

ISSN 1598-2661

SUNGKYUN JOURNAL OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES

VOL.16 No.1

APR. 2016



Academy of East Asian Studies
Sungkyunkwan University

Utilitarian Cultural Affinity: Transnational Ties between China and Singapore's Voluntary Associations

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ABSTRACT

China's central and local governments have striven to maintain transnational ties with the Chinese overseas to serve China's priorities in the reform era. This paper probes into how Fujian's local government and Singapore's voluntary associations seek to capitalize on Chinese cultural events to further their agendas and calls into question the common perception of China's relations with the Chinese overseas. I argue that cultural activities are not only adopted by Chinese authorities as a means to cultivate the Chinese overseas and achieve national reunification with Taiwan, but also allow these associations to address their own survival and revival challenges. Accordingly, the roles played by Chinese Singaporeans in the process of cultural interaction with China are not purely motivated by cultural affinity, but are inextricably linked to a multifaceted list of factors against the background of waxing and waning Sino-Singapore relations, such as benefit calculation and the accumulation of social and symbolic capital.

Keywords: Chinese culture, Greater China, Singapore, voluntary associations, Fujian local government, Chinese overseas

Introduction

Since the early 1980s the People's Republic of China's (PRC) relationship with the Chinese overseas has witnessed a dramatic reconfiguration.¹ Throughout this process, voluntary associations have served as an indispensable bridge between the Chinese overseas community and Chinese authorities. These associations (commonly known as *huiguan*) are based on locality, kinship, and dialect. *Huiguan* have been a topic of interest for many scholars and have inspired them to produce an immense corpus of literature. In the last two decades, a growing number of studies have examined the evolution and transformation of contemporary voluntary associations, placing them against the backdrop of China's economic growth and the social restructuring occurring in Southeast Asia. These writings focus on the following issues: (1) leadership within contemporary voluntary associations, (2) the renewed sense of attachment and loyalty to their native homeland, (3) the globalized tendencies of these organizations, and (4) the establishment of transnational networks, the shifting identities within this population, and the diverse ways of dealing with any upcoming challenges in the modern era of transnational ties (Wickberg 1988; Lin 1993; Li 1995; Sinn 1997; Liu 1998).

The term “Greater China” has many dimensions and variations but largely refers to the commercial network of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. “Greater China” can also refer to the cultural contacts between people of Chinese descent living around the world, and the political unification of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan (Harding 1993; Wang 1993). To date, there have been a growing number of scholarly publications that examine the cultural and ethnic bonds between China and the Chinese overseas (Wang 2000; Cai 2006; Kuah-Pearce 2011). In sharp contrast to the culturally deterministic view that dominates China’s official and scholarly discourses, Zhuang Guotu (2002) argues that the Chinese overseas’ increased amount of investments in Chinese markets have mainly been driven by self-interest rather than primordial sentiment. There has been no observable difference between the amount of capital coming from Chinese overseas and the international capital flow, the latter of which is normally viewed as being more interest-oriented. Based on his transnational project on economic interaction between Panyu and Xinyi, both of which are located in China’s Guangdong Province, and the Chinese overseas in Singapore and Malaysia, Yow Cheun Hoe (2013) has shown that the Southeast Asian Chinese have generally detached themselves from their origins and are becoming increasingly rooted in the countries where they reside. Due to this detachment, the meaning of “homeland” has entirely changed for certain people. The old “sojourner homeland” (*qiaoxiang*) cannot rely on the appeal of primordial sentiment and patriotism for a revenue stream from the Chinese overseas.

Economic benefit has played a pivotal role in the proliferation of the transnational Chinese economy involving the Chinese overseas. This transnational economy is beginning to be acknowledged by researchers, albeit at a gradual pace. The attitudes of Chinese overseas toward Chinese culture are still viewed by researchers as being driven by cultural affinity and primordial sentiments towards their home country of China and, more specifically, their ancestral homelands. Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng (2011), for instance, points out that collective memory, lineage ties, and moral duty are central to maintaining ties between the Chinese overseas and their ancestral homes. Chinese living in rural areas have managed to tap into kinship ties and the nostalgic sentiments of their relatives in Singapore to create “a moral economy.” Based on a sense of moral responsibility, both first-generation migrants and Singapore-born Chinese have actively participated in the rebuilding of their ancestral villages.

