

Asia Research Institute

Working Paper Series

No. 10

Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1918

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August 2003



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Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1918

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Introduction

One of the immediate difficulties in studying communities of local-born Chinese in Southeast Asia concerns terminology. Terms used to identify such groups – *mestizo* in the Philippines, *peranakan* in Indonesia and Malaysia, or *baba* for the men, *nyonya* for the women and (collectively) in what used to be the Straits Settlements, ‘Straits Chinese’ – have usually meant different things to different people. In several places, intermarriage by Chinese with local populations is seen to have created ‘hybrid’ or ‘creolized’ cultures with their own unique patois, dress and cuisines (or what is now referred to in Singapore and Malaysia as *peranakan* Chinese culture). However, the nature and extent of this process of acculturation still remains a source of debate.¹ In Singapore and Malaysia, a further complexity emerges when we examine historically the adherence to traditional dress, customs and religion maintained by local-born Chinese (and especially by the men) in public; a retention of traditions regularly commented on until around 1870 by European observers. While historians and sociologists have described communities of local-born Chinese in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as ‘hybrids’ or as ‘creolized’, largely by studying the domestic cultures of these communities, outside the household these same ‘creoles’ and ‘hybrids’ engaged in a variety of public activities through which they continued to identify themselves as authentically Chinese. Equally important is the fact that for much of this period they were accepted by new waves of migrants from the mainland as being such.

Perhaps because of the confusion surrounding their identities, little attempt has been made to incorporate local-born and locally settled Chinese in Southeast Asia into wider studies of the Chinese diasporas to which they belong and of which their seafaring ancestors had been the pioneering navigators. Prof. Wang Gungwu’s dictum is that until the Second World War ‘all who thought of themselves as Chinese were Chinese’ (Wang 1988: 1). This being said, the literature on Chinese expansion overseas has been generally preoccupied with the notion of the *huaqiao* or ‘sojourner’ (Wang 1991; see also Mckeown 1999). Intentionally or not, historians working in this field have tended to marginalize the experience of Chinese born or settled permanently outside China at least until after 1949 and the creation of the People’s Republic. This is the case in spite of the fact that the growth of these communities was sometimes considerable; the *peranakan* Chinese community in Java, for instance, numbered

¹ For a review of recent literature on this subject see Suryadinata (2002). Suryadinata concludes that ‘it may be more realistic to consider Peranakan Chinese as a spectrum ranging from those who are most Malayanized (“localized”, as Tan Chee Beng calls it) to least Malayanized’ (2002:75). See also, Rudolph (1998).

around 100,000 by 1812 or 2% of the island's total estimated population (Mackie 1996: xxii).²

An emphasis on the Chinese overseas as temporary stayers, with one eye fixed firmly on a return trip eventually to the ancestral town, village or family back home is understandable, especially between 1842 and 1949 – a period that witnessed the global expansion of Chinese migrant labour and remittance. However, if this approach is not balanced by an understanding of the overseas Chinese who settled and laid down roots (or the *luoddi-shenggen* as they are now referred to by certain historians) it becomes misleading (Wang Ling Chi 1998). Too much emphasis on the idea of 'sojourning' can easily reinforce the impression that mainland China and its China-born were the sole significant and authentic agents of political and cultural change in the diaspora; even perhaps the only authentic and 'pure' Chinese.³

Just how communities of local-born and locally settled Chinese in Singapore interacted with new waves of Chinese migrants in the nineteenth century, and then later how they responded to the cultural and political ideas emanating from the Chinese mainland, is the subject of the present discussion. Since much confusion surrounds the terms *baba*, *peranakan*, and 'Straits Chinese' they will be employed (as far as possible) in the sense that they were used by the groups adopting them during this period. Jurgen Rudolph's recent work on this subject has shown that until at least 1914 such terms were used for legal and political reasons, both by the community itself and by the colonial authorities, to demarcate settled Chinese with a permanent as opposed to temporary residential status. (Rudolph 1998: 51-54). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these permanently settled, 'Straits Chinese' represent a *transcultural* diaspora; transcultural in the sense that the hybridity or creolization evident in their domestic lives was carefully separated from their performance of a very Chinese ethnic identity in public. Transcultural, also, in the sense that over time Straits Chinese leaders extended their role as commercial 'go-betweens' linking the Chinese community to the European settler elite to become cultural agents in the broader transmission and translation of modernity, Confucian revival and even overseas Chinese nationalism; a process that attempted to make each of these discourses reconcilable with support for the British Empire and the uplift of an increasingly far-flung Chinese nation.

New approaches to the Chinese overseas: de-centering diasporic networks

Although the Chinese never had or, it seems, even sought a formal empire across the seas in the manner Europeans did, recent trends in the historiography of European expansion, which emphasize the nodal points or 'bridgeheads' through which this

² In Singapore in 1891 the local-born Chinese community numbered 12,805, around 10% of the total Chinese population (Lee 1978:87). Suryadinata's work on *peranakan* Chinese in Indonesia, in several monographs and articles, is an exception.

³ Yen Ching Hwang's recent volume on *The Ethnic Chinese in East and Southeast Asia*, for example, makes only three brief references to local-born Chinese (described as being of 'mixed blood') despite their importance within the community as a prosperous mercantile elite (Yen 2002: 151, 164, 238). Tan Liok Ee makes the significant point that so far research into Chinese women in the Straits only begins with the arrival of mainland migrants from 1853. Local-born Chinese women are categorized as not 'really' Chinese in existing narratives, despite having Chinese names, raising Chinese families and being buried in Chinese graveyards (Tan 2003: 354-7).

expansion was effected, may be of some relevance. The history of European commercial empires and the manner in which they expanded from the 16th to the 20th centuries, is increasingly understood to have been a process carried forward through ‘webs’ or ‘networks’, rather than solely through bilateral *centre-periphery* linkages or *metropole-locality* connections.⁴ Within these networks, nodal points such as port-cities had a habit of emerging as *centres* in their own right with their own bureaucracies, presses and intelligentsias. Policies, ideas and practices developed by the British in Calcutta, for example, might often have as significant an impact on their efforts to order non-European societies in Africa, Malaya and even as far afield as New Zealand as those originating in London. Moreover, ideas, practices and attitudes emanating from the ‘core’ or ‘imperial metropolis’ were often contested, negotiated and transformed in these cities. Social, cultural and political developments in the peripheral ‘centres’ of Empire were even, on occasions, exported back to the metropolis. The movement of ideas and people generated by European expansion was therefore far from unidirectional.

Does this refined conceptualization – of the way European networks of commerce, information exchange and colonization function – contain any relevance for the student of the overseas Chinese? Research into the operation of zones of Chinese influence radiating out from the diasporic settlements of Hokkien merchants active in Southeast Asia has begun to shed light on the processes involved in Chinese expansion overseas in the early modern period (Chin 1998). However, the ‘de-centering’ of Chinese diasporic networks has yet to find its way into much of the literature concerned with a later period of global Chinese migration. Nor have the agents involved in the local negotiation of Chinese migrants, and in the manipulation of the diasporic networks new arrivals relied upon, received particular attention.⁵ Nevertheless, when new Chinese migrants arrived in Singapore in the nineteenth century their fates were often in the hands (sometimes literally) of Chinese born and settled in the Nanyang; groups that are now often mistakenly seen as having existing on the fringes of Chinese diasporic society and as having exerted only a peripheral influence upon it.

The closest we have so far come in terms of surmounting the conceptual constraints generated by a repeatedly bi-lateral, *centre-periphery* approach to Chinese and other diasporic networks is the influential work of Adam Mckeown. Mckeown puts forward a model of networks of migration, trade and nationalism that radiated out from the Chinese mainland via treaty ports. These networks, he argues, eventually drew their participants emotionally and intellectually, if not physically, back to their ancestral homes. In an evocative description of this phenomenon Mckeown writes that Chinese migrant networks represented:

a collection of rays emanating from hubs in Hong Kong and other South China treaty ports, spreading out in one direction to South China’s villages and in the other to different locations around the world, further branching out from secondary nodes like San Francisco and Singapore (Mckeown 2001: 84-5).

⁴ See, *inter alia*, Ballantyne (2002); C..A. Bayly (2002); Frost (2002); Lester (2002).

⁵ The exception is Lee (1978), who discusses relations between ‘Malacca Chinese’ and the wider Chinese populace. The term ‘Malacca Chinese’, however, is problematic and Lee has less to say about such a group’s continuing interaction with the waves of new migrants from 1870-1920.

But while it acknowledges the important point that these networks operated through ‘secondary nodes’ such as Singapore, Mckeown’s conceptualization of Chinese diasporas still skips over the way these secondary nodes influenced and transformed the peoples and ideas moving through them. In particular, when applied to the Nanyang, his approach seems to marginalize the role of powerful cliques of Chinese settled outside China and the networks linking much of Southeast Asia that they historically sustained, sometimes independently of direct relations with the Chinese mainland. In the Straits Settlements and in the Indonesian archipelago in particular, local-born Chinese in the 19th century comprised entrenched elites with which new arrivals had to negotiate. Mckeown argues that changes in ‘personal and communal self-perceptions’ amongst Chinese communities overseas were ‘not necessarily the direct result of encounters between Chinese migrants and the people among whom they lived’ but ‘more likely they were ideas and sentiments carried abroad by intellectuals and officials from China who were sensitive to wider global power relations and conceptions’ (Mckeown 1999: 322-23). One might well argue that this claim reveals a high degree of mainland ‘sino-centricism’ and that in fact the opposite scenario holds equally true. As the second part of this essay will seek to elucidate, in a secondary node such as Singapore locally settled Chinese leaders, belonging to families that had often lost contact with China for generations, exerted a significant influence on cultural and political developments within the wider Chinese community. Indeed, the very existence of Chinese diasporic networks in the region was in no small part a consequence of the desire of wealthy, local elites to re-connect with China through treaty-ports such as Amoy, for further power and profit.

Recent studies have also examined the role of port-cities in the colonial epoch as points of intersection or convergence for diverse communal groupings. Rather than focusing on the social segregation caused by colonial urban policy and colonial attitudes to the division of labour, this approach examines the areas of public life in which diverse groups came together and interacted with one another. Tim Harper writes of the emergence of a ‘diasporic public sphere’ in Singapore during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, characterized by cosmopolitan discursive activity and translation (Harper 1997). Jean DeBernardi, meanwhile, in looking at temple life and secret society rituals, has revealed the extent of cosmopolitan interaction in Penang.⁶ While the present discussion will not examine cosmopolitanism as such, the general approach employed by both writers is invaluable if we are intent on understanding the social relationships that were being established at this time between new Chinese migrants in the Straits Settlements and those who had already laid down roots. In 19th century Singapore, breaking down ideas of an often assumed but less often evidenced social separation between ‘pure’ *sinkeh*s (newcomers from the mainland) and local-born (apparently ‘creolized’) Chinese forces us to analyze the world they shared in common as much as what set them apart and to reconstruct the shared public space that both groups inhabited; a public space comprising temples, commercial firms, literary clubs, dialect and clan associations and (ultimately) political parties that were presented as, and understood to be, unquestionably Chinese.

⁶ Members of the city’s Malay-Muslim and Indian-Hindu communities were welcomed into Chinese secretive sworn-brotherhoods. In turn, Chinese communities participated in Muslim public celebrations such as the festival of Mohurram (De Bernardi 2002).

Part One: The Making of the Straits Chinese, 1819-1869*South China merchants in the Nanyang: from seafarers to settlers*

Maritime interaction between the Middle Kingdom and Southeast Asia has a history dating back at least to the third century A.D and perhaps even earlier. The famous Cheng Ho (Zheng He) voyages of the early 15th century to the ports of Java, Malaya, Sumatra and beyond into the Indian Ocean, relied on and revealed the extent of Chinese achievements in maritime technology. Despite repeated bans by the Ming and then later Qing dynasties, private trade and smuggling in the China seas figured prominently in the centuries that followed. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed the rise of sea-borne merchant empires belonging to Wang Chih and Kapitan Li Tan who oversaw fleets of junks cruising to and from Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Manila and Batavia. Zheng Chih-lung, Li Tan's successor as sea-lord of the Nanyang, is said to have commanded a military force comprising 5,000 junks and 400,000 men (Wang Tai Peng 1994: 42).

Until the early nineteenth century, Chinese trade in the Nanyang was dominated by merchants belonging to the Hokkien dialect group operating out of South Fujian ports such as Yueh Kang (Port Moon), Quanzhou and later Amoy (Xiamen). James Chin has shown how in spite of the risks involved in early modern sea-borne commerce and the periodic massacres unleashed on overseas Chinese by foreign powers, between 1570 and 1760 Hokkien maritime networks flourished, resulting in the establishment of sojourning communities in Nagasaki, Manila, Banten, Batavia and Melaka. One of the major factors sustaining these networks and settlements was the remarkably flexible kinship system of Hokkien traders. Family enterprises were expanded by the adoption of sons who were sent overseas to serve as business assistants and sometimes through the adoption of 'brothers' and even 'fathers' resident in overseas ports. Merchants with daughters, meanwhile, encouraged their son-in-laws to live in their own homes and become commercial partners. Emigration destinations for traders from the same family were 'purposefully mapped out', so that relatives did not double up in one country. Contact was maintained through letters sent on junks.⁷ As their sojourns overseas became lengthier, and their profits greater, a bilateral family structure emerged in which Hokkien merchants often maintained two families; one in Fujian and one resulting from marriage to a local wife in the host country. In places, contemporary records indicate that the second, local wife managed the business affairs of her husband while he was out of port (Chin 1998: 317-22). At some point, this responsibility appears to have passed on to the local-born male descendents of such unions.

A particular stimulus to Hokkien trade in the Nanyang and a further incentive for them laying down roots overseas was provided by the growing presence of European merchants in the region. European merchants relied on Hokkien traders and the networks they commanded to purchase native goods and Chinese cargoes or to set up small-scale industries. In return for acting as middlemen in these ventures, Hokkien traders received much sought after advances of capital. The credit system that emerged relied on a deal of trust that over time benefitted those merchants who settled (who it was thought would not return to China without re-paying debts). This relationship was

⁷ Some evidence suggests that access to this channel of communication was not restricted to wealthy merchants alone (Chin 1998: 342-3).

still in evidence much later during the the early years of Singapore. Chinese traders granted credit and deemed by Europeans most trustworthy and least likely to abscond were those who, in addition to some English, possessed families and property – for the most part *baba* of Hokkien descent who had moved down to the new colony from Malacca (Lee 1978: 19-21).

The overthrow of the Ming dynasty by the Manchus in the 17th century and the resulting unrest in Fujian saw further dispersions of southern Chinese overseas. Moreover, after 1750 Nanyang trade networks were intensified as a result of the opium trade. Until the mid-19th century and the opening of treaty ports, ‘country traders’ sold opium to Nanyang Chinese merchants in exchange for silks, tea, ceramics and other Chinese products at geographically convenient bases such as Riau and then Singapore (Trocki 1990). As with the case of Penang before it, the establishment of Singapore saw the almost immediate migration of Hokkien-descended merchants from other nearby settlements such as Riau, Penang, itself, and especially Malacca.

