CONCLUSION

THE OVERSEAS CHINESE MERCHANTS:
THE LINK IN AN INTERREGIONAL TEA TRADE

_It is strange that you are writing a book about us…. Usually people will write books on Tan Kah Kee even though he failed as a businessman._

—Conversation with a Chinese tea merchant
Singapore, November 2008

The intention behind this book is to look at the political side of the Fujian-Singapore tea trade through the overseas Chinese merchants based in Singapore. Through the eyes of the Chinese merchants, we could then get a clearer picture of the close political and trading ties between Fujian and Singapore as the domestic and international political situation changed from 1920 to 1960. By 1920, tea production in Fujian was in a state of decline. Production in the province continued to use antiquated techniques and the amount of tea produced was insufficient for international trade. The problem was compounded further by the rejection of European and North American markets of Fujian tea in favour of Indian and Ceylon tea. The Fujian tea merchants had to seek other markets in order to keep their family businesses alive. As the province slowly descended into political chaos, economic malaise and banditry, it made some merchants conclude that the time had come to leave their hometowns in Anxi County in search of a better livelihood by conducting their businesses in a safe and peaceful environment elsewhere.

The political and economic conditions in Singapore by 1920, therefore, came as a haven for these merchants. Most of the Chinese migrants in Singapore had come from towns and villages in southern Fujian, including Anxi. These migrants also arrived in Xiamen and left the port for Singapore. The migrants would have been the perfect clientele since they were familiar with Fujian varieties of the semi-fermented wetlong teas such as Anxi tieguanyin and Wuyi shuixian. The closure of markets in Europe and North America and competition from India, Ceylon, Japan and Taiwan left the tea merchants no choice but to establish new branches of their family businesses in Southeast Asia. Singapore was an attraction for them since 75 percent of the population on the island were Chinese, with almost half coming
from southern Fujian, and it was generally peaceful to start a new business venture.

Turnbull noted that the 1920s was a time when ‘enormous fortunes were amassed almost overnight’ in Singapore.¹ This was applicable to a few prominent merchants such as Tan Kah Kee and Aw Boon Haw but it was certainly not the case for general merchants such as the importers and exporters of Fujian tea. Since consumers have to try various trademarks before deciding what they liked, the tea merchants needed time to build up their businesses. Furthermore, the sale of Fujian tea in Singapore was not a lucrative trade. Unlike the prominent merchants we read about in the modern history of Singapore who could invest money into rubber, tin and other forms of business, the tea merchants only sold tea in Singapore because it was the only commodity they knew how to promote and sell well. Since tea was their livelihood, the merchants did everything they could to ensure the continual import of tea into Singapore to be sold to their clientele at reasonable prices.

Seen in this light, it is not surprising that the tea merchants would attempt to promote Fujian tea as a national product among the Chinese community in Singapore from the early 1930s and respond aggressively to the attempts by the National Government in Nanjing and the FPG to control the Fujian tea trade. Furthermore, the Northern Expedition had been successfully completed by the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek and there was a resurgence of nationalistic pride as the National Government took office in Nanjing in 1928. This patriotic outlook was challenged in the late 1930s as the National Government introduced controls on tea production and export. The merchants suffered a rude shock to find that they were no longer free to import tea from their own family tea gardens and retail shops in Fujian. Their immediate response was to urge the National Government and FPG to make exceptions for them by pointing out the uniqueness of the qiaoxiao tea trade. The SCTIEA also met regularly to ensure that, with the possible fall in wulong tea exports to Singapore, tea merchants had to exercise restraint and not raise prices. After the founding of the PRC in October 1949, the tea merchants continued to import Fujian