CHAPTER FOUR
FROM NATIONAL PRODUCT TO CONTROLLED EXPORT, 1932–1947

Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore

The overseas Chinese had great hopes for China after the success of the Xinhai Revolution and the founding of the ROC. In the meantime, the Chinese community in Singapore had shown a great propensity towards exhibiting unequivocal support for China and other overseas Chinese communities. The Chinese business community organised a boycott of American trade in 1905 to protest the United States Exclusion Act. In 1915, after Japan delivered its Twenty-One Demands to China, a boycott of Japanese goods was organised by the Chinese merchants in Singapore.

Nationalism was one way the overseas Chinese could connect with China. After 1919, the overseas Chinese began to be more involved with ‘the siren calls of homeland politics’. Sensing the need to continue maintaining contact with the overseas Chinese, Sun Yat-sen established an Overseas Affairs Bureau in the KMT. Anti-Japanese feeling grew again in 1928 as a result of the Jinan Incident, which had led to the formation of the SCTIEA. The end of the Northern Expedition and the formation of the National Government in Nanjing was a source of pride for the overseas Chinese and ‘most Singapore Chinese’ supported the KMT. By this time, the British colonial authorities had their own suspicions about the growth of overseas Chinese nationalism in Singapore that became increasingly mixed with radical left-wing politics. This sense of nationalism was a combination of a

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concern with political, social and economic problems of China as well as recognition of Japanese imperialism. In 1929, the National Government approved the Nationality Law, which upheld the jus sanguinis principle from the Qing dynasty that claimed as Chinese nationals all persons of paternal Chinese descent.

While the ROC saw itself as the voice of all Chinese around the world, the British colonial authorities in Singapore attempted to quash overseas Chinese nationalism. In February 1930, Sir Cecil Clementi was appointed governor of the Straits Settlements. He attempted to curb the vehemence of Chinese nationalism by suppressing anti-colonial propaganda, censoring the Chinese press, enforcing a ban on the KMT and banning fund-raising activities for the KMT. After the Japanese invasion of China in July 1937, the popularity of the KMT soared again even as the colonial authorities in Singapore became increasingly alarmed with the boycott of Japanese goods organised by the Chinese mercantile community. Inasmuch as the British prohibited anti-Japanese activities, they could not stem the tide of overseas Chinese nationalism. The fall of Xiamen in May 1938 outraged the Chinese community in Singapore as this was the port from which many Fujian migrants in Singapore had come. The Nanyang Chinese Relief General Association was organised in October 1938 to co-ordinate all ‘patriotic’ (anti-Japanese) activities in Southeast Asia. In 1940, the San-Min-Chu-I Youth Corps, an anti-Japanese youth organization, was formed. The National Government also sought to control the Chinese National Salvation Movement in British Malaya. Anti-Japanese activities continued until the fall of Singapore to the Japanese military in February 1942.

**Overseas Chinese Concerns about the Fujian-Singapore Tea Trade**

In the midst of overseas Chinese hopes for the ROC and their reaction against Japanese imperialism, the Chinese tea merchants in Singapore responded by expressing their concerns on the declining Fujian production and trade in the 1930s. The Chinese trade with Southeast Asia faced intense competition from India, Ceylon and Japan as their teas began making their presence felt in coffee shops and restaurants. The use of poor production methods in China was seen by the merchants as the cause for the decline of about 50 percent in Chinese