One of the earliest Teochew traders to settle in Singapore was Siah U Chin. Siah’s life story bears out the continuing vitality of the junk trade in the early nineteenth century and the extent of mobility it facilitated. Born in Southern China in a village some way inland from the port of Swatow (Shantou), Siah was the son of a petty mandarin, giving him an excellent knowledge of the Chinese written language and eventually leading to his emergence as Singapore first Chinese ‘man of letters’. In 1823, Siah worked his way from Swatow to Singapore as a clerk on board a junk. Having arrived, ‘on the recommendation of the junk’s owners,’ he became attached to several other trading vessels in the same position. Five years of ‘roving sea life’ followed during which, his biographer tells us, ‘the various junks whereon he was employed visited from time to time practically all the coasts of the Straits of Malacca, the islands of the Rhio Archipelago and the east coast of the Malay peninsula as far north as Singgora.’ By the time he was twenty five, Siah was established as a commission agent supplying goods for junks trading between these places as well as Sumatra, receiving from them ‘all the produce they had collected for sale on commission’. In the 1830s, he began investing his profits in property, married and settled down in Singapore to become one of the island’s first pepper and gambier planters (Buckley 1965: 151; Song 1984: 19-20).

Siah was not alone in exploiting the Chinese trade routes that linked peninsular Malaya and the Indonesian archipelago at this time in order to then purchase property and settle. Other names include the Hokkien, Tan Che Sang and the Teochew, Wee Ah Heng or the *baba*, Ban Tiong and Poh Eng (mentioned by Munshi Abdullah) and the Koh family of Malacca.⁸ Moreover, Singapore’s trade links with ports further away were apparent almost immediately. In March 1820, Colonel Farquhar expressed his delight to Raffles that there were already upwards of twenty junks in harbour that had

⁸ At the age of fifteen, Tan Che Sang, born in Quanchou prefecture in 1763, left China and sojourned in Riau, Penanag and Malacca before settling in Singapore. His wealth and power led him to reportedly boast that ‘any day he said the word he could empty the place of all Europeans.’ Munshi Abdullah, meanwhile, tells us of *Baba* Ban Tiong and *Baba* Poh Eng who were both trading with Kelantan in the 1830s. According to Song Ong Siang, Wee Ah Heng settled in Malacca from 1810 and owned several junks travelling to and from Singapore and Selangor. It was Wee’s habit to ward off Malay pirates by showing ‘in a conspicuous place’ a spear, a kris and a ‘golden image’ given to him by a Selangor Rajah (Song 1984: 13-14, 42-3, 102-3, 129-130; Abdullah 1967).

arrived from China, Vietnam, and Siam. In February of the following year, the first junk arrived from Amoy (Song 1984: 9-10). Almost three decades later in 1848, the Singapore Free Press recorded that 108 junks had arrived during the December to April monsoon, the majority sailing from Amoy, 'Anam', Canton, Hylam and Macao (Siah 1848: 286).

Perhaps surprisingly, the arrival of square-rigged vessels in the region from 1830 (and then later of steamers) appears to have resulted in the intensification of Nanyang trade networks rather than their disruption and to the intensification of local Chinese involvement in them.⁹ On the one hand, junks from China continued to sail to Singapore but increasingly with consignments of migrants rather than goods (Lee 1978: 73, 76; *JIA* 1855:113).¹⁰ On the other, Chinese merchants who had settled in the town and accumulated sufficient capital were seizing on the new technologies and making use of them to pursue even larger dealings with traditional or more recently emerging out-ports, such as Saigon, Bangkok, Batavia and Nagasaki.¹¹ After 1850, the number of vessels plying the seas between such places owned by Chinese firms was striking. In 1866, out of 178 schooners, barques, brigs, junks and ships registered under Act of Parliament as belonging to Singapore, only fifty-eight were in the possession of Europeans, Indians and Malays. The local Chinese owned the remaining 120 (Song 1984: 119).

The *re-ordering* rather than the outright disruption of Chinese maritime trade out of Singapore is important to grasp because it was through these networks that some Chinese, born, raised or settled in the Straits, were exposed to greater direct contact with other Chinese settlements in the Nanyang and with the Chinese mainland itself. Even before the transformation in world shipping occasioned by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Chinese firms owned by *baba* were establishing links with Amoy or running vessels trading between Singapore and Shanghai. In some cases, the agents of these firms were local-born Chinese who were sent back to the mainland to sojourn.¹² As with other kinds of exchange facilitated by the emergence of diasporic

⁹ The argument against the 'disruption' thesis in the China Seas seem just as strong as in the case of the Indian ocean, which has been explored elsewhere by Bose (2002).

¹⁰ Trocki's claim that junks were seen off by square-rigged vessels is hard to substantiate when we consider the continuing use of junks for human traffic (Trocki 1990). In the 1870s, 30, 000 Chinese were arriving in Singapore a year on junks (Turnbull 1977: 82).

¹¹ Ang Choon Seng of 'chop Chin Seng' owned the schooners *Patah Salam* and *Kong Kek*, trading to Saigon and Bangkok. Low Poh Jim and co. and Yap Sian Tee and co. traded with Bangkok, while the firm of Khoo Cheng Tiong and co. brought rice to Singapore from its mills at Saigon. The firm of Wee Bin and co., meanwhile, became the greatest importer of goods from Bali and of all kinds of earthenware, later building up a fleet of over twenty vessels for the Dutch East Indies and Chinese trade. Chip Hock and co. began trading with Japan after the *baba* Tan Beng Teck had sojourned there and brought back 'consignment of lacquer, brass ware and porcelain. Ho Chong Lay arrived from Amoy 1844 and started the 'chop Teng Hin', which 'owned several junks and sailing vessels which made voyages to Siam and Saigon'. The *baba*-owned firm, Lim Kon Wan and Son, owned several schooners and later the steamers *Flintshire* and *Goh Kuan Sia* (Song 1984: 80-81, 100-1, 114-15, 44, 67, 207-8).

¹² The *baba*-owned firm of Eng-wat, Moh-guan and Bros. had dealings with Amoy where its Singapore-born, western-educated representatives were sent to trade and sojourn. Likewise, 'Hiap Hong Watt Seng', which was owned and run by *baba*, owned two sailing vessels shipping planks to Tien-Tsin and Shanghai. The merchant Lee Boon Lim's import-export business dealt with Shanghai in the late 1860s. Yow Ngan Pan, a Cantonese *baba* educated at St. Andrew's, went to Hong Kong in 1880 to be trained

networks, sojourning overseas could be a two-way process. Singapore's trade depression in the 1860s may have put a brief halt to such activities. Their revival after 1870, however, as the city emerged as a global entrepot, meant such linkages only increased. As we will explore in the second part of this paper, these networks continued to impact on the city's local-born and locally settled Chinese community, as well as on newer arrivals, in ways that have been little discussed.

The dialect connection: baba and sinkeh relations in Singapore

Siah U Chin's essays in Logan's *Journal of the East Indian Archipelago* give us an insight into Chinese society in Singapore around the middle of the 19th century. At the top of the pyramid stood three hundred or so Malacca-born 'merchants and shopkeepers' which Siah classes as 'descendents of Hokien immigrants'. Next to them, making up the rest of the *siang* (merchant class) were more recently arrived Hokkien shopkeepers as well as Teochew traders dealing in gambier and pepper or retailing 'rice and cloth' (Siah 1848: 290). Other sources indicate that until 1870 Hokkiens alongside Hokkien *baba* continued to comprise the major part of Singapore's mercantile elite (Lee 1978: 39-40, 45).

According to Siah, *baba* made up the greatest number of Chinese settled in the town with families. Hokkien retailers from the Chinese mainland were the next most likely to possess families since in Siah's view they were among 'those chiefly who can afford to marry' (Siah 1848: 284). At the time he was writing, the sex ratio of Chinese men to women in Singapore was over ten to one (Lee 1978: 39). Considering that large-scale female migration from the mainland did not emerge until the 1880s, *baba* with *nyonya* daughters were in an advantageous position to extend their family networks and business connections. One European contemporary observed in the early 19th century that the junks arriving in Singapore bringing goods and news from the mainland were greeted by a 'bustle' amongst the Chinese community, the first junk to enter port having the appearance of a 'locust which has inadvertently crossed an ants' nest' (Buckley 1965: 323; Song 1984: 41-2). The Straits Chinese leader, Lim Boon Keng, tells us that local Chinese families at this time used to also take a 'considerable interest' in these arrivals, since in addition they brought 'welcome batches of eligible sons-in-law for the daughters who could not marry the natives of the country' (Lim 1917: 876).¹³

The way established local-born families used marriage to negotiate the arrival of newcomers finds a prime example in the case of Siah U Chin's own life story. Around 1838, Siah married the eldest daughter of the *Kapitan Cina* of Perak. Accompanying the Kapitan's daughter to Singapore to live in her new home was her nine year-old brother, Tan Seng Poh. As Siah's brother-in-law, Tan joined him as a business assistant, then partner and then eventually took over the family firm when

at head office of Loh Ki Seng (exporting Chinese goods) of which his father ran the Singapore branch. Song Ong Siang's father learnt Cantonese as a thirteen year old during a sojourn in Hong Kong intended for that purpose (Song 1984: 103, 119, 44, 463, 76). Even as early as 1838, the wealthy Malacca-born *baba*, Choa Chong Long sojourned in China and was murdered in a house in Macao by burglars (Buckley 1965: 215-16; Song 1984: 30).

¹³ *Sinkeh* marriages to *nyonyas* in Singapore appear to have been most common amongst Hokkiens, who unlike other dialect groups seemed more willing to have their descendents born, raised and educated there rather than in China.

Siah retired. Over time, Tan rose through the ranks of Singaporean Chinese society to become a Justice of the Peace, an Honorary Magistrate, a Municipal Councillor as well as wealthy opium ‘farmer’ (Buckley 1965: 151; Song 1984: 21, 131-133). Other prominent China-born to marry into the local-born elite and establish commercial partnerships with them were powerful merchants like Chan Koo Chan and Lim Leack.¹⁴

Relations with newcomers were extended and cemented by the involvement of local-born Chinese in a number of public activities organized around Chinese temples that both enhanced their standing as leaders of Singapore’s dialect communities and in the process reinforced their own speech group identities. In an entrepot environment, where new arrivals from China were faced by a number of dialects that were often unintelligible, temples provided essential social services; functioning as a focal space for socializing, entertainment and seeking employment as well as for the placating of new ‘local’ and old ‘traditional’ protector gods (De Bernardi 2002). The clan, dialect and locality associations that sprang from newly established temples provided for the observation of traditional customs involved in festivals, ancestral worship and burials. Such associations also acted as welfare organizations, sponsors of education and as tribunals for the settlement of disputes. Ceremonial events connected with the temple were occasions in which the local Chinese elite could display their power and prosperity. To one European observer writing in 1879, such events were no different from the political spectacles of ‘civilized London’ and in his view bore a ‘strong resemblance’ to the Lord Mayor’s show (Vaughan 1985: 49).

Before Singapore’s establishment, local-born Chinese in the Straits were deeply involved with Chinese temples and with the public displays and structures of informal government centred within and around them. In 1673, the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple was founded in Malacca and from then on served as the political headquarters for the *Kapitan Cina* of the Chinese community settled there. Although the ‘*Kapitan* system’ was abolished by the British, the President of the Malacca Temple continued to function as the head of the Chinese community. Over time, this office was monopolized by local-born descendents of the original Hokkien mercantile elite; *baba* such as Chee Yam Chuan, who was elected head of the Malacca Hokkien community at the age of twenty-one (Song 1984: 406). Chinese arrivals from Malacca also founded the Guanyin Temple in Penang in 1800. The Penang temple served a similar political function to its Malacca counterpart and, indeed, seems to have been modelled on the latter rather than following temple designs to be found on the Chinese mainland during this period (Debernardi 2002: 304).

¹⁴ Chan Koo Chan was a China-born merchant who owned a gunpowder magazine and large estate at Kallang and who in the 1840s oversaw the common burial ground of the Khoo and Chan clans, the ‘Leong San Tong’. Chan married the daughter of Tan Tock Seng, the Malacca-born *baba* described as Singapore’s first unofficial ‘Kapitan Cina’ (Song 1984: 118, 297; Lee 1978: 54). Lim Leack, meanwhile, arrived in Singapore from China around 1825, married a *nyonya* and entered into business with the *baba*, Tan Chin Seng from Malacca, trading in tin and tapioca. By 1851, the firm of Lim Leack, Chin Seng and co. had established a branch in Malacca and owned ‘several schooners flying the British flag’. These allowed it to carry on extensive business dealings with China where after several return trips Lim Leack eventually died (Song 1984: 179-80).

Singapore in 1840 witnessed the dramatic spectacle of the arrival of a statue of the goddess Tian Hou or Ma Tsu Po, the 'Queen of Heaven', from China. The Singapore Free Press in April of this year tells us:

The procession extended nearly a third of a mile to the usual accompaniment of gongs, and gaudy banners of every colour, form and dimension ... The chief feature of the procession was the little girls from five to eight years of age, carried aloft in groups on gaily ornamented platforms, and dressed in every variety of Tartar and Chinese costumes ... The divinity herself was conveyed in a very elegant canopy chair, or palanquin, of yellow silk and crape, and was surrounded by a bodyguard of Celestials, wearing tunics of the same colour... She is supposed to be the especial protectress of those who navigate the deep: at least, it is to her shrine as the Goddess of the Sea that the Chinese sailors pay the most fervent adoration, there being an altar dedicated to her in every junk that goes to sea. The procession is regarded as a formal announcement to the Chinese of her advent in this Settlement, and the exhibition, with the feasting attendant thereon, is stated to cost \$6000. (*Singapore Free Press*: 23 April, 1840)

The goddess was housed as the main deity in the Thian Hok Keng temple on Telok Ayer Street, which was begun around 1840 in time for her arrival (on the site of a small joss house dating back to the early 1820s) and completed a few years later. Built with materials imported from China, and costing a then impressive 30,000 Spanish dollars, it became Singapore's most important Hokkien religious site (Comber 1958: 59). Until the land reclamation of the 1880s, the temple was literally situated on the water-front, a few yards from where Chinese junks disembarked at Telok Ayer basin; one of their passenger's first activities on arrival on dry land being to make thanks to Ma Tsu Po for their safe voyage.

As in the case of the Penang and Malacca temples, Singapore's *baba* elite dominated the Thian Hok Keng's management. The Chairman of the Board of the Temple's Directors was the Malacca-born Tan Tock Seng, who donated \$3,000 in gold towards its construction although he told a European associate he personally did not believe in idols (Comber 1958: 24; Lee 1978: 46-7). A plaque dating from around 1865 lists eleven members of the Temple's Committee of Management; four of the six we have information about were *baba* merchants including Tan Beng Swee, who conjointly served as president of the Chee Hoon Teng temple in Malacca (Lee 1978: 24; Song 1984: 91). In 1860, the Hokkien Huay Kuan (or dialect association) was established within the temple premises and at first presided over by Tan Tock Seng's son, Tan Kim Ching.¹⁵ J.D. Vaughan tells us in 1879 that his *baba* informant had 'visited the temple all his life' and that another *baba*, Cheang Hong Lim, was responsible for erecting a theatre across the road from the front gates for the performances of plays during festivals in honour of Ma Tsu Po and her attendant gods (Vaughan 1985: 57-8).

The local-born Chinese, Tan Kim Ching and Tan Beng Swee, also erected the assembly hall and ancestral temple of the Tan clan, the Po Chiak Kung. The first presidents of this institution were the *baba*, Tan Kim Tian and Tan Hoon Keat followed by Tan Cheng Siong who simultaneously served the British as a J.P. Later on

¹⁵ In addition to its usual functions, the dialect association (or *pang*) served as a marriage registry; the marriage certificates bearing Tan Kim Ching's seal until another *baba*, Tan Beng Swee, took over from 1884 (Song 1984: 93).

the director of the clan temple was See Teong Wah who was born in Singapore 1886 and educated at St. Joseph's Institution. See was made a JP and Municipal Commissioner and by 1919 he was presiding over both the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Hokkien Huay Kuan (Song 1984: 186, 104). Elsewhere, local-born Chinese in 19th century Singapore were responsible for establishing and overseeing the Giok Hong Tian Temple and the Hokkien Ong Clan Temple (Comber 1958: 62-3; Yen 1995: 69; Song 1984: 168-9, 160-1, 171-3).

The dialect identities of local-born Chinese, as well as those of their descendents, were further reinforced through the promotion of Chinese schools (which were initially organized around temples and dialect based). A list of local-born sponsors of Chinese education, especially free education, spans much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, covering a period in which the *baba* elite are considered by many to have become increasingly westernized in habits and attitudes. This westernization may well have been a process in full swing. However, it does not appear to have meant that the Chinese identities of *baba* were therefore irretrievably lost or any less evident in public.

In 1849 *baba*, along with Siah U Chin, were the main donors toward the construction of the Chong Wen Ge (or 'Institute for the Veneration of Literature'), the Thien Hock Keng's Temple school and the earliest Chinese free school in Singapore (Chng 1999: 71). Some five years later Tan Kim Seng established another school on Amoy Street, the Cui Ying School, also known as the Kim Seng Free School for Chinese boys, which functioned until 1954. Although the teachers came from China, throughout the 19th century the school in Amoy Street was sponsored and overseen by prominent local-born Chinese.¹⁶ Other Chinese free schools established and run by *baba* before 1920 were the Hong Joo School in Serangoon Road, the Toe Lam Hokkien school which met at 'Siam House' (Tan Kim Ching's palatial residence), the Chiang Jim Hien School and the Yong Cheng School.¹⁷ Local-born Chinese also founded some of Singapore's first modern, bilingual schools such as the Gan Eng Seng Free School and the Yin-sin school. The latter was located in a shop house and then later on the premises of the Yin-ho-kuan Temple on Telok Ayer Street. Established in 1904 by Chong Soo Leong, a local-born graduate of Raffles Institution and a trader with the Dutch East Indies, the school held lessons in Chinese and English and was said to be the first of its kind conducted on 'modern lines'. Its curriculum comprised 'reading (with explanations), physical drill, drawing, geography, history, arithmetic and singing' and by 1922 it had an enrollment of 110 boys and 20 girls (Song 1984: 192-93).

¹⁶ Such as Tan Jiak Kim, Ong Kew Ho and the sons of the Malacca-born Ang Choon Seng: Ang Kim Tee and Ang Kim Cheak, who successively served as the school's Treasurers (Song 1984: 81, 161, 199).

¹⁷ The Hong Joo Chinese Free School in Serangoon Road was endowed by the Malacca *baba*, Lee Cheng Yan. Lee Cheng Yan was also a sponsor of the Thoe Lam Hokkien school. The *baba*, Cheang Hong Lim in the early 1890s established the Cheang Jim Hean Free School, named after his local-born son who continued to support it. The Yong Cheng Cantonese school was founded by the local-born, Yow Ngan Pan, born in Singapore in 1863 and educated at St. Andrew's mission school (Song 1984: 110, 144, 326, 463-4).

What little education the colonial government provided for its Chinese subjects in Singapore in the 19th century also appears to have made instruction available in dialect. In 1835, the Singapore Institution was founded with an upper school providing instruction in English and a lower school providing instruction in Hokkien. Eight years later, only the Hokkien class in the lower school had been successful and was being continued. (Turnbull 1977: 61-2) In 1865, by which time the school had become known as Raffles Institution, its annual report recorded that ‘the Chinese class was making good progress’ with local Chinese luminaries, Siah U Chin, Tan Beng Swee and Whampoa, acting as a committee to examine and report on its progress. The report records that \$2000 dollars were available for advanced students from the Chinese class to continue their studies. In 1873, Tan Teck Soon was the first Straits Chinese scholar from Raffles Institution to claim the Guthrie Scholarship for Chinese boys, which allowed him to continue his Chinese education in Amoy (Buckley 1965: 122-39; Song 1984: 139, 94).

Whatever their actual standard, Chinese schools in Singapore, like temples and dialect associations, functioned as focal spaces for socialization between local-born Chinese and new arrivals from the mainland.¹⁸ As the evidence above suggests, through such mechanisms a common dialect identity was expressed. Moreover, *baba* involvement in public and philanthropic activities legitimized and facilitated the considerable cultural and political influence they wielded within the wider Chinese community in Singapore (as well as making them the most obvious collaborators to be sought out by the colonial government). During this period, local-born Chinese may be seen to have deviated from an authentic cultural norm in their domestic arrangements. This does not mean, however, that they therefore experienced a separate social existence from new arrivals because they had lost their essential ‘Chineseness’ in public, as many writers have suggested. For most of this period, the separation of public and private life amongst local-born Chinese was much in evidence with creolization and hybridity in a domestic context rarely impinging on the performance of ethnic identity outside the home until the century’s final decade. In addition, many local-born Chinese exhibited a striking capacity to move between private and public spheres, shifting languages and codes of social behaviour in the process. Significantly, this liberty of movement was not usually available to the female members of local-

¹⁸ Until the rise of the modern education movement in Singapore after 1900, Chinese schooling through temple and shop house schools, as well as through private tuition for the sons of the wealthy elite, has generally been overlooked by historians – especially the role of local-born Chinese in promoting it. Research into temple schools in the region, especially in Indonesia, has pointed to their inadequacies, their use of learning by rote being chief amongst these (Suryadinata 1972: 51; Coppel 2002: 259). If we measure the effectiveness of such education by a student’s capacity to read classical Chinese characters after they left school then perhaps we may agree. However, before the advent of examinations and school reports, generalizations about *peranakan* (local-born) literacy in Chinese have to be treated warily since for the most part they rely on evidence that is scarce and anecdotal. While Lim Boon Keng’s knowledge of Chinese characters failed and shamed him as an undergraduate in Scotland, Tan Teck Soon seems to have had no such problems in Amoy (see appendix A). Moreover, by the turn of the century some *baba* had gained sufficient schooling in Chinese characters to run their own Chinese-language newspapers; such as Tan Chor Nam, Teo Eng Hock and See Ewe Lay (see appendix B).

born Chinese families. Like their expressions of cultural hybridity in dress and cuisine, *nyonias* were generally confined to the household and kept away from the public eye.¹⁹

During earlier periods of Chinese expansion overseas before Singapore's establishment, maintaining public expressions of 'Chineseness', or what might be termed more specifically a shared Hokkien merchant culture, was also an obvious strategy that eased interaction between Chinese-Hokkien merchants across the Nanyang (Wang 1991: 181-97). As these networks survived, revived and even became intensified in the 19th century, so too did continuing efforts to maintain the visible signifiers of this shared culture. The idea that local-born Chinese in Singapore *re-sinified* themselves in order to be more socially acceptable to *sinkehs* (newcomers) may have some merit if we can prove that they were seen to have become extensively *de-sinified* in the first place. In the case of the Straits Settlements the evidence seems to point to the continuity of Hokkien traditions along the male line in most areas

¹⁹ Even in the 1930s, belonging to the Hokkien dialect group did not necessarily mean acquiring the language proficiently. The life story of the Burmese-born Lee Chee Shan (later to be a prominent banker) gives us a striking example. Although of Teochew extraction, and having grown up only able to speak Burmese and English, Lee adopted a Hokkien identity on arriving in Singapore in 1929, since (as his biographer states) the city was the 'enclave' of successful Hokkien merchants. Unable to speak the dialect at first, Lee was nevertheless accepted as Hokkien and his language failings tolerated as being a 'natural handicap' of his local birth (Yeap 1994: 23). In spite of such examples, however, research into local-born communities of Chinese in Southeast Asia has invariably emphasized these groups' adoption of indigenous, seemingly un-Chinese practices and languages as their common trait rather than their continuing expressions of a powerful dialect identity – a notable exception being Tan Chee Beng's work on The Baba of Malacca (1998a). William Skinner argues that these 'creolized' communities represent through 'fusion' with indigenous societies the creation of a new socio-cultural system that he says, 'achieved autonomy and stability despite continued contact with both parent societies' (Skinner 1996: 51-2). Undoubtedly, a feature of such societies was the appropriation of indigenous customs and practices, generating in the Straits Settlements and elsewhere the unique matriarchal culture and distinctive patois of the household regularly identified as *peranakan*. However, William Skinner's analysis stumbles on two major points. The first is the assumption that inhabitants of an emporium environment were monolingual, which is as untrue of Chinese in contemporary Singapore as it is of their predecessors. The second is the failure to distinguish between a 'domestic' and 'public sphere' and to acknowledge the capacity of local-born Chinese to literally walk out the door, into a public world where they donned different hats, in the process switching languages and cultural codes. As Tan Chee Beng has argued in work that draws on more contemporary evidence, *baba* or *peranakan* Chinese identity is better understood as a sub-category of speech group identity rather than a collective identity in its own right (Tan 1998b). Many of the *baba* informants in Malacca interviewed by Tan in the early 1980s claimed they had more in common with their particular dialect group, although they no longer spoke the language itself, than with other *baba* belonging to different speech groups (Tan 1990a: 90,117).

This is not to say that tensions did not arise as a result of maintaining such plural identities. Nor, indeed, was the domestic life of local-born Chinese in Singapore free from public scrutiny, especially at the end of the nineteenth century (a scrutiny that we will see was undertaken by both *baba* themselves and mainland literati). However, at no point before 1900, did such tensions appear to inhibit local-born and locally settled Chinese elites in Singapore from moving within wider Chinese circles and from directly influencing them. Yen Chin Hwang's thesis that mainland Chinese were the sole agents of change in the identity of the community and the leading force in the re-sinification of the *baba*, fails to acknowledge that *baba* themselves in Singapore were often the key figures seeking to limit 'Malayanization' (Yen 1995: 201-2). Moreover, 'westernization' in habits, attitudes and dress began to invade Singapore as much through nodal points such as Hong Kong and Yokohama as through the interaction of *peranakan* Chinese with European settlers.

except the language of the household, a problematic signifier for ethnicity in isolation. Malacca *baba*, the most ‘Malayanized’ of local-born Chinese communities, were said by Lim Boon Keng to still speak colloquial Hokkien in the 19th century for the purposes of trade (Lim 1917: 876-77). In the days of the junk trade, before the rise of modern education and the stigma that emerged for those who could not speak Chinese well, this was probably all that was required.²⁰

This is not to say that local-born Chinese in 19th century Singapore had no shared sense of belonging to a unique group. However, when this collective identity *was* expressed in public it was done in a manner that was unmistakably Chinese. In 1831, thirty-six local born and locally settled Chinese merchants established the Keng Tak Whay, a sworn brotherhood and ‘family benefit society’ led by Malacca *baba*.²¹ The Keng Tek Whay owned eight valuable shop houses in Singapore and was itself sited in a pagoda on the premises of the Thian Hock Keng Temple. The association was continued into the twentieth century by the descendents of the same families that had originally formed it, a period during which no new members were ever admitted (Song 1984: 29). The Rules and Regulations of the association, originally written in Chinese and then re-printed in English in 1918, strikingly reveal the sense of Chinese tradition and custom evident amongst its members at the time of its creation:

It has been said that, though a solemn oath is made in a day, it lasts through a thousand years, even at the streams and the banyan tree. The Ancients regarded an oath as a thing that is binding by its sincerity and its righteousness, and usually considered that ‘plighted words once uttered make the heavens tremble and the earth shake.’ Therefore, in the midst of tribulation and of wealth and prosperity, their purpose remains unchanged. For this reason, succeeding generations earnestly desire to imitate them.

Under the present dynasty, our people have for more than two hundred years enjoyed prosperity. It is meet (sic) therefore that we, who live in this part of the world, should according to custom respect age and revere the teaching of the Sages.

We thirty-six persons who are followers of the Sages, one and all now undertake to form this Association. We invoke for this movement the blessing of the God Sam Kwan Tahi The in whose presence we take this oath to become brothern (sic) (Hianh Tee), though we have different clan names (cited by Yao 1999:114).

²⁰ Evidence of the prevalence of Hokkien as a spoken dialect amongst *peranakan* Chinese comes down to us through published sources. In both the Dutch East Indies and Straits Settlements near the end of the 19th century, a number of works were published in both romanized Hokkien alongside romanized Malay. These works included dictionaries compiled by Europeans and local-born Chinese and also translations from Chinese of rules of family conduct or of Confucian classics. One such work, a translation of the *Hauw King* by a *peranakan* Chinese in Java at the end of this period, refers to the ‘bangsa kita orang Hokkian’ (‘our race, the Hokkien people’) as its audience (Coppel 2002: 269). Furthermore, the example of Penang and the language used by many *baba* there to this day seems to indicate that spoken Hokkien was never entirely lost, as does the continuing capacity to communicate in Hokkien by some *peranakan* Chinese in Singapore. Even if local-born Chinese spoke Hokkien poorly — and as J.D. Vaughan records ‘interlard ... with Malay words and sentences’ (Vaughan 1985: 89) — new arrivals to the polyglot environment of Singapore from China would often have recognized something that was closer to home than the sounds coming from other dialect groups such as the Cantonese.

²¹ The leaders were See Boon Tiong, Ang Choon Seng, Chee Kim Guan, and So Guan Chuan. See Song for biographies of members; also Chng (1999: 72).

The quest for respectability: Straits Chinese and the colonial state

In an article describing the ‘culture’ of Chinese merchants at home and abroad, Prof. Wang Gungwu has written about the difficulties this group faced in China in achieving a measure of social respectability. Confucian social and political philosophy, reinforced by law, ‘placed the merchant at the bottom of a four-tier social structure beneath the literati, the peasant and the artisan’. To attain a higher status, merchants had to identify themselves somehow with the literati elite, or the *shih* class. This was achieved by seeking official titles, property and by educating sons to pass examinations ‘and move up to become members of the literati in their own right.’ Such strategies were not apparently available to Chinese merchants overseas so wealth developed instead as a social indicator of respectability (Wang 1991: 181-97).

