Political Modernization and Traditional Chinese Voluntary Association: A Singapore Case Study*

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the effects of one aspect of modernization — political modernization — on the traditional Chinese voluntary associations in Singapore. Political modernization has been referred to by writers like Huntington (1968: 93) as the rationalization of authority. He writes:

Political modernization involves the replacement of a large number of traditional, religious, familial, and ethnic political authorities by a single secular, national political authority. It means national integration and the centralization or accumulation of power in recognized national law-making institutions.

Before analyzing the impact of politically induced change on the traditional Chinese voluntary associations, a brief historical review of Singapore is important for an understanding of Singapore society before and after British colonialism.

Historical Background

Singapore was founded in 1819 by the British as a result of British commercial interests in China and the East Indies. The population of nineteenth-century Singapore was predominantly made up of immigrants from China, principally from the two southern provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung, who were attracted by the excitement and greater economic opportunities of the British free port.¹

The familial-minded collectivistic inclination of the Chinese and their strong attachment to their native land accounted for the transitory nature of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Chinese emigration to the Nanyang ("South Seas", i.e., Southeast Asia), including Singapore. They also explained the attempt

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to re-create traditional and cultural institutions, like the Chinese voluntary associations in overseas Chinese settlements.

Traditional Chinese voluntary associations appeared to spring up largely in response to the overriding emphasis which the Chinese placed on their kinship system. This emphasis on real or ritual kinship ties had created a whole range of associations in Imperial China.

There are broadly four types of traditional associations existing in Singapore. These are the associations based on surnames (clans), dialect (dialect associations), place of origin (territorial associations or hui-kuans) and occupation (guilds) (Tan, 1983: 76-112). Even though people speaking the same dialect or hailing from the same areas in China were not necessarily blood relatives, they were nevertheless acknowledged as kinsmen. This could be attested to by the familistic forms and terminology of addressing even total strangers of the same race (Hsu, 1968: 585).

The functions of the traditional Chinese associations are varied and numerous but they generally reflect the emphasis on kinship as the basis of organization and the principle of collective responsibility. These functions can be summarized as the preservation of Chinese culture (including the tradition of ancestor worship), the purveyance of social welfare and mutual aid and generally the provision of an alternative structure in which the Chinese could organize their lives (Hsieh, 1977; Yen, 1981). These ranged from maintaining the rites of ancestor worship; housing and feeding newly arrived immigrants and destitutes; locating jobs; settling disputes; and representing the Chinese in their relations with the wider community.

The Chinese during colonial times were generally ruled through these traditional associations that arose to police and govern the Chinese community against outside interference. The colonial government, on their part, refrained, as a matter of deliberate policy, from upsetting the traditional social structure; and reduced interference with local customs and traditions to the barest minimum so long as this indirect rule did not jeopardize British political and economic interests in the colony. In the few matters that required official consultation with the Chinese, (like the maintenance of law and order), these were mediated through the informally acknowledged leaders of the Chinese community who as a rule were wealthy merchants holding top ranks in the traditional Chinese voluntary associations (Williams, 1964: 172-73; Yong, 1967: 6-10).

The pervasive presence of the traditional Chinese voluntary associations had the cumulative effect of keeping the Chinese separate from the other ethnic groups, who were also similarly organized in culturally and ethnically distinct communities. Ethnic voluntary associations in general prevented the development of intimate personal bonds with other ethnic minorities, and encouraged the formation of disruptive stereotypes (Gordon, 1964: 236).

The British made no attempt to close the cultural gap between the ethnic groups. On the contrary, its divide-and-rule policy often had the opposite effect of causing further division and a feeling of separateness. Thus one of the more pernicious legacy of British colonialism in Singapore was the development of a multi-racial society comprising the indigenous Malays, Chinese and Indians who were often suspicious and distrustful of one another.

After the end of British colonialism, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP)