4A

Social Structure and Bang *Interactions*[*]

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Abstract

This chapter explores, through a macro-perspective, the origin and nature of the *bang* structure and *bang* politics of the Singapore Chinese society and its changes.

The polarised *bang* structure led to serious conflicts in 1854 between the Hokkiens and the united front of the lesser dialect groups. The de facto polarised social structure was institutionalised by the *bang*-based organisational structure of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce formed in 1906. Prewar pro-China and pro-British political ideologies led to the consolidation of Chinese dialect groups.

The formation of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations after Independence has ended a period of ethnic parochialism within the Chinese society, and taken on a new mandate to upkeep and promote Chinese heritage and culture in nation building.

[*] This chapter is a revised and expanded version of the author's essay entitled "Historical Setting: Chinese Society in Pre-1941 Singapore" in Liu Hong & Wong Sin-Kiong ed., *Singapore Chinese Society in Transition* (NY: Perter Land Publishing, 2004), pp.1–43.

Singapore's strategic location at the southern end of the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca had made Singapore an ideal trading zone linking the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Hence, Stamford Raffles of the East India Company (EIC) chose Singapore as its trading base for the China Trade. The EIC turned Singapore into a thriving free port that served as a port of entry and exit for natural produce and products imported from the Malay Peninsula, Dutch East Indies (present Indonesia) and neighbouring countries for processing, sorting, grading, packing and re-exporting to global markets. It also served as a distribution centre for manufactured goods from Europe, the U.S. and China for local and neighbouring consumers. Singapore soon rose to be a thriving regional entrepôt port for Southeast Asian trade.

By the mid-19th century, Singapore had emerged as a cosmopolitan city where traders from Europe, China, India, the Arab world and the Malay Archipelago came to do business. Meanwhile, the opening up of the Malay Peninsula and the Dutch East Indies by the British East India Company and the Dutch East India Company resulted in a large-scale migration of Chinese coolies from treaty ports in South China to Island Southeast Asia through Singapore. By 1836, in a matter of two decades, Singapore's Chinese population had for the first time slightly outnumbered the Malay population by 4%. By 1901, the Chinese became the dominant ethnic group in Singapore forming 72% of the population.[2]

Immigrant Society and Chinese Bang-based Power Structure

In colonial Singapore, the Chinese community was organised along the lines of *bang* which denotes a Chinese political-socio-economic grouping based principally along dialect lines.[3] Hence, a *bang* is virtually a dialect group. Table 1 shows the distribution of the Chinese population by dialect group in 1881:

Table 1 Dialect group distribution of the Chinese population, 1881

Hokkien	24,981(28.8%)
Teochew	22,644 (26%)
Cantonese	14,853 (17.1%)
Hainanese	8,319 (9.6%)
Hakka	6,170 (7.1%)
Straits-born	9,527 (11%)
Others	272 (0.3%)
Total	86,766 (100%)

Source: Report of Census of Singapore, 1881.

[2] Saw Swee Hock, *The Population of Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), p. 47.

[3] Cheng Lim Keak, *Social change and the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985), p.23.

Most of the Straits-born Chinese were Malaccan Peranakans whose ancestors came from Fujian province and had lived in Malacca for many generations. Thus, they can be grouped with the Hokkiens. Table 1 shows that the five major dialect groups were the Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakkas. Other minority groups were the Foochows, Shanghainese, Hokchias, Henghwas, among others.

Bang (帮) politics refers to vertical and horizontal intra- and inter-dialect group activities and relationships, including the founding and management of temples, burial grounds, territorial (locality) and kinship clan associations, trade/occupational organisations and social groups as well as coolie quarters based on dialect groups.

Due to the differing living conditions and socio-political environments between China and colonial Singapore in the 19th century, the word "clan" carried different meanings in both places. In the traditional Chinese societies in Fujian and Guangdong provinces, from whence most of the Chinese migrant came (during the peak of Chinese migration after the Opium Wars), the concepts of family (*jia*, 家) and clan (*zu*, 族) was based on kinship among individuals of the same surname.[4] These families or clan usually lived in the same community or village, or among several nearby communities or villages in the same geographical region.[5] However, in colonial Singapore the number of families settling in an area was too small to form a community. Hence, the composition of a clan was enlarged from those sharing a surname to include people who originated from the same geographical locality (*xiang* 乡) who spoke the same dialects. Therefore, a clan association in an Overseas Chinese community would refer to both locality and kinship group or organisation.

The Cho Kah Koon of Singapore (Cao Jia Guan), one of the earliest kinship clan associations in Singapore.

As the colonial government would not care for them, what the Overseas Chinese feared most was being unemployed and sick. Fortunately, the pioneers of the respective dialect groups formed clan associations, kinship and trade organisations, temples, cemeteries, benevolent hospitals, schools and mutual-help organisations to care for their fellow clansmen's basic welfare and personal security during their lifetime and after they passed away. Hence, an internal, interlocking socio-economic networks within each dialect group emerged and an

[4] Hui-Chen Wang Liu, *The Traditional Chinese Clan Rules* (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin for the Association for Asian Studies, 1959), p.1.

[5] Ibid.

exclusive *bang*-based social structure began to take shape in the Chinese community under British colonial rule.

Ethnic enclaves in foreign lands formed by immigrants are common. Nevertheless, Raffles' town plan, known as the Jackson Plan, in the 1820s virtually strengthened ethnic and sub-ethnic settlements in Singapore. He instructed the Town Committee to segregate the different dialect groups to avoid conflicts among various Chinese dialect groups.[6] Under his town plan, the Cantonese settled in Kreta Ayer area, the Hokkiens at Telok Ayer area, the Teochews at Tew Chew Street and Ellenborough Market and the Hainanese at Hylam Street area.[7]

Social and Power Structure before World War Two

The Chinese community was highly polarised during the 19th century and inter-*bang* relations were tense and confrontational. A dominating Hokkien *bang* was challenged by a united front comprising the Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese dialect groups.

Hokkien *Bang*

Most of the Hokkiens in early Singapore came from Malacca soon after the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824. These pioneers were Straits Chinese merchants whose families had settled in Malacca for many generations since the 17th century. The majority of their

Street view of the Thian Hock Keng Temple in the late 19th century.

[6] Charles B. Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore 1819–1867*, 3rd reprint (Singapore: OUP), p.83.

[7] Cheng Lim Keak, op.cit., p.28.

ancestors originated from Southern Fujian, especially from the prefectures of Zhangzhou, Quanzhou and Yongchun. The Malaccan Chinese were among the first groups of enterprising migrant traders and merchants who saw business opportunities in this newfound port. According to Raffles' town plan, merchants were at the apex of the social strata, above labourers. Hence, the powerful and wealthy Hokkien *bang* was led by the Malaccan merchants, whose lineages continue to dominate Singapore Chinese community throughout the 19th century and early 20th century.

Temples and burial grounds served as rallying points as well as power bases for early Chinese immigrants in Singapore to maintain ethnic identities. The Hokkiens, headed by a wealthy merchant from Malacca, See Hoot Keh, built the Heng San Teng temple in 1827 on Silat Road to manage the first Hokkien burial ground. It was followed by the building of the Thian Hock Keng Temple on Telok Ayer Street in 1840 led by Tan Tock Seng, another prominent Malaccan businessman. Thian Hock Keng Temple was the iconic power base for the Hokkien *bang* in the 19th century. See Hoot Keh, Tan Tock Seng, Tan Kim Seng and later Tan Kim Ching (son of Tan Tock Seng) were the leaders of the powerful Hokkien *bang* throughout the 19th century. There was no lack of outstanding leaders in the Hokkien *bang*. Therefore, the wealthy and powerful Hokkien *bang*'s dominant position was largely unchallenged by lesser *bangs*. However, as far as inter-*bang* relationships were concerned, the Hokkien *bang* seemed those outside of it as aloof, exclusive and intimidating.

The Hokkien *bang* in 1878 formed an exclusive Tan clan association called the Tan Si Chong Su (also known as Po Chiak Keng) for Hokkiens bearing the surname Tan (Chen, 陈).

Bang Politics of the United Front

Confronted with a dominant and aloof Hokkien *bang*, other minority dialect groups such as the Teochews, Cantonese, Hakkas and Hainanese formed a united front to safeguard their collective interests.

The Teochews originated from Chaozhou prefecture in Guangdong province.[8] They spoke the Teochew dialect. In the 19th century, the Teochews mainly engaged in gambier and pepper industry as traders, planters, plantation labourers, opium and liquor farmers. A number of Teochew entrepreneurs like Seah Eu Chin, Tan Yeok Nee and Tan Seng Poh were as rich as the Hokkien *bang* leaders. The Teochews had scattered around the hinterlands of Singapore and Johor and they lived in the isolated gambier and pepper plantations.[9] In terms of population size and financial strength, the Teochew *bang* was second to the Hokkien *bang*. However, the Teochews' demographic distribution affected unity within the dialect group as well as their interaction with other *bangs*. They were not active in *bang* politics as there was no

[8] Teochew prefecture consists of eight counties: Chao'an, Chenghai, Chaoyang, Jieyang, Raoping, Puning, Huilai and Nan'ao.

[9] From "Historical setting: Chinese society in pre-1941" written by Lim How Seng, from *SG Chinese Society in Transition* (Refer to Acknowledgements (p vii). The present chapter is a revised and expanded version of that essay.

large concentration of Teochews in the urban areas to form associations. This indicates that the occupational pattern had tremendous impact on their social behaviours and structures. The temple on Philip Street, Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple (also known as Yueh Hai Ching), was built in the 1820s and served as their initial power base until 1845 when the *bang* leader Seah Eu Chin formed the Ngee Ann Kongsi to serve as the *bang*'s new power base. In 1929, umbrella Teochew clan association, the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, was formed in the aftermath of serious disagreements between the old-guard within the Kongsi and the young Teochews, the latter led by Lim Nee Soon, a strong supporter of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement.

The Cantonese *bang* consists of two factions. One with origins from the Five Counties (Wuyi) centering around the Pearl River in Guangdong and with Guangzhou city as the focal point. These Five Counties were Nanhai, Shunde (also Shuntak), Dongguan, Panyu and Xiangshan (Heungshan). The other faction has origins from Siyi. the Four Counties upstream of the Pearl River, namely, Xinning (now Taishan) , Xinhui, Enping, and Kaiping. There is a slight variation in their dialects and their occupations varied too. Generally, the Wuyi faction was economically stronger than its counterpart. The Wuyi clansmen were mainly engaged in commerce, medical halls, service sector like inns and restaurants while the Siyi clansmen were mostly construction workers, carpenters and working in brick-baking kilns and sawmills.