It could be argued that this last claim overlooks one of the key processes shaping Chinese society in Singapore in the 19th century: the way in which local-born Chinese, and their China-born relatives and business partners, utilized the colonial state’s dependency on local collaborators to fashion themselves into Singapore’s very own literate, gentry-official class – the ‘Straits Chinese’. The histories of leading families found in Song Ong Siang’s *One Hundred Years History of the Chinese in Singapore* and regarded as ‘Straits Chinese’ repeatedly reveal this process at work. Returning to the life story of Siah U Chin we find that following the success of his commercial dealings, and his purchase of property, he was elected in 1840 a member of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce. From 1851, Siah was frequently summoned to act as a grand juror and two years later he was granted a certificate of naturalization as a British subject. In the years that followed, the Straits Courts advised Chinese suitors to refer their cases to him and eventually Siah was one of the first Chinese to be made a JP. Retiring from business in 1864, Siah ‘spent the remaining years of his life in the cultivation of Chinese literature’ while continuing to be a leader of the Teochew dialect community. In addition, Siah provided his four local-born sons with private tuition in Chinese at home (teaching them himself) as well as sending them to English language schools such as St. Joseph’s Institution. These sons grew up to form a cadre of bilingual gentry-officials that dominated the Teochew community for decades. All of Siah’s sons were at some time appointed JPs, the most prominent being Siah Liang Seah who became a member of the Legislative Council and a leader of the Straits Chinese British Association (Song 1984: 19-22).²²

Access to this clique generally depended on securing marriage, property and education. Sometimes, ancestral clan or dialect connections helped, as occurred in the case of Hokkien merchant families that migrated to Singapore to escape the upheavals of the Taiping Rebellion in the 1850s – some of who were loaned money by wealthy

²² The Siah family’s emergence indicates a pattern evident in the histories of several other powerful family lineages established in Singapore in the nineteenth century by successful China-born merchants. Sons that received both Chinese and English education went on to become respected bilingual leaders of their dialect communities. See, for example, the Hoo family of Wampoa; the Wee descendants of the Teochew trader Wee Ah Heng ; the descendants of Low Ah Jit; the families of Wee Bin and his business partner Lim Ho Puah; or the family of Wong Ah Fook (Song 1984: 19-57, 102-3, 141-2, 114-7, 354-5).

baba.²³ At other times, the colonial government's pressing need to co-opt local powerbrokers in the Chinese community led to some remarkable characters attaining respectability. In the 1860s a popular expression amongst the Teochews in Singapore went — “the heaven belongs to Tan, the earth to Chua and the emperor is Siah” (Chng 1999:73). The Tan and Siah clans we have already discussed, but perhaps the most interesting of this local triumvirate was Chua Moh Choon. Chua came to Singapore around 1839, from Guangdong province and engaged in a successful rattan business. Joining the Gee Hok Kongsì he soon became an extremely influential General Headman, involved in the 1854 riot and in 1861 in leading his armed members against the Tan clan, an activity which led to his arrest and imprisonment. However, in 1864 Chua was granted naturalization as a British subject and from then on branched out into the brothel and coolie trade as well as becoming a government informant. A list of secret society presidents in 1877 gives Chua's occupation intriguingly as ‘Doctor and Theatre Manager’ (Chng 1999: 42, 66; Lee 1978: 52; Yong 2002: 90).

As the Chinese population mushroomed in Singapore after 1870 and the colonial bureaucracy grew and became more interventionist in response, increasing opportunities arose for educated sons of the mercantile elite to gain gentry-official status. As Yen Ching Hwang has argued, in the eyes of recently arrived migrants the officials who served in the Chinese Protectorate, the Advisory Board, or as JPs and jurors, were marked out by their opulent style of living and dress and became respected and sometimes feared as the equivalent of mandarin-officials in the homeland. Below this rank came junior government officials and clerks in European firms who may well have been seen as petty-mandarins comparable to *yamen* secretaries back home (Yen 1995: 3-11).²⁴

The colonial government's need for interpreters and local informants particularly benefitted local-born Chinese who had received western education. However, it would be simplistic to say that they alone were attracted to the status and power provided by such appointments or that China-born, Chinese-educated merchants did not also become co-opted by the colonial state, as any study of government appointments and the granting of naturalization reveals.²⁵ A case in point was Lim Ho Pua. Lim was born in Amoy in 1841 and came to Singapore where he worked for Wee Bin and co.. After marrying the daughter of the *towkay*, Wee's, Lim became a successful merchant in his own right, a naturalized British subject and a JP. Significantly, although he was based in Singapore, Lim saw to it that his son, Peng Siang, was born on Chinese soil in Amoy and received his early education in Chinese before coming to Singapore to continue his schooling in English and join his father's business. In 1902, Lee Peng Siang also became a naturalized British subject and like

²³ Tan Oh Lee, a Chinese physician, emigrated to Singapore in the 1850s along with his whole family in a junk. Here he made the acquaintance of the *baba*, Tan Kim Seng who gave him the financial assistance to continue his practice. His son, Tan Chin Seng, became a successful construction contractor; his grandson, Tan Kim Wah, emerged as successful tin miner and after 1914 donated warplanes to the British war effort (Song 1984: 518-520).

²⁴ This group also had its own particular style of dress. As photographs of the period reveal, company clerks and junior officials wore white suits with ‘Mandarin’ collars, pith helmet and Chinese jackets.

²⁵ Serving alongside *baba* on the Advisory Board and as JPs, for example, were several prominent China-born such as Tan Beng Wan, Tan Yong Saik, Boey Ah Soon, Ng Sing Phang (Song 1984: 259-60, 424).

his father he served on the Advisory Board and as a JP. In addition, Lee Peng Siang became a member of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, rising through the ranks to become its President, and was a fundraiser for the British during the First World War (Song 1984: 115-7).²⁶

The attraction naturalization as a British subject held to new migrants is easily explained. Generally, the holding of second and third nationalities did not mean revoking one's Chinese nationality, increasingly a hard thing to achieve even if one wanted to. In addition, second nationality meant security under a foreign flag when trading with the mainland, exemption from mainland taxes and an improved legal status. During this period, naturalization as a foreign subject was becoming highly popular among Chinese merchants based in Fujian as well as abroad (Lin 2001). In Singapore, British nationality also had immediate, local benefits. As a settled gentry-official class, co-opted by the colonial state as intermediaries between it and the wider Chinese population, the Straits Chinese were in a position to heighten their status by serving as the guardians of Chinese tradition and custom. Around 1850, for example, Straits Chinese leaders successfully petitioned the colonial government 'for liberty to observe the rites and customs' involved in almost every Chinese public ritual and festival held in the town. The condition was that 'the firing of crackers' would be limited to weddings. For their part, the authorities agreed to prohibit the practice hitherto prevailing amongst the police of seizing Chinese men by the 'thau-chang' (queue).²⁷

These processes of negotiation through local respected intermediaries were fundamental to the successful operation of colonial authority in Singapore during the 19th century. Out of them, bilingualism, dual cultural allegiances and plural identities flourished, both amongst local-born Chinese and the China-born, China educated elite settled in Singapore. Chinese merchants from the mainland regularly showed their loyalty to the British Empire, just as did local-born Chinese, on the night of the fall of Pretoria on 5th June, 1900, for example, when the former organized a 'monster procession'. Even China-born, Chinese-educated nationalists and reformers were caught up in public proclamations of Empire-loyalty. The reform party publicist, Khoo Seok Wan, as well as giving large sums of his fortune to the failed Hankow

²⁶ Another mainland merchant naturalized as a British subject was Teo Hoo Lye, who was born in China in 1853 and came to Singapore at the age of eighteen. Teo owned the steamships *Aing Hong*, *Flevo*, *Batavier* and *Benuit* and became naturalized in 1900. He was assisted and then succeeded in his business by his son, Teo Teow Peng, born in Singapore in 1882 and described as 'a fluent English speaker as well as a Chinese scholar' (Song 1984: 350-1). Leong Man Sau, the son of Leong Fong Cheng (a Cantonese timber merchant), was also a China-born community leader willing to become a British subject after completing his education at Raffles Institution (Song 1984: 432-33). The most famous China-born *literati* to become naturalized after 1900 was the reform party leader and Mandarin campaigner, Dr. Suat Chuan Yin (see appendix A).

²⁷ These 'customs and rites' ranged from the 'New Year Festivities and worship extending over fifteen days' to the 'annual oblations to the manes of the deceased in the open air in front of each house', the plays held in temple courtyards during festivals in honour of the temple deities, the 'annual procession and offerings to the queen of heaven of the people of the Junks from China' and the 'beating of gongs on board the Chinese junks' when they left, or arrived in, harbour. Such activities were a cause of tension across the Straits Settlements with Europeans because of the noise involved and the public space they took up. At various times, Straits Chinese also campaigned against the government's Burial Grounds ordinances and to preserve the Ta Po Kung shrine on Pulau Kusu (Song 1984: 81- 82, 15, 232-4).

uprising against the Qing in 1900, donated over a \$1000 dollars to the Boer War Fund in the same year (Song 1984: 319, 313).

Local-born Chinese, likewise, came out in public to express their loyalty to the Middle Kingdom in spite of their status as British subjects. When Prince Ch'un, the Emperor's younger brother, arrived in Singapore in 1901 the Chinese Consul and the Straits Chinese British Association were in attendance to receive him formally. Siah Liang Siah presented an address in Chinese, on behalf of the association, which stated that since China was their members' ancestral country they would 'never forget to love and honour it'. The address also hoped that the Chinese government would in turn never forget that the association's members were 'real Chinamen' although they were 'born in the Straits Settlements' (cited by Godley 1981: 43-44). Around this time Chinese literature began appearing in print, translated into romanized *baba* Malay and sometimes romanized Hokkien (Proudfoot 1993: 677, 681). Finally, both China-born, China-educated merchants as well as local-born Chinese leaders sponsored all types of education. Tan Kah Kee, one of the most famous promoters of Chinese education in Singapore and southern China, was also a sponsor of Raffles College and the proposed Methodist College (Song 1984: 430).

The conceptual model that has dominated our understanding of Chinese society in Singapore at this time divides the mercantile elite into two groups: the mainland and China-educated, who were "naturally" oriented towards the Middle Kingdom culturally and politically, and the local-born, western educated Chinese whose loyalties lay with the British Empire (Yen 1995; Yong 1992). As we can see from the examples above, such reductionism fails to account for the bilingual education of both mainland Chinese and their local-born counterparts or the fact that the colonial state went to both communities to find its collaborators. Such a simple dichotomy also ignores the class solidarities, consolidated by marriage, dialect connections, commerce and their shared role as intermediaries with the colonial state, bonding local-born and locally settled Chinese together as Singapore's respectable gentry-official class. As early as 1853, the Singapore press remarked on the arrival of the wives and families of 'several of the most respectable Chinese merchants' and of their decision to settle (Song 1984: 86). To Lim Boon Keng, in his own ethnographical history of the local community, settlement and family were the key elements defining what the term *peranakan* meant:

But the habit of new-comers in bringing their womenfolk with them ... has resulted in the production of a pure race of Chinese in Malaya. This fact should be known, as otherwise the study of the ethnological characters of the Straits-born population would be complicated ... Chinese merchants and scholars have visited Malaya with their families and have adopted the different places in the Archipelago as their permanent domicile. The Chinese colony in Singapore, as in every large town in this part of the world, consists therefore of a very mixed community of Chinese from different parts of the Middle Kingdom, as well as of the families which have made their homes in these parts. A distinct line of demarcation separates the two elements – the permanent families or *peranakans*, and the migratory population who hope eventually to return from the Tropics to China (Lim 1917: 877-8).

Part 2: The Straits Chinese Literati, 1870-1920

Straits Chinese and reform: the impact of the global ecumene

The plural identities that proliferated amongst Singapore's Chinese elite from the second half of the nineteenth century on owed much to the city's entrepot environment and the particular workings of colonial authority within it. However, as Singapore emerged as a global port-city after 1870, Straits Chinese leaders (whether their schooling was western, Chinese, classical, modern or more commonly all of the above) became subjected to a host of new cultural forces. Improved communications combined with the expansion of international capital and labour migration transformed the city into an ideological emporium as well as an international commercial centre. Mail networks, telegraph systems, the increasing exchange of print, as well as the growing ease with which both Europeans and Asians travelled abroad, represent an earlier period of globalization and interconnection. The global *ecumene* that was emerging encouraged individuals to look overseas and connected them to wider communities of text, religion or ethnicity. At the same time, news, views and ideologies from around the world began to exert a direct and often problematic influence at home. Governments that had previously neglected the fate of their overseas subjects began to take a revived interest in them.

The unique political and commercial position of Straits Chinese meant that far from being insulated from such developments they were often at the centre of them. After 1870, syndicates of Straits Chinese controlling the lucrative opium 'farms', extended their involvement in the trade beyond Singapore to Bangkok, Saigon, and Shanghai (Trocki 1990: 94, 179; Turnbull 1977: 102). Revenue from such ventures, combined with fortunes made from tin-mining and later rubber, allowed many families to move into international shipping and banking. Such was the expansion of their trading activities internationally that by the end of this period British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, Hong Kong, China and elsewhere were linked by Straits Chinese ships and capital. As always, the Straits Chinese were a people on the move, exploiting the re-ordered lines of communication within the Nanyang and their traditional dialect identities to the utmost.²⁸

At home, global pressures impacted dramatically on Straits Chinese life. To some, the younger generation was characterized by its materialism, its loss of traditional values and its hedonistic spirit encouraged by the wide availability of vices such as opium (Lim 1898). From 1870, Singapore experienced a revival in Christian evangelism aimed at the Chinese and the local born or locally settled population in

²⁸ As early as the 1860s, for example, the Straits Chinese merchant, Tan Beng Swee (1824-84) opened a branch of Kim Seng and co. in Shanghai while Tan Kim Ching established rice mills in Siam and Saigon. In the same decade, one of the leading Straits Chinese merchants in Singapore was the Hokkien-speaking Cheang Hong Lim (1825-1893), a ship-owner, opium and spirit tax-farmer in both Singapore and Hong Kong as well as a successful property magnate (Turnbull 1977: 91-97, 102; Song 1984: 92-3). In 1902, Cheong Choon Kim established a branch of his business Yap, Whatt and co. in Shanghai (Song 1984: 278). Sim Kia Jan, meanwhile traded oil between Siam, Malaya and Borneo (Ibid: 501). Loh Wei Leng (2000) has also examined the rise of Straits Chinese shipping. Visits to the ancestral homeland were becoming increasingly popular not just to survey commercial opportunities available in China but for education, employment and sometimes to find suitable wives and daughter-in-laws. See biographies of Lee Phan Hock, Tan Teck Soon and Chan Kim Boon (appendix A) and the See family (appendix B). Tan Jiak Kim, the 'knighted' Legislative Councillor, also visited China twice, in 1894 during the China-Japan war and with his family in 1908 (Song 1984: 195).

particular. Orchestrated by Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist missionaries from China as well as from Europe and the States, the revival had some success in winning converts, especially through modern schools providing English education — a proven passport to respectability.²⁹ In the same decades, the Qing government began to extend its tentacles southward into the Nanyang. A Chinese Consulate was established in Singapore in 1877 and in the 1880s it became involved in a cultural revival that accompanied its efforts to secure loyalty amongst overseas Chinese. Ranks and titles were sold and fundraising launched for mainland Chinese relief efforts.

Again, the local-born Chinese elite were as much the targets of these activities as the China-born. Bilingual *baba* turned out for the literary meetings of the Consul's Celestial Reasoning Society, which attempted to encourage their morality and learning through Chinese classics as well as improve their English (Song 1984: 209-10). The Consulate, together with mainland teachers attached to the *baba*-run Free School on Amoy Street, also arranged lectures on the Sixteen Sacred Maxims at the Thien Hock Keng temple.³⁰ In the early 1890s, the Chinese Consul employed *baba* to pass on the wishes of the Qing government to the wider Chinese community through *ju-tans* (or imperial 'letters of instruction'), an activity that further emphasized and legitimized the role of local-born Chinese in the community as a gentry-official class but at the same horrified the colonial authorities.³¹ The arrival of mainland literati as diplomats and then as journalists and teachers also brought questions of cultural authenticity suddenly to light. For the first time the domestic arrangements of local-born families began to be commented on in public. One Chinese-language daily claimed *nyonya* were causing Chinese men to forget the five sacred relationships set down by Confucius (Chen 1967: 60).

For a younger generation of Straits Chinese in Singapore in particular, cultural forces unleashed by a period of dramatic globalization created numerous social tensions. Straits Chinese students at modern schools were exposed to new ideas about the world and were beginning to question the wisdom of tradition. Meanwhile, the old sages were being employed by lecturers at the temple to usher them back to this

²⁹ For example, St. Andrew's school (founded in 1871, with an enrolment of 215 boys by 1899 and 345 by 1912); St. Anthony's school (founded in 1879 for both boys and girls with an average enrolment of 640 by 1920), and the Anglo-Chinese Boys School and Methodist Girls' School (founded in the 1880s by the American Methodist Mission). See Makepeace ed., *One Hundred Years of Singapore* (1991: Chapter 9); also Turnbull (1977: 118-121).

³⁰ The Sixteen Sacred Maxims emphasized the value of filial piety, clan loyalty, thrift and propriety, lawfulness, agricultural work and the appeasing of neighbours and fellow-villagers. In particular, the lectures exhorted the Singaporean Chinese towards the rejection of false doctrines and the promotion of right learning. Implicitly, such lectures may well have been directed against the incursions of Christianity. Commenting on the Chinese communities of Singapore and Malaya at that time, the *Sing Pau* newspaper reported that 'social morality declines, and various heterodoxies undermine the orthodoxy' (Yen 1995: 199-228).

³¹ In 1894, the Chinese Protectorate was forced to issue a proclamation in Chinese rebuking the Consulate for issuing 'ju-tans', as well as its own passports for Chinese returning to the mainland. In issuing such letters to 'Chinese who are British subjects by birth', the Protectorate stated that the consul had 'committed a grave mistake' and gone 'beyond his legitimate powers' (Song 1984: 281-3). The Chinese Consul's actions prompted the Assistant Protector G.T. Hare to write a memorandum on the development of a 'sentimental imperium in imperio' (Yong and McKenna 1990: 18).

tradition so as to maintain Chinese orthodoxy.³² The identities of young *baba* became an ideological battleground, fought over by Christian evangelicals, Ch'ing officials, revolutionaries, reformers, the colonial government and finally the local Chinese elite itself.

An important *baba* on the move in this new global age was Lim Boon Keng. In the late 1880s, Lim's international progress took him to Britain where he studied medicine. The crucial experience affecting him while abroad appears to have been the refusal by other Chinese students from the mainland to accept him as a fellow 'son of Han', and his shame at being unable to competently read classical Chinese characters. Although it appears Lim already spoke Hokkien and some Teochew, on his return to Singapore in 1893 he started to learn Mandarin and Cantonese. Moreover, after 1893, gathering together a cadre of like-minded, bilingual Straits Chinese, Lim launched a reform campaign, aimed not just at the local-born population but at the wider Chinese population in general (see appendix A).

The reform movement Lim and his circle led in response to the social and cultural wrongs they saw before them has been discussed in many places, especially its attention to female education and its campaign against the opium trade (Turnbull 1977: 165-8; Doran 1997). Less attention has been placed on the manner in which the movement's leaders used their bilingual education and their ability to move and interact freely within the wider Chinese community, both in Singapore and beyond, to extend and expand their audiences. In doing so, until the emergence of a new class of mainland intellectuals began to challenge them at the end of this period, Straits Chinese publicists largely set the agenda for public debate in Singapore amongst the wider Chinese community. Some of their programmes, such as Confucian Revival, were no doubt directly inspired by developments on the Chinese mainland. However, the way in which as local publicists Lim and his circle transformed and translated these discourses, making them palatable for local audiences and more locally applicable, has not been fully appreciated. When this transformation is addressed we soon discover that far from a process of *re-sinification*, the spread of these discourses meant Chinese identity in Singapore was being re-fashioned in a uniquely modern manner.

To be modern and progressive, a younger generation of Straits Chinese required a new sage. Like many other Chinese publicists, reformers and revolutionaries alike, initially this sage initially appeared to leap from the pages of the New Testament, and in the early days of the movement in Singapore (as well as in Batavia and Hong Kong) Christianity and reform seemed to go hand in hand. Such a break with tradition no doubt severely limited the reform movement's acceptance as authentically Chinese at the outset and the extent of its popular diffusion. Especially after its defeat by Japan in 1895, however, China itself was gripped by a gentry-literati

³² In his public lectures, Lim Boon Keng argued that it was necessary to respond to the tendency of *baba* to embrace the creeds of other races as a reaction to the 'absurdity' of traditional Chinese religion. Lim believed that Christianity was particularly attractive because it was perceived to be the 'source of life and power to the Europeans' (Lim 1904a: 25-30). According to a contributor in the *Daily Advertiser*, Straits Chinese students at the Anglo-Chinese School tended to 'look down on their 'heathen parents' and 'lose all respect for Chinese customs and rites'. In addition, 'while on the one hand they may neither accept nor deny the Christian religion as imparted to them, on the one hand, they very often scoff at Christianity itself' (17 February, 1894).

drive for modernization. News of events in China filtering through to Singapore appeared to provide a solution to the ideological predicament Lim and his circle had found themselves in and soon gave the reform movement in Singapore a much-needed dose of authenticity.

The ideologues behind the reform movement in mainland China were the Confucianists, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. In Kang's eyes, the Confucian classics, re-interpreted in a progressive light, were the means by which the traditional social order in China might be challenged, elements of modernity embraced and foreign religious practices purged. In particular, Kang wanted to end 'improper' sacrifices to Taoist, Buddhist and local deities and replace them with the worship of Confucius, which he hoped might be established as the 'national' religion of China. Overseen by progressive scholars and centred around literary debate and the printed word, this new brand of Confucian revival, or more precisely of 'Neo-Confucianism', was particularly attractive to Straits Chinese leaders in Singapore. In March 1896, Lim Boon Keng, Song Ong Siang and Tan Boo Liat, supported by older *baba* such as Tan Jiak Kim and Siah Liang Siah, inaugurated the Chinese Philomathic Society (or Hao Hsueh Hui) for lectures and literary debates on reform subjects. The following year Song and Lim established the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, which published their reform programme alongside popular short-stories, discussions of Chinese politics and odes glorifying Queen Victoria.³³

The effectiveness of Straits Chinese publicists in getting their message across to a wider non-Anglophone audience was especially enhanced by their establishment of Chinese-language newspapers and their cultivation of social contacts with Chinese-educated literati arriving in Singapore from mainland China. In 1898, Lim Boon Keng and Tan Teck Soon established the *Thien Nan Shin Pao* together with Khoo Seok Wan, a wealthy Hokkien poet and scholar who had recently returned to the city after studying in China. Lim also took over the defunct *Sing Po* and renamed it the *Jit Shin Pao*. Both papers served as vernacular mouthpieces for their owner's Confucian revival efforts and featured Chinese translations of their articles and lectures (several of which were also published in English in the Straits Chinese Magazine). A supportive announcement in the *SCM* made clear that the *Thien Nan* would take the 'standpoint of Chinese nationalism' and serve as a 'most fitting medium for the propaganda of patriotic views.' In contrast to other Chinese newspapers in the colony it would not hold back from criticizing the Qing government or become a mouthpiece for 'those disgraceful concoctions that appeared during the Sino-Japanese war' (cited by Chen 1967: 63-3). *Jit Shin*, meanwhile, aimed at increasing its readership's knowledge of western science and technology through translations from the western press and of well-known European writers (Chen 1967: 75-80). Both papers gave frequent reports on the activities of the Chinese Philomathic Society and reprinted news and editorials from the mainland and overseas reformist press, thereby linking reformers in Singapore to an increasingly global network of 'progressive' Chinese

³³ The first edition of the magazine numbered 800 and sold out 'so that those who subsequently became interested in the Magazine and tried to secure back numbers were unable to obtain a copy' (Song 1984: 295). Its readership beyond the Straits Settlements spread as far afield as Batavia, Bangkok, Saigon and Yokohama. To Tan Teck Soon the journal was a means for Straits Chinese to re-acquaint themselves with the history and culture of their forefathers in 'English dress' (Tan Teck Soon 1897).

literati. Another consequence of this publicity was that from September, 1899 the Philomathic Society threw its doors open to a Chinese-speaking as well as Anglophone audience. Soon after, it claimed to have a membership of 200, consisting of mostly merchants, doctors, journalists and government servants (Yen 1995: 216).³⁴

Straits Chinese publicists increased the scope of their reading and listening public regionally by utilizing their traditional *peranakan* contacts in the Nanyang. Soon after Lim, Khoo and Tan began their Chinese newspapers, a *peranakan* Confucian revival network emerged linking Batavia and Singapore. In 1899, the Philomathic Society published 1,500 copies of a pamphlet in Malay, pleading for the removal of the queue.³⁵ The same year Lim and his circle were visited by Tan Ging Tiong and Yoh Chai Siang, *peranakan* Chinese from Java. Tan Ging Tiong, who claimed Lim to be his friend, reported that the latter had informed him there was no one in Singapore ‘able to translate perfectly’ Confucian classics into Malay and he had therefore been asked to pass his translations to the Philomatic Society once they were published (Coppel 2002: 261). At this time, Singapore was a market for *baba* Malay publications and received itinerant book traders from the Dutch East Indies coming to hawk their wares, a few of which were now Confucian works or Chinese domestic regulations translated into romanized Hokkien and Malay (Proudfoot 1993: 20-31).³⁶ Links between Singapore, Batavia and beyond through scholarship were intensified by journalistic activity. On their return to Java, Tan and Yoh began publishing the *Li Po*, a Confucian reform weekly newspaper in Malay, which was said by the SCM to have ‘a large circulation among the Malay-speaking Chinese of Malaysia’. Ties between the two groups of revivalists were further strengthened by the creation of the Tiong Hoa Hwe Kuan (THHK) in 1900, Batavia’s first Confucian association. Both Lim and Lee Teng Hwee were active in the Dutch East Indies and made regular trips there to publicize the movement. In March 1902, the Batavia correspondent of the *SCM* reported that the previous year had seen Lee found the ‘Yale Institute’, an English-language school for *peranakan* Chinese under the THHK’s ‘supervision’. The same correspondent also claimed that many Chinese had ‘discarded the national appendage’, the ‘thaw-chang’ (or ‘queue’) and that ‘many are beginning to prefer English to Dutch education’ (*SCM* Vol. 6, No. 21, 1902: 53). The THHK’s decision to make English into a compulsory second language in its schools in the early years of the Confucian revival particularly reveals the influence of Singaporean publicists on the movement.

A feature of the reform envisaged by Straits Chinese leaders in Singapore was the attempt to promote a total abolition of what were termed ‘idolatrous practices’ (*SCM* 1897, Vol. 1(3): 110). In this respect Singaporean leaders often appeared to go beyond the reform intended by their mainland Chinese associates. For a whole decade the *SCM* abounded with articles and published lectures attacking Chinese ritual practices in general and what it deemed ‘superstitions’. When the movement became

³⁴ *Thien Nin* from ran from 1898 to 1905; *Jit Shin* from 1899 to 1901.

³⁵ *Cherita fasal Towchang, being No.1 of the series on Straits Chinese Reforms issued by the Straits Chinese Philomathic Society* (Singapore: ‘Straits Chinese Printing Office’, 1899) listed in Proudfoot (1993: 521-2).

³⁶ Proudfoot lists for 1902 the publication of *Menerangkan Ignmanja Nabie Khong Hoe Tjoe* by Tan Bian Lock; and also *Peraturan Berumah Tangga* by Wali Cina Tjoepeek and Lie San Seeng, published in 1896 with Chinese, romanized Hokkien and romanized Malay appearing side by side (Proudfoot 1993: 345, 407).

publicly a Confucian one around 1898, Confucius was employed as the main authority sanctioning the cleansing from Chinese society of practices that did not belong in a progressive, 'global' age. In one of Lim's discussions in the *SCM*, he insisted that:

the Chinese system of thought and social polity must be changed or adapted to the newer needs of *international intercourse*, or else we as Chinese must forfeit all the advantages which we otherwise enjoy, and must be content with only a secondary place in the social and commercial struggles of the nations (Lim 1899a, 22-25, my italics).

Confucius as Lim interpreted him, was a rational and scientific sage:

The scientists of Europe openly profess its [Confucianism's] tenets, though they do not call themselves Confucianists, but this is only a small matter (Lim 1904a).³⁷

To Straits Chinese literati, ancestral worship was anathema (Lee Teng Hui: 1901: 130-35). Food-offerings and other expressions of 'ancestral worship' were rejected as a corruption of the Confucian ideal of 'filial piety': instead, 'hero-worship' on 'rational lines' was advocated (Lim 1899c: 163-66; 1900a: 25-30). The 'parade and extravagance' of Chinese funeral rites was likewise attacked: all 'gaudy shows' and 'discordant noises' were to be banished, as well as the Buddhist or other priest, 'with his incantations, prayers or masses and all his paraphernalia'. Mourners were advised not to 'break out in lamentations calling upon the dead to rise, eat and sleep' (Lim 1900b: 49-57). The art of *feng shui* was discredited as the false-science of geomancy' (Lin Meng Ching 1898: 67-8).

In the press and at the debating club, Straits Chinese literati were coming down hard on many of the outward signifiers of Chinese culture as expressed by the main body of Chinese in Singapore. In place of 'superstitions', they sought to promote 'Confucian ethics', chiefly through the classroom, the lecture hall and the printed word. Ironically, a new generation of local Chinese was seeking to dismantle the religious practices and ritual observances that their fathers had sought to preserve and by which they had negotiated the arrival of new migrants from the mainland. In attacking ritual observance *per se*, the maintenance of which was a central Confucian dictum, Lim and his circle were going much further than the mainland reformer Kang Youwei, who still wanted Confucius to be properly worshipped. In addition, by emphasizing the role of Confucius as a rational philosopher rather than a deity they were making it possible for Chinese Christians and Christian-syncretists in their ranks to participate fully in the movement, as they did in Singapore and especially in Batavia.³⁸ Amongst Christian missionaries such a construction was an especially popular one as it seemed a means of establishing some common ground between East and West. One European contributor to the *SCM* stated that 'Confucius lived many

³⁷ The theme is also taken up in 'Confucian Cosmogony and Theism' (Lim 1904b: 78-85).

³⁸ Leading Christian publicists of the movement were Song Ong Siang who co-founded the Singapore Girls' School, which was intended to have a curriculum consistent with Confucian principles (Doran 1997: 103), Lee Teng Hui, Tan Teck Soon, and for a time Lim himself. It is significant that when Kang Youwei visited Singapore and the Dutch East Indies and attempted to have Confucian shrines erected in spaces used for Confucian associations he received a less than lukewarm response. In Batavia, at the THHK, he was advised that such an altar was not really necessary (Coppell 2002: 265).

centuries ago and was then a witness for God's truth while the rest of the world was in comparative darkness' (Sanderson 1907).³⁹

What was the impact of such ideas? In Singapore, the reform of customs and traditions appears to have had some success amongst a younger generation of local, prosperous Chinese who no doubt embraced them as a sign of their modernity (although in hindsight these changes may be perceived simply as a process of westernization). Song Ong Siang tells us that the funeral of the China-born, Chinese scholar, Ms Lo Tsung Kee in 1914, 'was one of the first among Straits Chinese in the reformed style, quiet, but solemn in its effect upon the large number of Chinese friends who attended to pass their last respects' (Song 1984: 368) In Java, by contrast, the reforms were greeted by many as a thinly veiled attempt at Christianization. A young *peranakan* Chinese who consulted the THHK and then carried out its new guidelines for the funeral of his father was denounced by his neighbours as 'unfilial'. The son had to publish an apologia for his actions and the THHK released a booklet on 'filial piety' seemingly to answer its critics and show it was still authentically Chinese. Only about half a dozen more funerals were carried out under the THHK's guidance between 1900 and 1903 and in the end the organization gave up its efforts and concentrated on Confucian schools (Williams 1960: 60-63).