This paper examines the functions that cultural activities have for both the Chinese authorities and Singapore’s voluntary associations in an attempt to offer a more nuanced view of China’s relations with the Chinese overseas. I will

¹ The term “overseas Chinese” (*huaqiao*), meaning Chinese sojourners, appeared in the late 19th century and should, strictly speaking, be applied only to those Chinese subjects who reside temporarily abroad with the intention of returning to China (Wang, 1992b, 1-10). Since the end of the World War II, it has become problematic to continue its use for those Chinese who have taken up the citizenship of the countries where they settle, particularly in Southeast Asia. This article uses the term “Chinese overseas” (*haiwai huaqiao huaren*) coined by Wang Gungwu (1992a; 1993, 927) to refer to Chinese descendants living outside of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, with or without Chinese citizenship.

attempt to showcase the intricacies of this relationship by examining cultural events presented by Chinese art troupes, the Singapore Amoy Association (the SAA), and other relevant locality-based associations. A range of published and unpublished documents from both Singapore's voluntary associations and Chinese authorities will constitute the primary source material for this study. A review of dozens of texts and posters regarding joint cultural events, for example, revealed valuable information about participants, expenditures, and intra- and intergroup negotiations. I also garnered data from numerous commemorative volumes, including oral histories and biographical sketches of voluntary association leaders in periodicals published by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations. In addition to reconstructing the dynamics and mechanism of jointly organized events, I conducted extensive, semi-structured interviews with the leaders and staff from nine associations. Most of the interviewees I spoke with turned out to be either major organizers of the cultural exchanges in question or had participated in them. Formal interviews with Chinese government officials also provided useful insights into the "overseas Chinese affairs" (*qiaowu*). It is important to note that to bridge a time gap of ten years between the materials on performing troupes and the interviews, critical readings of published and unpublished materials, corroborated by interview scripts, are imperative.

Neither Singapore or China, nor Singapore's voluntary associations, are monolithic and static actors. As far as joint cultural events are concerned, various motivations and calculations are included beyond the widely studied primordial sentiments toward one's ancestral homeland. Although admitting that one's bond to a region or ancestral village undergirds the persistence of overseas locality-based associations and their interactions with China, I suggest that such discourse is oversimplified. Therefore, I look at other aspects of China's relations with the Chinese overseas: how the Singaporean Chinese manipulate the Chinese government's cultural policies for their own benefit, the maintenance and revival of locality associations, the accumulation of social capital via performances organized jointly with Chinese authorities, and the welfare of local communities in Singapore. Rather than regarding this relationship as being completely underpinned by cultural affinity and primordial sentiment towards China, I argue that it is better to understand it as a win-win game also driven by pragmatism and calculation. A long-term collaboration between voluntary associations overseas and China is attainable when these factors are present. Though the primordial sentiments of Chinese Singaporeans towards their native places take a back seat in this article, I would like to emphasize that this does not mean that their native identities are not genuine.

Relations between Xiamen and the SAA: Historical Background

Immigrants from Southern Fujian constitute an essential part of the communities in Southeast Asia and elsewhere around the world. As the hub for both domestic and overseas trade in Fujian, Xiamen increasingly thrived with the rapid growth of trading activities during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In particular, Xiamen's economy rose dramatically after the inclusion of Taiwan in the Qing Empire in

1683 and the subsequent legalization of maritime trade during the reigns of the Kangxi and Yongzheng Emperors (Ng 1983). It was established as one of the five treaty ports in 1842 and then served as the destination of remittances by overseas Chinese, both for investment and their dependents' consumption. In other words, the evolution of Xiamen is intimately associated with the activities of the Chinese overseas communities.