Siyi clansmen were the first batch of Chinese immigrants who followed Raffles to Singapore. They formed a cohesive group with strong group identity. Though they formed associations quite early on, they had no obvious power base. The Xinning clansmen formed the Ning Yeung Wui Kuan soon after Raffle's landing in Singapore while the Sinhui clansmen founded the Kong Chow Wui Koon (Guangzhou Association) in 1843. In 1879, the Enping and Kaiping clansmen jointly established the Siu Heng Wui Kun (Zhaoqing Association). They also established a guild for bricklayers, the Pak Seng Hong in 1868 and a guild for carpenters, Lu Pak Hong in 1890. These guilds were responsible for regulating codes of conduct for skilled workers in the respective trades. Skills of the trade were passed down from masters to apprentices through a very personalised and disciplined learning and teaching process. An apprentice had to choose a master from whom he would acquire skills. The whole workshop was organised like a family. The master was regarded as the father or elder brother while all fellow apprentices were like siblings. Under the rigid regulatory system, every individual was attached to the guild for survival. Thus, strong bonds were formed among all workers in the same trade and it helped create a disciplined and personalised relationship among them. This was something not found in other *bangs*.

The Wuyi clansmen, on the other hand, founded several locality organisations such as the Xiang Kongsi in 1838, later known as Chung Shan Association, Nam Sun Wui Kun (Nanshun Association) in 1839, Tung On Wui Kun in 1876 (Dong An Association) and Poon Yue Association (Panyu Association).

As a result of the highly fragmented *bang* structure, the Cantonese community had no focal *bang* organisation throughout the 19th century. Nevertheless, the two factions actively

collaborated in intra- and inter-*bang* activities. The distinct identities of both factions reinforces that the Cantonese *bang* was not a homogeneous group, in fact, both factions were very conscious of their own sub-ethnicity. Nevertheless, they were often solidly united in inter-*bang* activities. The Siyi group identified themselves as "Zhao" (肇) for Zhaoqing (肇庆) and the Wuyi group as "Guang" (广). Hoo Ah Kay, better known as Whampoa, a native of Wuyi's Panyu county, was the richest Cantonese businessman in Singapore at the time and was regarded as a spokesman for the Cantonese *bang* at large. He was also the first Chinese to be appointed as a non-official Legislative Council member by the Straits Settlements government. Thus, the Wuyi camp was led by the Panyu group.

The Hakka *bang* was another small yet fragmented dialect group. There were slightly more than 6,000 Hakkas in Singapore in 1881, only a quarter of the Hokkien population. The Hakka *bang* consisted of three main sub-groups:

1) Feng Yong Da Hakkas, also sometimes referred to as Yongding Hakkas, are a a cross-territorial grouping for clansmen whose origins were from Fengshun and Dabu in Guangdong and Yongding in Fujian. In 1909, this group formed the Fong Yun Thai Association (originally the Fong Yun Kongsi).

2) Jiaying Hakkas consisting of the following five counties in Guangdong's Jiaying prefecture.: Meixian, Jiaoling, Wuhua, Xingning and Yinhe. In 1823 they formed the Ying Fo Fui Kun (Yinhe Association) as their power base.

3) Huizhou Hakkas, comprising 10 counties in Guangdong's Huizhou prefecture. In 1890, they established the Wui Chiu Fui Kun (Huizhou Association).

In terms of inter-*bang* relations and activities, the Feng Yong Da and Jiaying sub-groups formed an alliance (although the reasons for this are as yet unclear) while the Huizhou Hakkas teamed with the Cantonese to form an unusual cross-*bang* grouping known as the Guang Hui Zhao (广惠肇) group. It is likewise unclear what led to this partnership. Nonetheless, the group jointly built the Cheng San Teng (Qingshan Ting) cemetery and subsequently the Loke Yah Teng cemetery in the 19th century.

The Hainanese *bang*, on the other hand, was highly united despite being relatively small. They built the Kheng Chiu Tin Hou Kong Temple in 1857 as their rallying point. Like the Teochews, the Hainanese played a marginal role in inter-*bang* activities.[10]

Development of the United Front

There were no cardinal rules governing intra- and inter-*bang* collaboration and rivalry in Overseas Chinese communities. Most of the time, alliances were formed as a calculated tactical move in response to prevailing social circumstances. For instance, the Hokkiens and Cantonese in Penang jointly founded the Kong Hok Keong temple (now better known as

[10] Lim How Seng, "Singapore Chinese Society in the 19th century: Power Structure and Bang Politics", *Asian Culture*, No. 26 (June 2002), p.37.

Kuan Im Teng) in 1800. Singapore and Malacca in the 19th century, however, saw very little interaction between the Hokkien and Cantonese *bangs*. Instead, the Cantonese in Singapore collaborated with the Hakkas in building Fuk Tak Chi Temple in Telok Ayer Street in the 1820s. Therefore, it can be concluded that the alignment and realignment of *bang* ties were shaped by specific local contexts and needs instead of general cultural differences or similarities between different *bangs*.

The formation of a united front by the Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese *bangs* in 19th century Singapore was a strategy to counter the over-powering Hokkien *bang*. The objective of forming such an alliance was to maintain a balance of power in *bang* politics. The united front crossed the boundaries of dialect, territorial, kinship and professional groups. It also broke rigid barriers between *bangs*. Nevertheless, the degree of involvement of each *bang* in the united front varied.

The driving forces of the united front were the Cantonese and Hakka *bangs* while the Teochew and Hainanese *bangs* only played supportive roles. The core groups were the Feng Yong Da and Jiaying Hakka sub-groups and the Guang Hui Zhao group (a group of Huizhou Hakkas and Cantonese). They jointly built Fuk Tak Chi Temple at Telok Ayer Street in the vicinity of the Thian Hock Keng Temple, the headquarters of the Hokkien *bang*. Fuk Tak Chi Temple served as the power base of the united front. The Hakka and Cantonese alliance also established the Qingshan Ting burial ground and subsequent Loke Yah Teng burial ground for the deceased fellow clansmen.

The renovation of the Fuk Tak Chi Temple in 1854 provided strong evidences of solidarity within the united front. A total of 172 small Teochew concerns contributed to the renovation fund. Moreover, the author also found congratulatory plaques were exchanged between temples built by different *bang* organisations. For example, in the Teochew power house Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple, we found congratulatory wooden plaques presented by two Hakka clan associations, namely, the Yinghe Association and Chayang Association, as well as by devotees of the Guang Hui Zhao group and the Hainanese between 1896 and 1899. Similarly, the author also found a group of Ghee Ann clansmen (Teochew) gave a congratulatory plaque to the Hainanese temple, Kheng Chiu Tin Hou Kong Temple in Beach Road. These congratulatory plaques demonstrate exchanges of goodwill from friendly *bangs*.

The absence of the Hokkien *bang* in these *bang*-based congratulatory exchanges provides indirect evidence on the rivalry between the united front and the Hokkien *bang*. The only exceptions were Cheang Hong Lim and his brother's donations in the form of plots of land in 1869 and 1870 for Fuk Tak Chi Temple's expansion. These contributions would have been significant if the donations had taken place after Cheang had become a Hokkien *bang* leader in 1891, as it would have represented the Hokkien *bang's* gesture of goodwill and generosity towards the other *bangs*. However, as Cheang was not yet a *bang* leader, we can only construe that his donations were made in his personal capacity, likely to enhance his public image.

In the 19th century and early 20th century, the Hokkien *bang* and its counterparts held separate annual religious processions in the Chinatown areas. The Hokkien religious

A chingay procession — one of the many traditional temple activities.

procession was spearheaded by the Thian Hock Keng Temple in conjunction with two other Hokkien temples, Hong San See Temple and Kim Lan Temple. Similarly, the combined Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka shopkeepers would hold their procession centered around the Teochew-led Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple in Philip Street during the 11th Lunar month each year.

Inter-*bang* Conflicts: The 1854 Riots

The tense relations between the Hokkien *bang* and the united front led to the outbreak of the 1854 riots. Charles Burton Buckley referred to it as "the biggest Chinese riots that have been known in Singapore, which upset the whole island for ten or twelve days".[11] The riots started in the Telok Ayer area on 5 May 1854 because a party of Hokkien men who quarreled over the weight of a catty of rice was attacked by some Teochew men and robbed of their provisions. This led to a large-scale fight between the Hokkiens and a group comprising Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka workers. The fight quickly spread from the central business

[11] C. B. Buckley, op.cit., p.585.

district like Circular Road, South Bridge Road, Circular Road, Boat Quays, Philip Street, Market Street, and Telok Ayer to the remote rural areas in Chan Chu Kang (present Nee Soon), Bukit Timah and Paya Lebar, where houses belonging to the Hokkiens were burned down by the predominantly Teochew gambier and pepper plantation labourers. The casualties were heavy: 400 dead, a great number wounded, and about 300 houses burned down.[12]

While it is true the secret societies were involved to some degree, in light of the large scale of the 1854 riots between the Hokkiens and other dialect groups like the Teochews, Cantonese, Hakkas and Hainanese, contemporary opinion indicates they were less likely to be the result of fighting between rival secret societies as opposed to disparate groups sparked to action by deep-seeded inter-clan feuds. In fact, clannishness within the Chinese community had long been noted by senior government officials like J. D. Vaughan who arrived in Singapore in 1856 as Master Attendant. Vaughan observed that "the greatest riot we ever had in Singapore viz., that of 1854 occurred between the natives of Fuhkien (Hokkien) and Kwangtung (Guangdong). The former under the generic term Hokiens were ranged against four races on the other size, viz., the Macaos (Cantonese), Kehs (Hakkas), Tay Chews (Teochews), and Hailams (Hainanese). The solemn obligations of the secret societies were cast to the winds, and members of the same Hoey fought to the death against their brethren".[13] Wilfred Blythe, a Chinese scholar and former Colonial Secretary of Singapore, wrote in his book *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya* that "the Governor believed that this feud had been smouldering for some time".[14] Eye-witnessed accounts at the time by the reporters of the two English presses, *The Straits Times* and *The Singapore Free Press*, testified too that the serious feuds between the Hokkien and Teochew *bangs* were responsible for the riots.[15]

Blythe also wrote that the "authorities received no assistance from the leaders of the Chinese community who, though sent for, could not be induced to leave their house."[16] On the contrary, contemporary newspapers reported that Chua Moh Choon, the headman of the Teochew Ghee Hock Kongsi, was asked to patrol the streets in the central business district. Similarly, the Gambier King, de facto Teochew *bang* leader Seah Eu Chin, was assigned to patrol Bukit Timah with the police.[17] Hokkien *bang* leader Tan Kim Seng was also called upon to assist in restoring peace.[18] The assistance of a total of 50 Chinese business leaders were indeed sought by the government to use their influence to put down the riots. However, all these efforts were in vain as the scale of the riots was just beyond their influence and control

[12] Ibid.; Wilfred Blythe, *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya* (KL: OUP, 1967), p.79; *The Singapore Free Press*, 30 December 1854.

[13] J. D. Vaughan, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese*, reprint (Singapore: OUP, 1971). First published in 1879), p.99.

[14] Blythe, op.cit., p.77.

[15] *The Straits Times*, 16 May 1854; *The Singapore Free Press*, 12 May 1854.

[16] Ibid.

[17] *The Straits Times*, 16 May 1854

[18] *Song Ong Siang, One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: OUP, 1984), p.88.

as pointed out by Vaughan. They were even worried of their own safety.[19] The 1854 riots threw into the spotlight the damaging and polarised *bang* structures within the Chinese community.

Bang Leadership and Cross-*bang* Activities

In the first half of the 19th century, most of the Chinese *bang* leaders in Singapore engaged in one way or another in cross-*bang* activities and served the whole Chinese community. This public-spirited behaviour appeared to be the norm practised by *bang* leaders across the board. For instance, Tan Tock Seng Hospital was established by the Hokkien *bang* leaders and was also strongly supported by Teochew and Cantonese *bang* leaders. Seah Eu Chin (a Teochew) and Hoo Ah Kay (a Cantonese) joined their Hokkien counterparts Tan Kim Ching and Tan Kim Seng on the hospital's management committee for many years. As seen in the 1854 riots, they also collaborated during the social crisis to restore law and order. However, such cross-*bang* interactions before the 1880s were class-oriented and limited to the business elites. The Hokkien *bang* remained largely insulated and was aloof towards other *bangs*. Essentially, there was little change to the polarised *bang* structure.

Bang Politics within the Working Class

The polarised *bang* structure had tremendous impact on the personal lives and livelihoods of the working class as they relied heavily on kinship ties or clan fellowship to secure jobs in a foreign land. In an urbanised 19th century Singapore, workers had to attach to *bang*-based business networks, work groups and secret societies for job security and protection. At times, a quarrel over trivial matters between workers of different *bangs* could trigger serious inter-*bang* conflicts and even riots. The 1854 riots were a case in point.

Parallel to the inter-*bang* collaboration among the business elite, similar pattern of cross-bang relations and interactions emerged in the working class. This movement was linked to the secret societies organised generally along *bang* lines. The Teochew, Feng Yong Da and Guang Hui Zhao factions formed the nuclear group of the secret societies in Singapore. The Ghee Hin Kongsi had been the headquarters of the secret societies until its suppression by the government in 1890 after which it went underground and used the She Gong Temple as a cover.[20]

The She Gong Temple originally located in Lavender Street kept the spirit tablets of 73 deceased high-ranking secret society leaders who were posthumously glorified as martyrs of the anti-Qing movement and the restoration of the Ming dynasty.[21] They were given titles of general headman, treasurer, general, vanguard, master of lodge and the like, indicating the well-organised setup. David Chng, author of *Heroic Images of Ming Loyalists*, established

[19] Blythe, op.cit., p.77.

[20] David Chng, *Heroic Images of Ming Loyalists: A Study of the Spirit Tablets of the Ghee Hin Kongsi Leaders in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1999).

[21] Ibid.

the origins of 47 members among whom there were 26 Teochews, nine Cantonese, seven Hakkas, three Hainanese and three Hokkiens. Thus, the Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka members were the driving force behind the Ghee Hin Kongsi and it too operated very much like a united front.

Erosion of the Confrontational and Polarised *Bang* Politics

The concept of balance of power was under review in the light of the changing political and social landscapes at the turn of the century. At the end of the 19th century, the confrontational and polarised *bang* politics had shown signs of change. On the one hand, the overpowering Hokkien *bang* leaders' public-spiritedness and philanthropy had helped change its intimidating image as their public projects benefited the Singapore public, including the Chinese population. These public projects included Tan Tock Seng's establishment of a pauper hospital (the predecessor of Tan Tock Seng Hospital), Tan Kim Seng's generous donation to towards the government's water supply project and Cheang Hong Lim's founding of a fire brigade. Their public services eliminated fears among the lesser *bangs* and it became less critical to maintain the balance of power through an oppositional united front. Maintaining a balance of power was the fundamental cause of polarised *bang* politics.

On the other hand, internal struggles also occurred within the united front. In 1887, a landmark lawsuit between the Cantonese and Hakka custodians of the Fuk Tak Chi Temple (headquarters of the united front) broke out. On the surface it appeared to be the fight over the distribution of the temple's takings between the two rival (Cantonese and Hakka) custodians. However, it demonstrated an underlying power struggle between the Cantonese and the Hakka factions over the control of the temple and of the united front at large. Both parties filed petitions to the Protector of Chinese. The case was heard by the Protector of Chinese and the Chief Police Officer and they ordered that all revenues be kept by the temple for annual maintenance and recurrent expenses. The agreement was then engraved in a stone inscription for display in the temple. The lawsuit over the temple takings weakened the unity of the united front. In addition, the lukewarm participation of the Teochews and Hainanaese had undermined the solidarity and effectiveness of the united front.

But the most crucial factor responsible for the erosion of the divisive *bang* structure came from the changing political landscape in Singapore in the 1870s, which would eventually change the destiny of the Overseas Chinese. The establishment of a Qing government consulate in Singapore in 1877 prompted the British Straits Settlements government to establish the Chinese Protectorate ahead of the Qing Chinese consulate. Both institutions wanted a more united Chinese community.

The Straits Settlements government adopted a two-pronged approach. While it acknowledged the existence of polarising *bang* structures and politics within the Chinese community, it encouraged cross-*bang* collaboration among *bang* leaders to ease inter-*bang* conflicts and confrontations. It made the system work for the government. These *bang* leaders were all top brass within the business elite and cream of the Chinese community in the

19th century. Their leadership was endorsed by the government by conferring on them official titles of the Justice of the Peace and appointed them public officers like honorary magistrates.[22] The *bang* leaders were often called upon to assist the government to maintain law and order during riots and disturbances such us the 1854 riots. These elite worked very closely in business and community work. For instance, Teochew *bang* leader Seah Eu Chin served on the management committee of the Tan Tock Seng Hospital. As mentioned, although such cross-*bang* ties were confined to the upper class, the government successfully made use of the *bang* structure and *bang* politics to contain the Chinese population.

A wooden plaque (left) inscribed with the words "Bo Jing Nan Ming" (Calm the waves on the South Seas) in the Thian Hock Keng Temple, given in 1907 by Emperor Guangxu. The inscribed wooden plaque was bestowed together with a yellow silk scroll bearing the same characters in handwritten script and a royal seal (right).

Similarly, the Qing government represented by its consuls in Singapore were also not in favour of the *bang* structure and *bang* politics. As the mission of the Chinese Consul was to protect the Chinese in Singapore and look after their welfare, *bang* politics was seen as an obstruction to carry out the Consul's diplomatic duties. Despite Emperor Guangxu's bestowing plaques to the Teochew-led Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple and Hokkien-led Thian Hock Keng Temple in 1899 and 1907 respectively, this was seen as a tactical move to woo the Chinese in Singapore in the face of rising calls for reform and revolution in China.

A plaque bestowed by Emperor Guangxu to the Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple, inscribed with the words "Shu Hai Xiang Yun" (Auspicious clouds above the sea at dawn).

[22] Lim How Seng, "Singapore Chinese Society in the 19th century: Power Structure and Bang Politics", *Asian Culture*, No. 26 (June 2002), p.47.

Both the Protector of Chinese and the Qing Consul were tasked to protect and serve the Chinese in Singapore. They battled for control over the Chinese in Singapore to consolidate the community's allegiance to the British for the former and to Qing China for the latter. The result of their battle raised the consciousness of the Chinese from the rather parochial *bang* identity to a wider national identity. Consequently, groups of pro-British and pro-Qing China Chinese emerged by the end of the 19th century. Parochial sectional confrontation between *bangs* had lost much ground and appeal and a new era of *bang* relations was in the making.

Chinese Community and *Bang* Politics in the New Era

The Qing consuls had launched proactive and successful outreach programmes encouraging Chinese businessmen to purchase Imperial (Qing) titles so as to enhance their social status. The programmes were well-received in the Federated Malay States, including Singapore. Meanwhile, the Chinese community was consciously drawn into political movements in China. Two opposing forces, the Royalists led by Kang Youwei supported Emperor Guangxu's reform movement while the Revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen sought to overthrow the Qing government. The visits by Kang and Sun to Singapore in 1900 and 1906 respectively catalysed waves of change in the Chinese community. Kang found a scholar-cum-millionaire Khoo Seok Wan to act as his spokesman. Sun formed a local branch of the Tongmenghui (Revolutionary Alliance) in the Sun Yat Sen Villa (now the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall) as his revolutionary headquarters in Southeast Asia, headed by Lim Nee Soon, Tan Chor Nam and Teo Eng Hock. Such campaigns initiated by the Qing consuls, Royalists and Revolutionaries greatly promoted Chinese nationalism among Singapore Chinese, as opposed to *bang* consciousness, and a Chinese identity was in the making. Nevertheless, the *bang* structure remained intact and the later development of the local Kuomintang (KMT) and the Overseas Chinese relief fund movements in the 1930s were in fact operated within the *bang* framework.

Straits Chinese British Association and Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce

Amid the active political campaigns of the China-born Chinese community in Singapore, the English-educated Straits Chinese became alarmed by the surging tide of Chinese nationalism among the Chinese population. They increasingly positioned themselves as pro-British and anglicised, and in 1900, the Straits Chinese led by prominent Peranakan leaders like Tan Jiak Kim, Tan Chay Yan, Seah Liang Seah and Lee Keng Liat founded the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) as their power base to counter the influence of Chinese nationalism. They actively promoted local political participation, education and social reforms. They gradually detached themselves from the mainstream of the Chinese community.

In light of these social and political changes at the turn of the century, the divisive *bang* structure within the Chinese community began to lose steam. The formation of the Thong Chai Medical Institution by the leaders of the five major *bangs* in 1885 shows that the writing was

already on the wall. In addition, the Protector of Chinese established the Chinese Advisory Board in 1889 where government-appointed leaders of major *bangs* to regularly meet and discuss Chinese affairs affecting the whole Chinese community. This further eroded the political divisions along *bang* lines.

A Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce badge, front (left) and back (right).

However, it was the formation of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC, now known as Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry) based on the principle of representation for each *bang* that ushered in a new era of *bang* politics. The SCCC was initiated and supported by the Qing government to promote Overseas Chinese investment in China and to reinforce immigrant Chinese ties to China. It was also seen as a reaction to the establishment of the SCBA a few years prior. All *bangs* now shared a power base where they could have dialogue and work together for the welfare of the whole Chinese community in Singapore. The SCCC effectively institutionalised the *bang* structure at the community level. It was designed to safeguard the interests of the Chinese business community but in practice it functioned as the highest power base of the Chinese community right from the outset.

SCCC's organisational structure based on *bang* representation was aimed at preventing any one *bang* from dominating the organisation. Thus, the posts of the President and Vice-President were to be occupied by the Hokkien and Guangdong candidates in rotation and seats in the council and management committee were allotted to the Hokkien and Guangdong *bangs*. The Guangdong *bang* consisted of the original factions of the united front, namely the Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese. Therefore, the setup of SCCC recognised and extended the balance of power which characterised the united front in the 19th century. The Hokkien *bang* was again confronted by united front of the lesser *bangs*. But critically, the SCCC provided a forum and platform for various *bangs* to engage with each other in intra- and inter-*bang* communications. It provided a formal channel to resolve inter-*bang* conflicts through arbitration and consultation. The *bang* representatives were required to consult their respective clan associations for a consensus or directive on the *bang's* position on various issues and they would voice and vote on those issues accordingly. Clan associations were also able to vote their representatives out should any of them not toe the line.

At the turn of the 20th century, Singapore Chinese community was again divided although now between a pro-British and a pro-China allegiance. However, the legitimate roles of the SCCC and the SCBA were endorsed by the Straits Settlements government. In official functions, the President and Vice-President of both the SCCC and the SCBA were invited as representatives of the migrant Chinese community and Straits Chinese community respectively.

Consolidation and Restructuring of *Bang* Organisations

The consolidation and restructuring of *bang* organisations from 1929 to 1937 was seen as a by-product of the KMT's unification of China in 1927. The KMT had been perceived by the Overseas Chinese as a modernising sociopolitical force.

The Teochew pioneer revolutionary and local KMT leader Lim Nee Soon led the formation of an umbrella Teochew organisation, the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan (Teochew Association) in 1929 to serve as the headquarters of the Teochew community. He successfully forced the established tycoon Seah Eu Chin and his family to hand over the properties of the Ngee Ann Kongsi, which were perceived as the communal properties of the Teochew *bang*, to the Teochew Association.

A similar unifying movement took place in the Hakka *bang*. The movement was headed by the legendary Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par brothers whose Chinese medicine business was well-known throughout the region. They formed the Nanyang Khek Community Guild to serve as the Hakka *bang's* power base not only in Singapore but also in Southeast Asia.

The trend towards forming larger umbrella organisations among lesser *bangs* continued in the 1930s. The formation of the Singapore Kwangtung Hui Kuan (Guangdong General Association) in 1937 was the pinnacle of this movement. It manifested the solidarity of all dialect groups originating from Guangdong province, namely, the Cantonese, Teochews, Hakkas and Hainanese. It revived the old spirit of the united front. However, it was not meant as a federation of lesser *bangs* as there was no corporate or institutional membership, while from its inception almost all office-bearers were prominent *bang* leaders, they joined the association in their own personal capacity. Nevertheless, they formed an important inter-locking leadership networks which could become an important pressure group if they decided to take concerted action.

Sino-Japanese War and Chinese Nationalism

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident on 7 July 1937 marked Japan's full-scale aggression in China. It at once triggered spontaneous fundraising campaigns among the Chinese in Southeast Asia to help war victims in China. The SCCC promptly established the Singapore China Relief Fund Committee (SCRFC). Chaired by Tan Kah Kee, its structure and operations were organised along *bang* lines, with the 31 elected members in the executive council comprising 14 Hokkien, 9 Teochew, 4 Cantonese, 2 Hakka, 1 Hainanese and 1 Sanjiang *bang* leaders. They were assigned to serve on five departments. The all-important fundraising department comprised six *bang* committees, each led by respective *bang* leaders. The *bang* committee then mapped out fundraising plans throughout the respective *bang* networks.

The China Relief Fund campaigns, on the one hand, effectively used the *bang* networks to mobilise the Chinese in Singapore to raise funds in support of China's fight against the Japanese invasion. It considerably strengthened *bang* consciousness and *bang* solidarity as the pride of the *bang* was at stake in the fundraising efforts. On the other hand, the campaign's patriotic

overtones and the sense of national crisis it instilled effectively enhanced an awareness of Chinese national identity among the Chinese in Southeast Asia. A case in point is the South Seas China Relief Fund Union (SCRFU) which was set up in October 1938, with Singapore as the headquarters, to better coordinate fundraising activities in Southeast Asia.

SCCC: Last Bastion of *Bang* Politics after World War II

After World War II ended in August 1945, the rise of nationalist movements in Asia put an end to the Chinese nationalist movement among the Chinese in Singapore. More importantly, soon after the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China on mainland China in October 1949, the Straits Settlements Government imposed restrictions on travel to China for purposes of tourism, family visits and study. Chinese migration to Singapore was under tight control. The Chinese in Singapore was at a crossroads. In light of the changing political landscapes in Singapore and Malaya, where people demanded for more political participation, self-rule and independence, the SCCC too began to fight for local citizenship and political participation in the 1950s. It began to struggle to fit into the new post-war political landscape. The SCCC was the last bastion of *bang* politics. In fact, as early as in the 1930s and after the war in 1947, Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian (then SCCC president) had prematurely called for the abolition of SCCC's *bang* voting system.[23] It was not until 1959 that there was a slight breakthrough. In that year, the *bang* voting system to elect the President and Vice-President was formally abolished under the presidency of Ko Teck Kin (Hokkien) but the *bang* voting system to elect respective *bang* councilors remained.[24]

Heated debates on the *bang*-based election system took place in 1965 and 1968. The reform group was led by an outspoken old-time Hokkien *bang* councilor Kheng Chin Hock. Unfortunately, the pro- and anti-abolition camps were unable to reach a consensus to abolish the system.

The main arguments put forward by the two camps were as follows:[25]

Anti-abolition:

1. The system ensured that lesser *bangs* were represented and prevented domination by the major *bangs*.
2. Abolition would lead to factional conflicts and cause serious split within the Chinese community.

Pro-abolition:

1. The system was outdated, and it prevented the young, professional and able talents from being elected onto the SCCC council.

[23] *Nanyang Siang Pau,* 11 February 1941，转录自杨进发，《战前的陈嘉庚言论史料与分析》（新加坡：南洋学会，1980），页82–83.《新加坡中华总商会帮派论争来龙去脉》（新加坡：国际时报，1969），页12.

[24] Ibid., pp.13–14.

[25]《新加坡中华总商会帮派论争来龙去脉》（新加坡：国际时报，1969），页54–55，74–75，77, 88–95.

2. It divided the Chinese community into feudalistic factions.

During the great debates in 1965 and 1968, a number of councilors had declared their stance.[26]

1. Those who were for temporary retention of the bang election system:

Hokkien	9
Cantonese	3
Teochew	9
Hakka	1
Hainanese	1
Sanjiang	2
Total	25

2. Those who supported abolition of the bang election system:

Hokkien	5
Hakka	1
Total	6

It is interesting to note that those who voted to keep the decades-old system included most of the respective *bang* leaders such as Wee Cho Yaw, Soon Peng Yam (Hokkien), Lien Ying Chow (Teochew), Lam See Chiew. Liang Qing Jing (Cantonese), Lam Thiam (Hakka), and Foo Chee Fong (Hainanese) while the reformers came from Hokkien and Hakka *bangs* including two prominent Hokkien *bang* reform leaders Kheng Chin Hock and Chuang Hui Chuan. Thus, the prevailing opinion held by the majority of leading councilors was that the timing was premature to abolish the system despite its deficiencies.

In 1981, a long time SCCC President in the 1970s and 1980s Tan Keong Choon (Hokkien) aptly summed up the sentiment at the time of the great debate: "We are talking now of the organisation as a whole. Each dialect group has its own organisation and the members co-operate with one another. One dialect group is likened to a pillar, and as there are seven dialect groups in the Chamber there are seven pillars to support it. It is very hard to say whether or not, after the abolition of the dialect groups, the entire Chamber will be dominated by a few persons."[27]

Thirty years later in the 1990s, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI, renamed in 1977) once again revived the proposal to abolish the system, which by that time was largely regarded as obsolete. Singapore's political, economic and social environments had by then undergone tremendous change. Politically, Singapore was no longer a British colony but had been an independent island state for three decades since 1965. Economically too, Singapore had undergone substantial structural changes. Since Independence, the economy had moved away from labour-intensive industries and had been transformed by an export-oriented industrial policy to attract high-tech and high capital

[26] Ibid., p.84.

[27] Oral History interview by the author (Singapore Oral History Centre, 1981).

foreign investments aimed to develop Singapore as a regional and international financial and business hub. Young professionals in finance, information, industry, service and technology were in great demand and they became the backbone of Singapore's economy.

The government and business circles began to urge the SCCC to open its doors to attract these up and coming professionals, mounting pressure for the SCCCI to abolish the *bang*-based voting system, which was seen as a stumbling block to modernisation. The early 1990s was also an opportune moment for reformation as the China-born old guards had either retired or passed away and the leadership was in the hands of local-born and English-educated entrepreneurs and professionals. They found an energetic leader in 39-year-old Kwek Leng Joo, executive director of the Hong Leong group, who was elected as SCCCI's new President in early 1993. On 15 March 1993 during his installation speech, he stressed the importance of unity among the Chinese in the age of modernisation and globalisation and urged councilors and members to end the historical burden, the obsolete *bang* voting system.[28] In that speech he promised to amend the SCCCI constitution accordingly within six months. At the historic general meeting held on 21August 1993, 99.5% of the 380 attendees voted in favour of abolishing the *bang* voting system and ended an age-old institution.

Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations

In the meantime, Chinese clan associations (one of the pillars of the age-old *bang* system) in the 1980s were faced with the double crises of an ageing membership and succession issues. The government's various welfare and education policies have taken tolls on the Chinese clan

A forum on the "Role of Chinese Clan Associations in the New Era" on December 2, 1984 resulted in the formation of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations.

[28]《放眼四海：新加坡中华总商会90周年纪念特刊》, 1996, 页129.

associations. Most of its initial self-help or social welfare services and educational roles for fellow clansmen and the larger Chinese community had been superseded by the government's national social, health and educational programmes. More importantly, the government's urban redevelopment plan and population resettlement scheme had virtually destroyed ethnic enclaves and *bang*-concentrated settlements. Local-born and mostly English-educated young Chinese shunned the activities organised by clan associations. Faced with these crucial crises, Chinese community leaders of all major dialect groups held a forum on the "Role of Chinese Clan Associations in the New Era" on 2 December 1984. All participants resolved unanimously to form the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) to be the general organisation of Chinese locality and kinship clan associations. Formally formed in January 1986, SFCCA has since replaced SCCCI as the spokesman of the Chinese community. To keep the clan associations relevant in contemporary Singapore, SFCCA aptly focuses its core mission of inheriting Chinese culture and tradition as well as facilitating Chinese new immigrants to integrate into the local Chinese community and Singapore's multi-racial and multi-cultural society.

To achieve this end, SFCCA initiated the establishment of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre which was opened by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on 19 May 2017. The Centre aims to nurture and promote Singapore Chinese culture, and to foster mutual understanding among all ethnic communities within Singapore's multicultural heritage.