When reformers in Singapore utilized their social links with the mercantile elite and with their own dialect communities to promote modern education, rather than to belittle the ritualistic power of the traditional gods of the diaspora, they achieved greater success. In 1902, a committee of 195 members was formed to establish Confucian temples and modern schools across Malaya which eventually raised \$200,000. Amongst the thirty-four identifiable leaders of the committee we find the *baba*, Lim Boon Keng, Tan Boo Liat, Lee Choon Guan and Chua Mien Kuai, alongside some of Singapore's wealthiest Straits Chinese and dialect-group leaders.⁴⁰ In December 1906, certain Straits Chinese leaders used their status as leaders of the Hokkien community to directly intervene in the affairs of the Thien Hock Keng temple in order to halt the temple's involvement in the 'Chingay' procession and the Hungry Ghosts festival ('Sembayang Hantu' in Malay). The ban came on the grounds that such festivities were not Confucian and the money would be better spent sponsoring modern education.

Sharing the stage with Lim Boon Keng and Tan Boo Liat, one of the main speakers at the Hokkien Temple meeting was Ong Hwe Ghee; a China-born journalist who wrote for *Lat Pau*, was editor of the *Thien Nan* and then later worked on the reformist *Union Times*. Ong's thoughts, later published in the *SCM*, reveal the currency and acceptance of certain attitudes to Chinese religion belonging to Straits Chinese leaders in a wider context. Ong believed that:

the object of the temple is to commemorate the deeds of the departed great ones, to exalt their virtues, and to record appreciation of their services, and not to serve as a place of prayers and the asking for favours. Ignorant people subvert this

³⁹ See also Murray and Lim's debates on comparative religion in the *SCM* during the second half of 1904.

⁴⁰ Loke Yew (CMG), Wong Ah Fook (SMJ and JP), Lee Peng Siang (JP and naturalized Br subject), Teo Sian Keng (sponsor of King Edward Medical School) and, finally, the Royal Asiatic Society member – fond of giving 'at homes' to Europeans – Low Kim Pong (Yen 1995: 240 - *f.n.* 79; Song 1984: 107, 111-12, 331).

evident policy with the vulgar notion that worshipping the gods will bring good luck and sacrifices will avert calamities ... As for respecting the gods, reverence, accompanied by the burning of incense is enough.

Turning to the Hungry Ghosts festival and the sacrificing of food offerings, Ong went on:

Now, we Chinese are Confucianists, and yet we do not sacrifice to our parents in the same grand style. How is it that we seem to treat the spirits of our ancestors more niggardly than we do the spirits of the vagabonds? All this is due to blind observance of tradition. Confucius tells us to have little to do as possible with spirits, good or evil, and I think this advice is applicable to us to-day' (*SCM* Vol. 10, No. 4, 1906: 203-5).⁴¹

Such sentiments reveal that the Confucian revival in the diaspora, far from being an attempt to *re-sinify* 'hybridized' Chinese, was a programme seeking to radically reconstruct Chinese religion and identity. To neo-Confucianists in Singapore and Batavia, the problem was less the *peranakan* Chinese community's assimilation of new, local practices, but rather their and the wider Chinese populations' stubborn adherence to ancient traditional ones.

The success of Straits Chinese leaders in opening a number of girls' schools and institutions providing education in Mandarin was also largely achieved through their far-flung social contacts. Tan Teck Soon, together with other *baba* and the Rev. A. Lamont oversaw the Singapore Educational Institute — the city's first night school for adult wage-earners providing classes in Chinese and English literature and history (Song 1984: 265-6). *Baba* funds along with \$3000 from Khoo Seok Wan helped Lim and Song establish the Singapore Chinese Girl's school which, according to the intention of its founders, was to include in its curriculum Mandarin, English and some Malay. The efforts of Suat Yuan Chin and Lim Boon Keng to promote the teaching of Mandarin as well as female education were also backed by the Chinese consulate and the Hokkien Huay Kuan.⁴²

The story of how the Chinese Chung Hua Girl's School came into being is especially indicative of the way the social connections of the Straits Chinese elite assisted them in generating the necessary interest and cash for their projects. At the age of fifty, the wealthy China-born merchant Phua Choon Hiang was advised by his doctor to join Lim Boon Keng and Tan Boo Liat's 'Chinese Riding Party', which he did for five years.⁴³ At this time, Lim apparently convinced Phua of the importance of

⁴¹ My italics. The meeting was presided over by the *baba*, Lee Cheng Yan, assisted by the naturalized British subject, Lim Ho Puah, and the wealthy Hokkien merchant Goh Siew Tin. Lim Boon Keng and Tan Boo Liat, both *baba*, were the main agitators, and a week later their decision was ratified at the temple by a much larger gathering of the Hokkien community. Ong Hwee Ghee went on to become secretary of the Chinese High School. As far as the author is aware the Chingay processions were not revived in Singapore until the Tourist Board promoted them again in the 1970s.

⁴² In 1899, Lim began to hold Sunday lessons in Mandarin for Straits Chinese at his home. By 1903, student numbers were sufficient to merit a re-location to the Straits Chinese Recreation Club, where he also gave lectures to students on comparative religion and Confucianism. From 1902, the Chinese consulate gave the movement its full support. Consulate secretaries such as K'ung Chiang Hsien, Lu T'ung Fu and Chao Hang Nien taught lessons in Mandarin at the club and from 1905 the Chinese Consul General himself became responsible for examining Straits Chinese students. (Kiong 1907:105-108). In 1906 the Hokkien Huay Kuan created the Tao Nan School, to which pupils from various dialect groups were enrolled to study Mandarin and later it established the Chong Hock girl's school in 1915.

⁴³ He stopped when he fell off his horse and broke his leg.

modern education in Mandarin for girls, encouraging him to study ‘Chinese translations of foreign books on education’. In March 1911, the school was opened thanks to Phua’s financial support and that of several of his fellow traders. Alice Yin, the niece of Yin Suat Chuan, was the school’s headmistress (Song 1984: 461-2).

An element of Straits Chinese reform that also deserves attention was dress. One of the first concerns of the *SCM* was the removal of certain ‘heterodox’ fashions belonging to *nyonyas*, such as Malay dresses and hairstyles and the adoption of more traditional Chinese attire. For the men, however, 1898 saw the ‘Straits Chinese Reform party’ (as they were called) cut off their queues, an act that sent reverberations throughout the Chinese community. A year later, Lim Boon Keng called for a new form of costume that would more fully represent the community’s reconciliation of Chinese tradition with the modern world. As he explained:

Let us have a genuine product of the Straits Chinese – a dress evolved out of our own ideas making free use of all articles European or Chinese which are now in use, or else we should have a Chinese costume proper or the entire European dress such as the Japanese have taken to (Lim 1899b: 57-9).

As adverts carried by the *SCM* and photographs of the time reveal, the particular style of dress Lim had in mind appears to have been quite popular. Characterized by a combination of panamas and pith hats, waistcoats and bow ties with Chinese jackets and mandarin collars it was especially popular among young *baba* meeting political leaders from China visiting Singapore such as Sun Yat Sen.

The tensions of respectability: Straits Chinese and mainland Chinese politics

A failure to register the plural identities of Straits Chinese in Singapore before 1920 greatly affects our understanding of their involvement in more overtly political activities linked to the Chinese mainland. Existing narratives generally depict the Straits Chinese as colonial collaborators whose western education made them more culturally proximate to Britain rather than China, thus causing them to resist public and political expressions of China-oriented sentiments (Yen 1995; Yong 1992; Pan 1998).⁴⁴ This largely unchallenged thesis has meant that the role Straits Chinese

⁴⁴ Generally, these writers see leaders born in China and Chinese educated as more ‘naturally’ inclined to participate in such activities. This narrative, which is still dominant, contested earlier passing claims by historians such as Lea Williams (1960) and Michael Godley (1981) that Confucian revivalism and overseas Chinese nationalism were led by western-educated and Christianized *literati*, such as Lim Boon Keng. The main proponent of the China-born/China-educated thesis, in a series of articles drawing on his invaluable reading of the Chinese nationalist press that emerged in Singapore in the 1890s is Yen Ching-Hwang (who, incidentally argues, that as a Straits Chinese and Chinese nationalist Lim Boon Keng was a unique exception). Yen’s occasionally ‘sino-centric’ reading of this crucial period in the development of the public sphere in Singapore has been somewhat misleading. For a start, the marginalization of western-educated Chinese in the story of the city’s response to mainland political developments looks rather anomalous when we consider the backgrounds of other Chinese nationalists in places like San Francisco, Hawaii, Yokohama or closer to Peking in Shanghai, Canton and, of course, Hong Kong. Yen’s research into this subject at times also reveals a failure to read across the archive. An example is his dismissal of Straits Chinese involvement in the Confucian revival in Singapore. Quite apart from not acknowledging their contributions as publicists through debate and in print to the intellectual vitality of the movement, Yen holds that Straits Chinese leaders were unwilling to support it financially. As evidence, he cites a list of thirty-four leaders of the Committee to establish Confucian temples and schools in 1902 and claims only four were local-born Chinese who had overcome their cultural and political attachment to the British. Looking more carefully at the ten dialect leaders in this

publicists played in leading such activities, and the way they transformed overseas Chinese nationalism into a movement reconcilable with their status as British subjects, has been overlooked. Another aspect of their political involvement in China which has evaded discussion as a consequence is the crucial role played by British authorities in sanctioning the dual political allegiance of the Straits Chinese, at least in as far as this dual allegiance allowed British commerce to make further headway into the Chinese interior through treaty ports such as Amoy.

Discussions in the *SCM*, occasionally backed up by English-language and Chinese newspapers, focused on the role Straits Chinese publicists were mapping out for their community in the future political and commercial development of China. Lim Boon Keng instructed *baba* to go to the mainland and reap the rewards they enjoyed as members of both the Celestial and the British Empires. In an article entitled ‘The Role of the Baba in the Development of China’, he argued:

And when the Straits-born Chinese with proper qualifications arrives in China he finds that he is the sort of individual destined by nature to reconcile the great Chinese Nation to the ways of the great world beyond China ... Our intercourse with Europeans enables us to work smoothly and successfully with Europeans of any nationality in China and experts will through our mediation succeed in piloting any enterprise through the desired goal without those disastrous catastrophes which ended in the resignation of European officers and which have disfigured almost all the Chinese enterprises of late years ... We are more cosmopolitan in our tastes and habits, and in China we can pull along much in the same way as the Apostle Paul, a Greek unto the Greeks and a Gentile among Gentiles.

Moreover, if Kang Youwei’s reform movement in China succeeded this dual allegiance might prove rewarding. Hence, Lim advised his readers to:

take your fair share of the heritage that belongs to the son of Han ... Moreover, as British subjects you must enjoy all the benefits that accrue from the spread of British influence which unfortunately has not been in evidence for some years in China (Lim 1903: 94-100).

Other Straits Chinese also put forward the idea that as British subjects the community was in a unique position to achieve the ancestral homeland’s uplift and the birth of a modern Chinese nation. When news of the Boxer rebellion reached Singapore, Wee Theam Tew, a *baba* lawyer fluent in English, Chinese and Malay, penned a pamphlet in Malay calling on the Straits Chinese to form a volunteer force to go and fight in China alongside the British against the evil Manchus. China’s need for ‘many thousands of teachers for years to come’ encouraged a contributor in the *SCM* to state: ‘we Straits Chinese have the material and the resources. Let us supply this demand and in this manner save ourselves and help the Fatherland’ (Rudolph 1998: 323). Female education was championed as a means of banishing Malay customs and language and transforming the Straits Chinese into ‘such an ideal people that our men and women may even be in a position to help in the work of civilization in the Far East’ (*SCM* Vol. 11, No. 2, 1907: 41-3).

committee, who (as Yen argues) were its most powerful members and crucial to securing its support amongst the wider Chinese community, we discover that although mostly China-born a number were either knighted, British subjects through naturalization, fundraisers for western-education or British war efforts, Legislative and municipal Councillors or JPs – in anybody’s definition, therefore, loyal ‘Straits Chinese’ (see *f.n.* 44 above and appendix A and B).

The early years of the Straits Chinese British Association were also dominated by political interest in mainland China and in Chinese throughout the world. At the same time as it strove to maintain loyalty to the Empire, to safeguard the rights of Straits-born Chinese as British subjects and to effect the union of all Chinese ‘who are British subjects in different parts of the world such as Hong Kong, Sarawak, Mauritius and elsewhere’, the founders of the Association hoped it would form a ‘progressive’ forum for debate about Chinese reform. At the time when the SCBA was established, a circular appeared encouraging Straits Chinese to become members and expressing the hope that:

the prominent Chinese, who are British subjects, will come forward to give the movement their co-operation and that they will use their personal influence in favour of progress and reform in all necessary directions – and not, as hitherto, cast in their lot with the conservative, unprogressive Chinese, who reflexly acquire the worse features of the characters of the Peking anti-Reform reactionaries (*Singapore Free Press*: 21 January, 1900).

In 1900 members of the SCBA created an offshoot of the organization named the Chinese Loyal and Patriotic Association in support of the reforming Qing Emperor.⁴⁵

One may well agree with the claim of the social anthropologist, Yao Souchou, that Straits Chinese regarded themselves as, and were perceived by the British to be, objects of ‘cultural perfection’ (Yao 1999) – what might be described as a sanitized, non-opium smoking and rationalized Chinese: a living justification for the whole imperial project. However, whether this resulted in the creation of a Chinese *other* by westernized *baba* and a resulting shift away from their identification with China and with other Chinese is questionable. Rather than creating *difference* between themselves and the ‘coolie masses’ simply to please the gaze of watching Europeans, Straits Chinese were encouraged by their leaders to actively engage with Chinese of all classes for the sake of the ‘fatherland’. The unique kind of Chinese nationalism expressed by the community’s leaders and their involvement in mainland politics was also encouraged by more mundane material concerns. China was proclaimed as a ‘new field for Straits Enterprise’ and Straits Chinese were dispatched to the mainland to report on political stability, infrastructure and the possibilities for investments of *baba* capital.⁴⁶ Lim Boon Keng’s view of the opening up of China was that it provided ‘splendid opportunities’ for Straits Chinese, ‘especially in co-operation with Britishers’ who may be interested in the Celestial Empire’s ‘industrial awakening’ (Lim 1917). Moreover, many Straits Chinese appeared to have taken their role as self-styled ‘civilizers’ and modernizers of China seriously enough to travel to the ancestral home and serve the fatherland – where, in fact, the gaze of the colonizer no longer fell upon them. The most famous examples were Koh Hong Beng, the Penang-born Professor of Latin and English Literature at Peking University; Wu Ting Fang, the

⁴⁵ On 21 June, 1900 the *Singapore Free Press* published a translation of the poem ‘Jin Shen Tsu’ which was to be sung at the ‘Chinese Loyal and Patriotic Association’ in support of the Emperor and his attempted reforms.

⁴⁶ In 1912, following the revolution of a year earlier, Dr. S.C Yin visited China to investigate first-hand the problems raised by taxation, the conduct of the army, the state of communications and the availability of raw materials needed for railways such as coal and iron. In addition, Yin reported back to Singapore on the openings for Straits Chinese capital and investment, especially in Fukien province (‘China Today’ in *Straits Budget*: 27 June, 1912).

Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Chinese Republic; Lim Boon Keng himself; and Wu Lien The ('the plague doctor'). But several other less famous names followed them – mainly local-born doctors, lawyers, interpreters, journalists and engineers.⁴⁷

The interest of certain Straits Chinese in mainland Chinese politics also arose because of their continuing function as local informants to the European settler population – a role they performed through articles in the English-language press, through published books and through public lectures.⁴⁸ However, the role of Straits Chinese literati in overseas Chinese nationalist activities was not just limited to non-participatory observation and commentary. After the coup of 1898 and subsequent abortive uprisings, mainland political exiles came to Singapore where they sought to win financial support and to engineer their return to influence. On occasions Straits Chinese publicists, in their role as leaders of the wider Chinese community, came out to meet them and were their means of reaching out to the wider dialect or Malay speaking Chinese population. Lim Boon Keng accompanied Kang Youwei on his tour of the Dutch East Indies, for example, while Sun Yat Sen stayed at the home of Tan Boo Liat in 1911 (Song 1984: 473). Both Lim Boon Keng and Wu Lien The were son-in-laws to the reformer and revolutionary, Wong Nai Song – who visited Singapore on more than one occasion, gave lectures at the Philomathic Society and wrote for Lim's newspapers (Yeap 2001).

Literary debate and Chinese cultural activities eventually drew a new generation of Straits Chinese into a direct involvement in mainland politics. This involvement, intentional or not, especially comes to light through a study of the Chinese Philomathic Society. According to one of its founders, the society throughout its 'vigorous existence' brought together 'a number of young men and some of the older folks for the regular study of English literature, Western music and the Chinese language' (Song 1984: 236). As reports in the *SCM* reveal, the Society was established

⁴⁷ Wee Theam Tew, after trying to get fellow *baba* to fight the Boxers in 1900, was appointed secretary to Prince Su, the military governor of Peking and Minister to the Emperor and went to China in 1904, returning a year later. Kung Tian Cheng, became managing editor of the 'Republican Advocate' in Shanghai in 1912 and then editor of the 'Peking Daily News'. He also acted as translator to president Yuan Shikai of whom he was writing a biography when he died. Another journalist in Peking was the Queen's scholar and Cambridge graduate Goh Lai Hee. Another doctor, Raffles and Cambridge grad to go to Peking was Chan Sze Pong, while Li Cheung went to work in Hong Kong as an interpreter. Wong Siew Qui after being called to the bar at Middle Temple became Attorney-General of Kwang-tung Province and returned to Singapore after the 'Second Revolution. His brother Wong Siew Yuen, graduated from Camborne School of Mines in 1909, worked on Hankow Railway before returning to Singapore (Song 1984: 274, 511, 309-10, 329, 208, 354-55).

⁴⁸ At meetings of the Straits Philosophical Society Lim Boon Keng presented papers on 'The Chinese in British Malaya', 'The Chinese Revolutionary Movement in Malaya', 'Socialism among the Chinese' and 'The Confucian Conception of the State' (*Proceedings of the Straits Philosophical Society, 1910-1916*). Earlier, in 1900, under the alias of 'Wen-Ching', Lim penned a series of fourteen articles with the title 'Crisis in China' (later published in book form) which explained the political situation and tensions prevalent on the mainland leading up to the Hundred Days reform movement of 1898 (*Singapore Free Press*: 18 October, 1900). In the *Daily Advertiser*, Tan Teck Soon also sought to explain the vagaries of mainland Chinese politics in some detail. In 1900, he addressed a 'well-attended' meeting of the Chinese Christian Association on the Reform Movement in China, a paper that was later published and distributed in pamphlet form (*Singapore Free Press*: 5 July, 1900). In addition, in 1907 Tan presented to the members of the Straits Philosophical Society a paper entitled 'Chinese Reform and the Foreigner', which was then reprinted in the *SCM* (1907, Vol.11 (3): 94-100).

in March 1896 by Lim Book Keng and Song Ong Siang, and with the support of other Straits Chinese such as Tan Jiak Kim, Seah Leang Seah and Tan Boo Liat, as well as the Revd. A. Lamont who served as an honorary member (1897, Vol. 1(1): 3-8, 16-23, 32). In September 1897, following the dispersion of a thirty-five strong crowd after a lecture:

A few energetic members *who stayed behind* spent a good time together in discussing the question of the reforms for the young Baba party, Mr. Tan Keong Saik taking a prominent part in the discussion and dwelling on the necessity of carrying through reforms on very cautious lines. On the other hand, the younger members of the Society present thought that if reforms were ever to make headway, some decisive step ought at once to be taken so as to mark the difference between the progressive party and the conservatives (1897, Vol. 1(3): 113. My italics).

The ‘decisive step’ taken by ‘progressive’ *baba* appears to have been the cutting of their queues. In 1898, after a speech by Lim Boon Keng on China, entitled ‘The Elements of National Greatness’, the Society passed a resolution to meet weekly for ‘social and conversational intercourse’, occasional ‘excursions’ and ‘chess’ (1898, Vol. 2(5): 38). From September 1898 until the end of the year, discussions of the political situation in China dominated the Society’s meetings. In November, a joint meeting with the Straits Chinese Christian Association was held to debate the motion: ‘That recent events at Peking connected with the Palace Revolution mark a retrograde step in the history of Chinese progress’ – a motion carried unanimously. Around the same time the Society began providing violin and woodwind lessons to its members with Tan Boo Liat in charge of the ‘Committee to look after Music classes’ (1898, Vol. 2(8): 192). In August 1899, the Society heard Moy Fa Chang’s discussion of superstitions ‘at variance with the teachings of the Classics’ (Moy 1900). The following month the Society’s activities were advertised in the Chinese press and its membership joined by a number of Chinese-educated professionals, as we have noted. Meetings were held at the offices of the *Thien Nin* or at Khoo Seok Wan’s shophouse on Boat Quay. Khoo along with Lim Boon Keng and the journalist Yeh Chi-yun from *Lat Pau* were regular speakers on Confucius and reform at home and in China (Chen 1967: 78; Yen 1995: 216).

In October 1899, rumours of the Chinese Emperor’s apparent confinement following the palace ‘coup’ led Khoo to send a petition to Peking, signed by a few hundred Chinese merchants, enquiring after the Emperor’s health. Another telegram with 1,000 or more signatures from supporters in Malaya and Singapore was sent in November on the Empress’s birthday urging her to return power to the Emperor and retire to a peaceful life (Yen 1995: 213). In February 1900, Kang Youwei arrived in Singapore following Khoo and Lim’s invitation. Soon after, a branch of Kang’s Emperor Protection Society (Pao Huang Hui) was set up in Singapore with Khoo as President (Yen 1995: 215). Using the Philomathic Society as a front organization, it set about organizing and raising funds for the failed Hankow uprising.

In March of the same year, the Philomathic Society was continuing to hold its soirees for respectable Chinese. The *Straits Times* reported on one of these evenings held at the house of Tan Boo Liat in March and presided over by Lim Boon Keng, in which the ‘attendance was chiefly Chinese, but there were present a fair number of European ladies and gentlemen, and some Malays’. The programme consisted of songs

– played on violins and sung, such as the ‘Jubilee Polka’ – and included a ‘particularly successful’ impersonation of a negro minstrel by Mr. Song Ong Joo (the brother of Song Ong Siang). The evening concluded with a rendition of ‘God Save the Queen’ (*Straits Times*, 3 March, 1900).

The following decade saw Straits Chinese leaders (in public at least) generally steer clear of fomenting revolution with a China at peace with the British Empire. Instead they preferred to hold on to reformist hopes and to spread the gospel of constitutional government, as articles in the *SCM* and their support of the reformist-leaning *Union Times* reveal.⁴⁹ Revolution was generally not popular with China-born and local-born merchants in Singapore alike, who would have both preferred to maintain stability on the Chinese mainland and their trade links with it. Nevertheless, this did not stop a younger generation of *baba* exposed to overseas Chinese nationalism through Straits Chinese literary circles and through print emerging as leaders of the revolutionary movement. Teo Eng Hock (the son of the *baba* Teo Lee) Tan Chor Nam (the son of a local timber merchant) and Lim Nee Soon were three of the most important revolutionaries in Singapore in the early 1900s.⁵⁰ Together they established and pumped money into revolutionary newspapers, organized reading rooms and revolutionary societies, established the Singapore branch of the Tung Meng Hui and then the Kuomintang, visited China (sometimes carrying with them bundles of revolutionary pamphlets) and accompanied Sun Yat Sen on his lecture tours (Yong and McKenna 1990; Yen 1995). Lim Nee Soon was yet another example of the dual political allegiance of bilingual Straits Chinese leaders. During the First World War as the ‘pineapple king’ he made a public display of British loyalty by distributing pineapples to the officers and men of HMS Malaya. In 1916, he travelled throughout China to meet with leading Chinese political figures and the following year he petitioned the colonial government for a ‘war tax based on income’. A JP in Singapore and a committee member of Raffles College, he was given a state funeral in Nanjing when he died in 1936 for his services to the Chinese nation (Song 1984: 516-7, 536).

Participation in mainland Chinese politics was especially attractive to the Straits Chinese elite when it became respectable. Between 1907 and 1911, when it appeared the revolution might eventually succeed, several joined the Tung Meng Hui and then the KMT. In 1913, eight of the Singapore-branch leadership of the KMT (i.e. Presidents and Chairmen) were British subjects through birth or naturalization, as were sixteen of the total of 123 office holders. As well as Lim Boon Keng, Tan Boo Liat, Yin Suat Chin and the younger *baba* revolutionaries, the KMT was presided over by Tan Chay Yan – the President of the Malacca branch of the Straits Chinese British Association. Just how respectable involvement in mainland Chinese politics had become was revealed on the 27th of April, 1913. On that day a service of intercession for China was held in St Andrew’s Cathedral apparently in response to a request from the Chinese government for its ‘Chinese subjects to join together and pray for the

⁴⁹ Dr S.C. Yin, for example, wrote in the *SCM* on the need for a Chinese parliament (1906). Another contributor on mainland Chinese politics was Leong Kwong Hin (1907). Yin was also involved with the *Union Times* and in 1909 in convincing European dignitaries of the respectability of the paper and its owners whose policy ‘had always been to uphold the British government and to create the best possible feeling between the large mercantile communities of English and Chinese in Singapore (Song 1984: 441-2).

⁵⁰ Lim was Teo’s nephew. Teo was also a member of the Chinese Philomathic Society.

welfare of the nation.’ Bishop Ferguson-Davie preached from the text ‘Righteousness exalteth a nation’ which was interpreted into Hokkien by Mr Tan Peng Guan, while the *Union Times* printed the main parts of the service in Chinese characters free of charge so that ‘the Chinese could sing and pray in their own tongue.’ The service was attended by the Governor and his wife, leading English residents, the Chinese Consul-General and his staff, the Straits Chinese Voluntary Infantry, representatives from the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the revolutionary Chinese Reading Club, and leading Chinese ministers from the Presbyterian and Methodist churches (Song 1984: 491). One year later the readers of the *Straits Times* in 1914 were informed:

It must not be forgotten that the soul of Chinese morality and piety is inextricably identified with the claims of culture, that this culture is a process of national evolution, and that it represents the nation’s efforts to meet man’s needs of conformity to higher laws than mere personal fancy, caprice or power ... For a Chinaman, therefore, to be deprived of the invigorating stimulus of his country’s literature is indeed to be *denationalized*. And not only that, but, in the coming years when the schools of Hong Kong and China pour forth their hosts of Anglo-Chinese educated office seekers and workers, the Straits Baba will find himself sadly handicapped by his wont of foresight and narrow outlook (cited by Song 1984: 503-6, my italics).

Although some within the administration were against the Straits Chinese expressing China-oriented sentiments, the top ranks of British officialdom often sanctioned it through public announcements. At the opening of the Anglo-Chinese school in 1893, for instance, Governor Cecil Smith made a speech, reported in the press, in which he stated:

The school might be devoted to the study of English, but I am glad to know that a knowledge of Chinese will also be gained there, which to me appears an essential part of the education of a Chinese boy ... The boys who grow up with a knowledge of Chinese and also attach to it a knowledge of English will prove better citizens than those who throw off the language of the country to which they naturally belong and adopt the English language simply from a utilitarian sense of the time they are going to spend in this settlement’ (Song 1984: 275).

The fact that some British officials could see the Straits Chinese as ‘naturally’ belonging to China while remaining British subjects is crucial to our understanding of the dual cultural allegiances of the community during this period.

Conclusion

Contrary to received narratives of political leadership in Singapore and much literature on the Straits Chinese, this essay has argued that the Chinese who laid down roots and settled in Singapore were crucial to the maintenance of a diasporic merchant culture. Later they became deeply involved in cultural expressions of overseas Chinese nationalism. Lastly, they played a crucial role as publicists in collaboration with mainland agitators in more overtly political activities.

An attempt has also been made to show how the Straits Chinese, as a product of the unique diasporic environment evident in Singapore, negotiated the peoples and ideologies emerging from the Chinese mainland. This process transformed the Straits Chinese community, its ideas and its attitudes. It also impacted on the peoples and discourses arriving in the city from China. In the secondary nodal points through which Chinese diasporic networks operated in the Nanyang, cliques of local-born or

locally settled Chinese shaped what Chinese identity amounted to and how ‘Chineseness’ was expressed in ways that have received little attention. At times their activities even exerted a direct influence on the Chinese mainland. If we are to speak of Chinese diasporic networks in the 19th and early 20th centuries it is important to understand that the cultural and other types of exchange they facilitated were two-way traffics. In nodal points such as Singapore, changes in ‘personal and communal self-perceptions’ amongst the overseas Chinese were born out of contact with an entrenched elite and its experience of the ‘local’, as much as out of interaction with mainland intellectuals and officials. Ideas that radiated out from the mainland, such as what Mckeown refers to as ‘diasporic nationalism’, were open to a great deal of negotiation and transformation as a result of this process. To take his metaphor further, in nodal points such as Singapore, Chinese migrations of peoples and ideas were ‘rays’ that were often transformed, refracted and even beamed back.⁵¹

This approach has hopefully also cleared up some questions about who the Straits Chinese were and refuted some of the myths concerning their identities that result from a failure to grasp the extent of bilingualism in Singapore during this period. To local-born and locally settled Chinese in Singapore, ethnicity during this period was very much a living drama in which they could play several roles while visibly retaining their ‘Chineseness’.

The question may be asked why did the Straits Chinese earn the reputation they did and where did these plural identities go? To this, I think there are a number of answers. In the first place, plural identities continued to be expressed by some Straits Chinese, as recent graduate research on the community in the 1930s has revealed (Chua 2001). However, at a political level after 1914, with Sun Yat Sen’s dissolution of the KMT and his creation of the Chinese Revolutionary Party, direct participation in overseas Chinese nationalism again started to be tainted by the prospect of violent upheaval and again became less than respectable. In terms of commerce, bad experiences of the state bureaucracy and the political instability of the ‘warlord period’ may have also made investment in China less appealing to Straits Chinese. At a local level, after 1900, modern education in Singapore expanded dramatically but at the same time seemed to break down into polarized camps, with former Anglo-vernacular schools becoming solely English and dialect schools being superseded by Mandarin institutions. A whole new generation of local-born Chinese appears to have been increasingly forced to choose one of two educational options rather than floating back and forth between both as they had done previously.

Finally, at an international level, sojourns and business activities in China were no longer being protected by dual nationality. In 1914, China amended its nationality law to prevent natural born Chinese from being claimed as foreign subjects and in 1930 Britain and China ratified an international agreement that meant Chinese British-subjects could no longer claim British national status whilst visiting the mainland. In

⁵¹ Mckeown (1999: 324) does cite Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang as authors of local-born ‘nationalist visions’ not emanating from China but does not address their impact outside Singapore. These ‘visions’ are also described as being focused on local matters, such as ensuring China was accepted by local Europeans as a ‘civilized and deeply rooted culture’. This analysis, as the latter part of this paper has attempt to clarify, is limited and underestimates the regional and global impact of such local negotiated visions of Chinese nationality. Its failings also re-emphasizes the need to de-centre Chinese diasporic networks in the Nanyang.

1936, Straits Chinese visiting China would have been legally subject to the new conscription law. Meanwhile, after the First World War the British government increasingly used the Chinese nationality of Straits Chinese as a reason for withholding from them appointments to higher positions in the colonial government (Chua 2001) while, at the same time, a general discourse of the untrustworthy Asiatic was emerging throughout the Empire. Whereas before the British had sanctioned its Chinese subjects' exploration of their plural identities and their interest in opening China commercially, now the China-orientation of the Straits Chinese was being used to bar them from political representation in the administration. This was a major reason why, in reaction, the Straits Chinese British Association increasingly protested the loyalty of the community in public and why China-oriented sentiments were increasingly frowned upon by its leaders.

The attitude of the colonial state to the Straits Chinese after 1920 also provides us with a context for reading Song Ong Siang's *One Hundred Years History of the Chinese in Singapore*. Published in 1923, to prove the history of his community's loyalty to the British, Song made sure everyone understood it was the China-born who were overseas Chinese nationalists and not the Straits Chinese. This work, which has informed many historians' perceptions about the Straits Chinese, has never been adequately contextualized. The result is that often what Song would have liked the British to have believed becomes passed down to us as history and the dual cultural and political loyalties that the Straits Chinese historically maintained have been overlooked.

This essay has attempted also to say something about the significance in terms of identity formation of the networks of commerce, migration and especially print that spanned the globe during an age of global empires, and of the individuals who generated and sustained them. As the intellectual leaders of Confucian revival and the reform movement in Singapore, Straits Chinese publicists were put into contact with like-minded 'progressives' in Batavia, Tokyo, Shanghai, Hong Kong and San Francisco as well as with those leaders still active on the mainland. By joining themselves to such networks and participating in 'communities of text' seeking reform, modernization and Confucian Revival amongst the Chinese, Lim Boon Keng and his associates were assimilated into a global Chinese identity – an identity that might well have been denied them previously because of the heterodoxy as westernized, Christianized or being born outside China they were seen to represent. The habit of translation and the operation of these print networks through Chinese, English, Malay (even on occasions romanized Chinese dialects) meant language was hardly an obstacle to their involvement. If local-born Chinese elites were being assimilated into anything in this period it was into an international Chinese community, existing largely but not completely in the mind, in which public participation rather than descent and language were key – a global community of the Chinese nation that was not only 'imagined' but socially and politically participated in (Anderson 1991). Claims as to what constituted authentic 'Chineseness' had yet to be hammered out by the more disciplined, *mono-lectional* political parties, authoritarian governments and historians that would follow.

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Appendix A: Biographical Sketches

Lim Boon Keng (Lin Wen Ching): b. 1869 (Singapore), d. 1957. Lim was educated at the Hokkien Clan temple then at Raffles Institution. In 1887, he was the first Chinese to win the Queen's Scholarship and went on to gain First Class Honours in Medicine at the University of Edinburgh. In 1893, he returned to Singapore and set up a medical practice in Telok Ayer Street. Lim became a member of the Legislative Council and the Chinese Advisory Board, attended King Edward VII's coronation in 1902 and King George's in 1911 and was a founder of the Straits Chinese British Association.

Lim also founded the Chinese Philomathic Society in 1896 and was editor of the *Straits Chinese Magazine* from 1897-1907. He was a close associate of the reformers, Kang You Wei and Khoo Seok Wan and the son-in-law of Wong Nai Siong. In 1898 he jointly founded the Chinese reformist paper, *Thien Nan Shin Pao* and served as its political and English language editor. He was also proprietor of the *Jit Shin Pau* from 1899-1901. Lim joined the Tung Meng Hui in 1907 and became President of the Singapore branch of the Kuomintang in 1913. He briefly served as the Chief of Department of Health in the provisional Republican Government in Nanjing 1912 before returning to Singapore after Sun Yat Sen's resignation. Lim lectured extensively in Singapore, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies on reform, the need for modern Confucian schools and later on Sun's 'three principles'. He became President of Amoy (Xiamen) University in 1921.

Tan Teck Soon: b. 1859 (Singapore), d. 1922. Tan was educated at Raffles Institution where he excelled in the Chinese class and won the Guthrie Scholarship for Chinese Boys in 1873. He then proceeded to Amoy to complete his Chinese studies and returned to Singapore to work in government service, then at Kim Ching and co. in the Siamese consulate department. Tan was a member of the Straits Chinese Christian Association, the Straits Philosophical Society and the Chinese Philomathic Society. He was Chairman and founder of the Singapore Chinese Educational Institute, 1892-1902 (the city's first 'night school' giving classes in Chinese language and history and English language and history to adult 'wage-earners'). With Rev. A Lamont he collaborated on *Bright Celestials*, a play about Chinese life 'at home and abroad'. From 1890-94 he was proprietor and editor of the *Daily Advertiser* 1890-94, the first mouthpiece for Straits Chinese reform. From 1898, he was also general manager of *Thien Nan*.

Tan Boo Liat: b? (Singapore), d?. Tan Boo Liat belonged to one of the oldest and wealthiest *peranakan* families in Singapore (being the great-grandson of Tan Tock Seng and the grandson of Tan Kim Ching). Having received private Chinese education at home while attending Raffles Institution he went on to become a leader of the Hokkien community and a trustee of the Thian Hock Keng temple. He was also a keen horse-racer and member of the 'Chinese Riding Party', a committee member of the S.C.B.A., a member of Straits Chinese Voluntary Infantry and he attended King Edward VII's coronation in 1902. As a supporter of Lim's Chinese Philomathic Society he hosted soirees and advanced English classes at 'Siam House. In 1906 he was involved in the Hokkien temple reforms and earlier in 1902 he was a leader of a committee to establish Confucian temples and schools. Tan was Hon. Treasurer of the Singapore Chinese Girl's School, a sponsor of the Hokkien *pang*'s Tao Nan School, an associate of Sun Yat Sen, a member of the TMH and a President of the KMT Singapore branch.

Yin Suat Chuan (Dr S.C. Yin): b. 1877 (Amoy), d?. Yin was educated at the Anglo-Chinese School, Fuzhou and came to Singapore as an interpreter in the police courts. He then studied medicine at the universities of Michigan, Toronto and London before returning to Singapore to join Lim Boon Keng's Telok Ayer practice. Soon Yin became Lim's brother-in-law and a naturalized British subject and in 1906 both men launched the Opium Refuge. Yin also lectured in Chinese to 'large audiences' at the YMCA on health and other subjects, served as a Municipal Councillor and as President of the Straits Chinese Football Association. During World War One he made a 'rousing speech' affirming his loyalty to Britain. He was also a supporter of Chinese reformists and involved with the *Union Times*. For the *SCM* he penned articles on the political situation in China and the need for constitutional reform and a parliament and later became one of the magazine's editors. With Lim, Yin campaigned for Mandarin education and served as committee member of the Chung Hua Girls' School (where his niece was headmistress). As an associate of Sun Yat Sen he joined the TMH and later became Vice-Chairman of the Counselling Bureau of the KMT Singapore branch.

Gnoh Lean Tuck (Wu Lien The): b. 1879 (Penang), d. 1960. Educated at Penang Free School Wu won a Queen's Scholarship and studied Medicine at Emmanuel College, Cambridge and then at St Mary's College, London. He returned to Malaya in 1903 and married a daughter of the Chinese nationalist, Wong Nai Siong. Thereafter, he joined Lim in the anti-opium campaign and became an editor of the *SCM*. At the request of Yuan Shikai he went to China to be director of the Army Medical College at Tientsin. During the pneumonic epidemic in Manchuria 1910-11, Wu became internationally famous as the 'plague doctor'.

Song Ong Siang: b. 1871 (Singapore), d. 1941. Educated at Raffles' Institution, Song won a Queen's scholarship and studied Law at Cambridge. He returned to Singapore in 1893 and worked as barrister. Song was the President of the Straits Chinese Christian Association, a founder member of the S.C.B.A., he attended King Edward VII's coronation and was a member of the Straits Chinese Volunteer Infantry. He also co-founded the Chinese Philomathic Society, established the Malay paper, *Bintang Timur* in 1894 and the *SCM* with Lim in 1897. He was an active supporter of the anti-opium campaign and a founder of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School (a school originally to be run on 'Confucian principles').

Song is often seen as the embodiment of 'King's Chineseness' because of his efforts to ensure that in the 1920s and 1930s the British authorities understood the loyalty of the Straits Chinese. From 1910, he campaigned against the 'colour bar' in the civil service and for greater local representation in colonial government. Later, he attempted to remove his Chinese nationality by going to China and having himself 'denationalized' but his attempt failed. Song, however, thought his own ideas might be considered too western by the Straits Chinese Community at large and is a less indicative example of the plural identities of Straits Chinese leaders in the period to 1920 than the rest of his circle. (See Song 'The Position of Chinese Women,' *SCM* Vol. 1, pt. 1 (March, 1897), pp16-23.) In 1923, Song published *One Hundred Year History of the Chinese in Singapore*.

Kung Tian Cheng: b. 1879 (Malacca), d. 1915. Educated at Anglo-Chinese School in Singapore, Kung proceeded to India to complete his studies. Returning to Singapore to work as junior clerk in Raffles Library in 1895, he became chief clerk and interpreter in the Chinese Protectorate, Penang and then returned to Singapore to become Chief Clerk at Raffles Library. Kung was a member of the Chinese Christian Association, a Mandarin-language campaigner and a regular contributor to the *SCM* on subjects such as Max Muller, Mandarin education and the Chinese collection at Raffles library. Over time he became interested in the revolutionary movement in China and in 1910 he left Singapore for China. In 1912, he became managing editor of the *Republican Advocate* in Shanghai which furnished the *Straits Times* with news from the Chinese mainland, and then editor of the *Peking Daily News* in 1913. Kung acted as translator for President Yuan Shikai and became a member of his personal staff as well as his biographer.

Lee Teng Hui: b. 1872 (Batavia) d. ?. Educated at the Anglo-Chinese school, Singapore, Lee became a Methodist and studied at Ohio Wesleyan University and then

Yale. He returned to Singapore, moved to Penang and eventually Batavia, where he worked as a doctor. He was a member of Lim's Chinese Philomathic Society and a regular contributor to the *SCM* on reform subjects as well as being the magazine's Batavia representative. Lee was also involved in the THHK in Batavia and established the 'Yale Institute' under the association's direction to teach English and Confucianism. Lee eventually became President of Fuhtan University in Shanghai.

Wee Theam Tew: b. ? (Singapore) d. ?. Educated at Raffles Institution, Wee was considered 'a great student of English and Chinese literature'. Having studied law overseas, he returned to Singapore in 1897 to practice as an Advocate and Solicitor. An original member of the Chinese Consul's Celestial Reasoning Association, Wee was also a trustee of Gan Eng Free School and a Municipal Councillor. In 1900, he penned a pamphlet in Malay calling for a Straits Chinese contingent to be sent to fight alongside the British against the Manchus during the Boxer Rebellion. In 1904, he was appointed Secretary to the Military Governor of Peking, Prince Su. He returned to Singapore one year later to continue with his legal profession.

Chan Kim Boon (Batu Gantong): b. 1851 (Penang) d.1920. Chan was the son of Chan Yong Chuan, a trader with Padang in Sumatra. Educated at Penang Free School, while learning Chinese at home with a private tutor, he then proceeded to Fuzhou Naval School to further his education and became a tutor there in Maths. Returning to Penang in 1872, after a fortune-teller predicted he would die before he was twenty-five, he joined the legal firm of Aitken and Rodyk as book-keeper and cashier. Wee was a member and Councillor of the Celestial Reasoning Society and also of the Chinese Philomathic Society, where in 1897 he lectured on 'Prehistoric Chinese Rulers'. Speaking Chinese, Malay and English fluently, Wee was a prolific translator of Chinese fiction into *baba* Malay.

Tan Beng Teck: b.? d.?. Tan is described by Song as a Straits-born Chinese who 'after some years residence in Japan' returned to Singapore to run Beng Teck, Chip Hock and co., which became one of the first shops to deal in Japanese wares. Before his trip to Japan, Tan began his translation of *Fan Tang yanyi* into romanized Malay in 1889, which was later completed by Chan Kim Boon. Tan also translated an abridged version of the Chinese romance 'The Plum Tree Flowers Twice' (1889), as well as other Chinese stories.

Lee Phan Hock: b ? (Singapore) d?. Lee was the son of the local-born Lee Boon Lim (b. 1842 Singapore) and the grandson of Lee Eng Guan, a doctor who emigrated from China. He became an employee of Beng Teck, Chip Hock and co. and travelled extensively in Japan, China and India. According to Song, he was 'one of the early adherents of the Singapore reformed party which discarded the queue in 1898' and a keen supporter of Lim Boon Keng and his circle's efforts for female education.

Appendix B: The See family — *Baba* Pioneers of the Chinese press

The See family were *baba* from Malacca who had been settled there since the 18th century. Around 1828, See Hood Kee (president of the Cheng Hoon Temple in Malacca) came to Singapore and built a temple on Silat lane. His son, See Eng Wat went to Amoy and became one of the first Chinese British-subjects to trade there. Returning to Singapore before 1859, See Eng Wat established the business of Eng Wat, Moh Guan and Bros then returned to Amoy where he married again and died in 1884. See Eng Watt ensured his sons were educated in Chinese as well as English and seems to have brought them to Amoy to trade with him. Two of the sons born in Singapore went on to work as compradores for the Hong Kong Shanghai bank and become respected Straits Chinese leaders. The other son, born in Amoy, having passed a Ching government examination at twelve was selected to be educated in the U.S. and entered the University of Boston (but then was called to serve in the Imperial Chinese navy and died during the Sino-French naval conflict in 1884.)

The eldest of these three remarkably internationalized Chinese was See Ewe Lay, who in partnership with his father founded the *Lat Pau* newspaper, the Nanyang's first and for a long time most successful Chinese daily. *Lat Pau* carried adverts from European firms, employed staff writers from Hong Kong, received books from Shanghai, Imperial edicts from Peking, telegrams from treaty ports and commercial news from all over the region. It was read and received correspondence seemingly from wherever Chinese had settled across Southeast Asia and was such a successful means of disseminating information that the Dutch government used it to publish its notices. Like other journalistic endeavours undertaken by Straits Chinese publicists in the years that followed, the *Lat Pau* put its readers in touch with Chinese events through reproducing cuttings from mainland Chinese papers. At the same time it campaigned loyally behind the British over the suppression of secret societies, fundraised amongst the Chinese community for the S.V.I's purchase of gattling guns, and refrained from openly criticizing the Qing government. The one time it received an admonishment from the colonial authorities for its reporting of Chinese news was when it re-printed a proclamation in full from the Canton authorities offering rewards for killing French troops and sinking of their vessels. This was See Ewe Lay's angry reaction to the death of his brother in the 1884 conflict and was later retracted after a government warning.

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