It could fairly be argued that, in founding Nanyang, the Hokkien tycoons wanted to invest in Singapore and not China. But when Tan Lark Sye proved too outspoken in defence of Chinese-medium education, and antagonized Lee further by financing his left-wing opponents, Lee deprived him of his citizenship. Nanyang University's Chinese orientation clearly seemed to Lee a back door to China-inspired subversion. More important, perhaps, its Homeland orientation ("Chinese chauvinism", as Lee calls it) threatened the delicate balance of a multi-racial society and jeopardized Singapore's precarious existence as a tiny, ethnically-Chinese state amid powerful Muslim neighbours. On these premises, it was only a matter of time before Nanyang itself would be eliminated.

The transition to a pan-Chinese template for elite certification produced some outstanding leaders, such as Tan Kah Kee, with community-wide and even regional influence. But the process entailed painful costs. The emergence of the nation-state in China proper made it harder for "Homeland" to co-exist with other symbols of social and cultural identity, because of the pre-emptive claims of the colonial regimes and new nations. Embattled Chinese communities thereby lost some of their earlier capacity to manoeuvre within political systems ruled by others. Old lessons about how to prosper in such systems were no longer useful in an environment of militant nationalism. Chinese in the Nanyang had, and have, no state of their own. In this statement one must include Singapore, which its leaders proclaim is not a Chinese but a multi-ethnic state, and in which "Chinese chauvinism" is resolutely crushed by its present (mainly ethnic Chinese) ruling party!

If the relationship between Chinese overseas and the Homeland can contribute to our sense of a single history, then the experience of the Chinese in Malaya/Singapore must have some comparative value elsewhere. If it does, then it seems to me that the following subjects need to be addressed, case by case. First, the changing effect of the Homeland (in both its objective and subjective senses) on Chinese community structure and status systems overseas. Second, how the attitudes of indigenous (that is, non-Chinese) populations were influenced by the rise of the modern Chinese nation state, and how those attitudes affected their relations with local Chinese. And third, how the expression of Chinese culture, among Chinese overseas, responded to the needs of a people who were attached to their Chinese heritage; but who were also made more vulnerable by it, when that heritage seemed to be associated with a militant, modernizing nation within the Homeland itself.