I. Research Projects

Studying Singapore's "Cottage Industries"

One of the "stories" of late twentieth century Asia is the process of urbanization and the concomitant shifts — and more importantly, continuities — in social patterns and values. The problem for the researcher is how to get a handle on the situation.

At the individual level, it is not a question of density alone. Cities, after all, have been places of human habitation for at least 5,000 years. Nor is it solely a matter of being stacked up, as disorienting and liberating as the process of shifting from ground level to somewhat more spacious "sky box" living may be. Perhaps the critical factor is technological change and the accompanying alterations in the work people do, the skills they possess, the structures within which they earn their living, the ways they look at themselves and their elders, and the aspirations they have for their children. Singapore's current shift to "high rise" and "high tech" puts it on the cutting edge of this phenomena. Its size and this particular historical moment, when surprisingly substantial numbers of the population still earn their living as small-scale crafts/trades people — in "cottage industries", loosely defined — while their children swarm into electronics, "computer", and other "modern" trades, make it ideally suited to such a study.

As is frequently the case, the study has taken a form somewhat different from that originally intended. From a distance, in a false preconception of contemporary Singapore, my initial assumption was that cottage industries simply would not exist, or would only exist in insufficient, "exotic" numbers. My original thought, then, was to study small-scale enterprise, primarily family businesses. These seemed to be basically "traditional" in organization, caught in the pressure for economic and social change, with younger generations both involved and leaving. Killiney Road, a more or less "intact" neighbourhood with a variety of enterprises including craftsmen, was chosen. In exploring the possibilities, I became increasingly aware that many such cottage industries, mostly family businesses, in fact continue to exist and function in Singapore.

Statistics are only suggestive since "cottage industries" as such do not fall into the standard government categories. However, according to the 1982 survey, 58,625 people (18.74 per cent of the work-force involved in manufacturing) work in establishments with fewer than twenty workers. While "own account" and "unpaid
family workers" in registered manufacturing establishments have been included in this number, additional such workers who ply their trades in a more informal manner are not included and are impossible to estimate (Ministry of Labour, Census of Employment, 1982). If one assumes that many of the patterns and values found in this group are shared by workers (and their family members) in small establishments generally, the study takes on added dimension. Virtually one Singaporean worker in three (30.25 per cent of the work-force in establishments registered with the Ministry of Labour plus the separately registered “own-account” workers like taxi-drivers and hawkers) is involved in such small-scale enterprise.

The goal of the study is not a statistical survey. Nor is it, in the academic sense, a scientifically chosen random sample. Rather it is to provide a document or record of as many crafts/trades people as possible, looking especially at two levels — process and personal history. From the beginning of the project, the definition of who to include has not been bounded by the usual definition of “craft”. The focus has been on individuals or groups who make something by a process that is not totally mechanized, and who sell the product whether or not that sale constitutes the total source of income. Thus we have looked at food processing but not cooking. We found skills that run the gamut from paper-bag-making to erecting the complex paper houses and deities used in Chinese funerals, from sewing patchwork (on a street corner) to fashioning cloth, bamboo, and wire into a dancing dragon. We found makers of Malay sandals and makers of high fashion shoes, traditional wooden clog-makers, and “clog makers” who turn out heels for modern shoe factories. We talked to blacksmiths and goldsmiths, furniture-makers and coffin-makers.

It is important to stress that the study is not just a study of crafts of the “arty-craftsy” type because that would be misleading. Rather, it would be more appropriate to think in terms of the local usage of “trade” or “line”. However, we have also avoided using the term “vanishing trades”. Many of these trades most certainly will disappear. But to use this as the collective noun presupposes a condition which, in fact, must be examined on a case-by-case basis. More importantly, it consigns them to a nostalgic but basically irrelevant past rather than recognizing their continuing existence and relevance, albeit diminished, for contemporary Singaporean life. The purpose of the study is therefore to find, within the time available, as broad a spectrum of skills presently being practised from as many as possible of the linguistic and ethnic groups represented in Singapore.

The method of study involves interviewing. Initially, the interviews were conducted with craftsmen on Killiney Road and those who function visibly in other areas of the city, chosen for the general interest of the particular skill. As the need to broaden the base became obvious, the next step was to survey various parts of the city and identify suitable subjects to include in the study. In addition, talking with one craftsman frequently led us to others as working networks were shared.

Interviewing was done with the assistance of a professional photographer who also acted as the interpreter. Later five university students were recruited to assist in the intensive interviews. In all, interviews of over eighty establishments were completed.

The interviews were only loosely structured and a standard question form was