CHAPTER ONE

ANXI, XIAMEN, AND THE FUJIAN-SINGAPORE TEA TRADE

The ‘Bang’ Structure of Singapore Chinese Society

The Chinese merchants played a significant role in the economic advancement of Singapore as a British colony. Free trade created an opportunity for the Chinese to escape abject poverty, civil unrest, banditry and wars between China and the European powers and Japan. Many merchants who eventually settled in Singapore had no choice but to leave their hometowns in search of a better livelihood or even just to make a living. When the Chinese migrated to Singapore, they settled in areas occupied by fellow migrants. The British accepted this arrangement because it ensured that the Chinese community remained separated into provincial and dialect groups. It was easier to govern the Chinese in this manner. Chinese migrants maintained this structure since they could assist other Chinese from similar provincial or dialect backgrounds.¹

This segregation made the Chinese community appear clannish, but the division was a natural phenomenon. Each dialect group spoke a mutually unintelligible dialect. The term ‘bang’ was used to describe ‘a Chinese politico-socio-economic grouping based principally on a dialect’.² When the Chinese arrived in colonial Singapore, they congregated together and lived and worked with people who spoke the


same dialect. The importance of the bang concept helped researchers frame the Chinese community in Singapore in its actual context. With the Singapore Chinese community divided by bang, dialect specialisation of trades became inevitable. When people from a particular dialect group established themselves in a trade or occupation, it encouraged other members of the dialect group to take up the same line of work. Over time, each trade came to be associated with a particular dialect group. As late as 1955, the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs in Singapore noted that ‘certain streets tend to be occupied by Chinese of one dialect to the exclusion of others, [and] likewise there is a close association between dialect and profession’. The fact that trades came to be dominated by particular dialect groups also necessitated the formation of trade associations along dialect lines. Merchants and craftsmen would employ apprentices from the same dialect group. This practice worked for both the employer and the employee since they spoke the same dialect. Consequently, there was a stress on the dialect even within trade associations.

In terms of economic power, the Hokkiens from southern Fujian were the main Chinese merchants in colonial Singapore. They were called ‘merchants without empire’ for a good reason—they had been involved in foreign trade since the twelfth century and their trading networks extended across Southeast Asia. They also established themselves in Southeast Asia as community leaders since they held both political and trading links with European colonial powers in the region.

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7 Chin Kong James, ‘Merchants and Other Sojourners: The Hokkiens Overseas, 1570–1760’ (Ph.D. diss., The University of Hong Kong, 1998), 316–64; and Chang