In the late 1970s, after its long-term isolation from the international trading system, the Communist Party of China undertook economic reform and launched an open-door policy. It offered politically favorable conditions for the re-establishment of the bonds between Chinese overseas and their ancestral homeland. This was especially true in the cases of Fujian and Guangdong, both of which were China's "sojourner homeland" in a broad sense. Prior to 1978, Chinese overseas were viewed as a liability, but during the reform era, they were considered a great asset for China's economic development. Therefore, both the central and local governments have been anxious to tap the capital and expertise of Chinese overseas for the "four modernizations" (*sige xiandaihua*). Stating that "many natives of southern Fujian have emigrated to other countries and gone into trade," the central government in Beijing, with great support from Deng Xiaoping, opened Xiamen as the only special economic zone in Fujian in 1980 (Deng 1993, 36). The administrative organs and civilian organizations that took charge of Chinese overseas affairs, particularly the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (*qiaoban*, OCAO) and the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (*qiaolian*), devised ways to reach out and involve the Chinese overseas through numerous *huiguan*.

The Singapore Amoy Association (SAA) was set up in 1938 by overseas Chinese from Xiamen to provide support for the war against Japan and assist refugees from Xiamen (SAA 1988, 50), which, along with the Tung Ann District Guild and the Ho San Kong Hoey, are the three major Xiamen-related regional associations in Singapore. Historically, the Chinese in Singapore organized their social lives according to their linguistic patterns: "speakers of one dialect tended, especially in the early days, to cluster residentially, form voluntary associations, worship in the same temples, and (when Chinese women began to immigrate in considerable numbers) marry one another" (Freedman and Topley 1961, 4). The SAA played a critical role in mediating disputes among its members as well as in raising funds for natural disasters in Fujian by organizing benefit performances or art exhibitions in the early period (Carstens 1975, 19; SAA 1988, 50-51). Apart from the temporary suspension of operation during the Japanese occupation, the SAA went through several changes. Twelve presidents, most of whom were successful businessmen and entrepreneurs, managed its affairs from 1938 to 2013.² Like other locality/dialect associations across the world, it renewed ties with the ancestral homeland government following the opening up of the PRC in the 1980s. From

² The documents of the SAA reveal its members' various occupations in the last century: among 176 members, 111 were merchants. The rest included clerks, managing directors, teachers, actors, and housewives.

June 18 to 29, 1985, a delegation of the SAA visited Fuzhou, Quzhou, and Xiamen. The governor of Fujian Province and Deputy Mayor of Xiamen had an audience with the representatives during the grand banquet prepared for the occasion (SAA 1988, 50). This meeting was an opportunity to establish a rapport and paved the way for subsequent exchange visits. The ties between the SAA and Xiamen have been maintained ever since. For instance, in April 2003, another delegation that was led by the SAA in collaboration with the Ho San Kong Hoey received a warm welcome from officials of the local government and visited state agencies pertaining to “overseas Chinese affairs.”

Currently, the SAA's main source of funding comes largely from property rental revenue, donations from members and non-members, and membership fees.³ It initially rented an ad hoc office and then eventually decided to buy its own premises after several resettlements. In 1983, a three-story building at Teo Hong Road was purchased to serve as the new location for the SAA's main office (SAA 1988, 36). Partly due to financial considerations, the SAA started to sublet the first level of the main building in 2000 (SAA 2008, 37). In 2004, the council started subletting the third floor as well, which generated a monthly income of 5,000 Singapore dollars (Ba 2008, 47). It was not uncommon for voluntary associations in Singapore to rely on real estate rent to support daily operations. Parts of the buildings were used for offices and recreational purposes, while the rest were made available for lease or rent (Li 1995, 290-330).⁴ In a recent interview, officers of another major Xiamen-related association—the Tung Ann District Guild—revealed that the membership fees collected only accounted for a small portion of the revenue compared with the substantial rental income generated from their properties.⁵

Aside from struggling with financial issues, Chinese voluntary associations also underwent crucial transformations after the 1960s. Many Chinese gave up their Chinese nationality in return for citizenship in Singapore following the establishment of the Republic of Singapore in 1965. The shift of political allegiance from China to Singapore is seen as a natural process of nation-state building premised upon social consensus at large; as claimed by one major locality association, “our people should remain loyal to Singapore rather than their ancestral homeland” (Cai 1986, 72). Under these unprecedented circumstances, the old functions of the associations, such as establishing private schools or cemeteries, were assumed by the Singaporean government. The traditional demarcation of the plurality of dialects also broke down (Yow 2005, 573-75). In 1979, the Singaporean government launched the “Speak Mandarin Campaign” to discourage the use of dialects and encourage the usage of Mandarin in Chinese communities (Ngiam 1979). The housing and urban renewal program carried out by the

³ Interview with a SAA leader, October 19, 2013.

⁴ For example, all Xiamen-affiliated locality-based associations in Singapore rely heavily on rental income. For details on the revenue of the voluntary associations, see Li Minghuan 1995, 290-330.

⁵ Interviews with a staff member and a leader of the Tung Ann District Guild, October 29, 2013.

government beginning in 1960 led to the restructuring of residential settlement and dramatically altered the traditional Chinese population distribution according to dialect groups. It is currently more convenient for residents in a community to attend the activities of the community centers rather than traditional events in clan associations, particularly after the mid-70s, when more modern and well-organized community centers with public facilities emerged. More importantly, traditional voluntary associations seem to have a waning appeal for the local-born generations as time passes. In the interviews conducted by Chen Wanfa, most English-educated Singapore Chinese admit that there is no need for them to join voluntary associations. “Clan association is outdated. It is a dying institution,” commented an English-educated Chinese (Chen 1989, 51).

The SAA sought to solve the loss of appeal for younger generations by initiating institutional reforms and reducing restrictions on membership. It amended the constitution in 1986 and allowed Singapore citizens with origins in Xiamen as well as those citizens who had once lived in Xiamen to join as members. Meanwhile the constitution introduced an “associate membership” for Singapore citizens who have no specific relationship with Xiamen. In 1994, the criteria for membership expanded again and permitted permanent residents of Singapore to join (SAA 2000, 69). One leader in the SAA stated that “even those who come from other regions such as Chaoshan or Hainan are eligible to join this association.”⁶ It has also substantially created new sub-groups to attract more members, including a youth league, a senior citizens’ section, a southern music (*nanyin*) group, a women’s group, and a Peking opera group.

Joint Cultural Events in 2003, 2004, and 2005: Institutions and Mechanisms

Three activities jointly organized by Singapore’s voluntary associations and China in 2003, 2004, and 2005 are examined in this section. These are the performances of the Art Troupe Affiliated with Quanzhou Senior Citizen University (*Quanzhou laoniandaxue yishutuan*), the Art Troupe Affiliated with Xiamen Senior Citizen University (*Xiamen laoniandaxue yishutuan*), and the Hangzhou Song and Dance Troupe (*Hangzhou gewutuan*) respectively. Such cultural activities were carefully selected with reference to the roles of the SAA. In the first performance, the SAA served as a co-organizer. For the second, it assumed a leading role. In 2005, the SAA took full responsibility for organizing and launching the series of events and performances. The range of the events included performing troupes from their immediate ancestral homeland (Xiamen 2004), a geographically adjacent region in Fujian (Quanzhou 2003), and another province in China (Hangzhou 2005).

These three activities were mainly undertaken by major Southern Fujian locality organizations. They were jointly organized through a working committee and regular meetings attended by representatives from relevant associations. The first joint meeting, which was attended by eight associations, was launched on September 18, 2003 in the Chin Kang Huay Kuan (CKHK). An ad hoc committee

⁶ Interview with a SAA leader, October 19, 2013.

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Table 1. Three Joint Cultural Events

The Name of the Troupe	Date / Locality	Leading Association / Organizer	Co-organizer / Sponsor	Budget / Actual Expense
The Art Troupe Affiliated with Quanzhou Senior Citizen University	November 17, 2003/ Kallang Theatre	CKHK/CKHK; the Lam Ann Association; the Hui Ann Association; the Tung Ann District Guild; the Ann Kway Association; the Kim Mui Hoey Kuan; the Eng Choon Hway Kuan; The SAA	Joo Chiat Community Club/--	S\$20,000/--
The Art Troupe Affiliated with Xiamen Senior Citizen University	November 11, 2004/ Kreta Ayer People's Theatre	SAA/SAA; the Lam Ann Association; the Kim Mui Hoey Kuan; the Chang Chow General Association; the Ho San Kong Hoey; CKHK; the Ann Kway Association; the Hui Ann Association; the Tung Ann District Guild; the Eng Choon Hway Kuan	--/NTUC; the Lee Foundation; the Ee Hoe Hean Club; Tan Tock San	S\$14,940/14,928
The Hangzhou Song & Dance Troupe	January 28, 2005/ Victoria Theatre	SAA/SAA	--/--	S\$9,700/--

consisting of representatives from all participant locality associations was established with the president of CKHK as the chairman. Each association assumed a specific responsibility, either independently or in cooperation with other associations. The Tung Ann District Guild and the SAA, for instance, were responsible for the reception and traffic issues, as well as the welcoming banquet. In the 2004 event, the first and the fourth meetings were held at the SAA, while the second and the third were arranged at the Tung Ann District Guild and the Ann Kway Association. At the beginning, the representative presiding over the meeting introduced the members from various associations to establish bonds among them. Other institutions that acted as sponsors, co-organizers, or honored guests were also invited to engage in such activities. The performance in 2003 drew a wide range of participants from the Chinese Embassy in Singapore, the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Traditional Southern Fujian Music Society, and the Siong Leng Musical Association.

Communication pertaining to the three activities was smooth and open. A variety of communication means such as faxes, letters, phone calls, and official documents, were utilized by the associations and their partners in the ancestral homeland. During the preparation for the 2003 performance, the CKHK kept in frequent contact with the Quanzhou Senior Citizen University to coordinate itinerary details, necessary facilities, and rehearsal requirements. The leading association in a separate event usually sent a formal fax to relevant associations at the outset. A notification of the meeting with information on the meeting agenda and the draft minutes of the last meeting would be sent to relevant individuals

before the next joint meeting commenced. The invitation letter, the request for sponsorship, and the shared duties were also delivered or faxed through formal documents. In an interview conducted in 2013, a staff member stressed that officials in China usually use fax machines or phones to contact their locality-based associations in Singapore.⁷ In brief, these cultural events are successful in terms of facilitating the extensive involvement of voluntary associations and hosting large audiences. More than one thousand spectators, which included the representatives of the leading clan associations in Singapore: Singapore Kwangtung Hui Kuan, Singapore Hainan Hwee Kuan, and Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, attended the 2004 performances.

To a certain degree, the collaboration of different associations is more effective than an individual association acting alone. In this way it is, likewise, easier for associations to organize activities that involve large amounts of money and entail inviting performing troupes. The relatively small associations seem more likely to depend on their cooperation with other associations as they usually have inadequate funds. For example, the actual cost of the performance in 2004 was S\$14,928, which was almost three times the net monthly income of the major organizer, the SAA. However, at the end of this event, each association needed to spend only S\$698.80, after deducting for sponsorships, because ten locality associations co-organized this activity. This not only eases the burden for each association, but also contributes to the feasibility of other cultural events that require considerable space, musical facilities, and manpower.

Joint Events in 2003-2005 for Singapore Voluntary Associations and China

Early on Freedman (1960, 43) argued that dialect grouping was “the major frame of organization” for voluntary associations in Singapore, “but an immigrant might belong to a territorial association which mediated his ties with the dialect association which stood above it.” Similarly, in the taxonomy of associations, Mak (1995, 25) has compared and explored the meanings of the dialect principle and locality principle that shaped group alignment and re-alignment in early Malaya to argue that “pure locality affinity is a theoretical construct that is empirically and functionally nonsensical.” The phenomena of group alignments in the above-mentioned activities attest to the fact that locality affinity and dialect origin still play a notable role in contemporary Singapore voluntary associations in spite of the decreasing importance of dialect. Although the Hokkien locality associations currently organize a wide range of events with new migrants associations, they have more frequent contact with those sharing the same lingua franca. In the SAA’s case, it is more likely to obtain support in terms of funding or manpower from Southern Fujian voluntary associations. The reason lies in the fact that they have a long history of cooperation with each other and that they share the same vision in preserving southern Fujian cultural traditions. Whenever the officials of Xiamen or Quanzhou visited Singapore, particularly high-ranking officials, these associations

⁷ Interview with a SAA staff member, March 23, 2013; Interviews with six officials in Xiamen, 2014 and 2015.

were inclined to welcome them together and provide a greeting banquet with the relevant locality associations.⁸ The jointly-conducted cultural and recreational activities, and the reciprocal receptions for mainland officials, are vital occasions for forging fellowship among these associations. The restored links between Singapore's Chinese voluntary associations and the ancestral homeland, therefore, also strengthen the cohesive structure of local associations.

The alignment of the Hokkien-speaking associations on the basis of locality and dialect ensured the availability of large sums of money for holding cultural events in 2003 and 2004. All involved associations eventually needed to pay their share of expenditure. An immediate conclusion might be that the sentiment tied to the homeland was the only reason for these events. However, a closer observation indicates that the leaders of voluntary associations who are particularly dedicated organizers in cultural activities view these activities as a means of acquiring, consciously or unconsciously, "social capital" and "symbolic capital." In the classification of capital by Pierre Bourdieu, "social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1986, 248). Symbolic capital, according to him, "is a credit, it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition" (1990, 138). Both social and symbolic capital can be converted into economic capital, and vice versa. Most members of voluntary associations, in particular the leaders, are businessmen or entrepreneurs of great influence. According to an informant in the SAA, "most leaders in voluntary associations are businessmen; therefore we can help each other in business, more or less."⁹ As such, a joint cultural event can provide frequent occasions for leaders and members of different associations to get to know one another and forge new business networks. Similarly, as Hong Liu argued, the support for the globalization of overseas Chinese voluntary associations is partly based on the need for "seizing expanding business opportunities world-wide" (Liu 1998, 590). The endorsement for cultural activities associated with Chinese local governments also has practical value for many participants as they created an arena for participants to meet and foster relations with other prominent individuals—Singapore politicians, PRC diplomats, clan/kinship leaders, and officials from China. This results in an increase of their social capital and prestige through personal interactions and the broadcasting of these events through both traditional and electronic media. Before the art troupe set off in 2003, high-ranking officials in Quanzhou attached great importance to the nominal non-governmental exchange under the assumption that it would develop a close rapport with Singaporean Chinese. Shi Yongkang, the secretary of the Quanzhou Municipal Party Committee, inspected the rehearsal of the art troupe before its departure. The delegation of the art troupe was led by the main leaders of the Quanzhou Senior Citizen University, all of whom were former officials in

⁸ Interview with an official in Xiamen, April 28, 2014.

⁹ Interview with a SAA leader, October 19, 2013.

the government, including the Deputy Mayor of Quanzhou, the Deputy Director of the Quanzhou Municipal Bureau for Retired Officials, and the Deputy Director of the Propaganda Department of the Municipal Party Committee. Similarly, the art troupe's 2004 performance was led by the former Director of Xiamen Overseas Chinese Affairs Office. For the Singaporeans, cultivating the necessary connections and relationships with Chinese government officials at different levels can have a direct bearing on their businesses. Among the nine locality-based associations in question, there are at least four associations whose members and leaders have made investments in Fujian or have managed China-related enterprises that demand intimate relations with local Chinese governments.¹⁰ Whereas some investments are made as a manifestation of sentiment towards native places, most of the post-1978 investments are “primarily based on business calculation and aimed at gaining profits” (Yow 2005, 572).

Even in the absence of direct business calculations in these cultural events, the extended networks of relationships with the Chinese government are very meaningful to voluntary associations. I asked many of my informants about the relationship between voluntary associations overseas and the Chinese state. Both the leaders and members agreed that, in reciprocal relationships, helping to arrange seemingly costly cultural events is well worth the effort because other, regular activities such as anniversary ceremonies, are expected to receive support from Chinese authorities.¹¹

The survival and development of the traditional associations in recent decades were threatened particularly by their gradual loss of appeal to the younger generations and difficulties in finding successors to manage them. There is a general consensus among the nine local associations in Singapore interviewed that the lack of appeal of voluntary associations among the younger generations, particularly among those who were born and grew up in Singapore and were educated in an English-dominated system, poses the greatest challenge to the continuation of the voluntary associations. A senior staff member who had worked in the Tung Ann District Guild for more than twenty years even claimed that the main function of traditional associations had faded away.¹² To recruit new members, its scholarship provision permitted those aged sixteen or above who are members to apply for scholarships, which brought about a dramatic increase of membership in a couple of years. However, “most of the young members never actively engage

¹⁰ Interview with a SAA leader, October 19, 2013; Interview with a leader of the Ann Kway Association, July 26, 2015; Interviews with two leaders of the Eng Choon Hway Kuan, August 13, 2015; Interview with a staff member of the Hui Ann Association, July 10, 2015.

¹¹ Interview with a SAA leader, October 19, 2013; Interviews with a staff member and a leader of the Tung Ann District Guild, October 29, 2013; Interview with a committee member of the Kim Mui Hoey Kuan, July 29, 2015; Interview with a leader of the Ann Kway Association, July 26, 2015; Interviews with two leaders of the Eng Choon Hway Kuan, August 13, 2015; Interview with a staff member of the Hui Ann Association, July 10, 2015; Interview with a CKHK staff member, July 28, 2015; Interview with a leader of the Lam Ann Association, July 12, 2015; Interviews with three leaders of the Ho San Kong Hoey, July 12, 2015.

¹² Interview with a staff member of the Tung Ann District Guild, October 29, 2013.

in the activities except the scholarship award ceremony," according to a leader of the Tung Ann District Guild.¹³ According to these voluntary associations, promoting Chinese language and culture is essential to attract more youths and encourage their participation in activities relating to Chinese associations. In the 2004 performance, "Pass the Light" (*Chuangdeng*), a popular song in both Malaysia and Singapore, was used to emphasize the significance of promoting Chinese culture. By introducing Chinese culture to young Singaporeans, these cultural events are expected to influence their attitudes towards voluntary associations and to invite more of them to join and volunteer to become the backbone of the future leadership.

Furthermore, voluntary associations used Chinese cultural events, which were held in collaboration with troupes from China, as important platforms for their fund-raising. Since 2004, the leaders of the SAA have set new policies on promoting Chinese culture. By organizing a variety of cultural and recreational activities, the association attempted to raise funds for sustainable operation and revival (Ba 2008, 47). The objective of the third performance by the Hangzhou Song & Dance Troupe in 2005, for instance, was to raise essential funds for renovating the association's building. Several letters requesting support, in the form of either performance tickets or advertisement fees, were sent to major Southern Fujian associations. Through this performance, the SAA succeeded in securing S\$18,139 for the renovations and other subsequent activities (SAA 2008, 102). Over the next few years, the SAA continued its cultural program during the spring festival to raise money. In 2008, the Henan Provincial Art Troupe was invited to perform at the Victory Theatre (Ming 2008). The SAA not only contributed to the promotion of Chinese culture and language, but also raised up to S\$23,165 through organizing this event (SAA 2008, 107). According to one of the leaders of the SAA, "the communication among members and different associations was enhanced by continually holding cultural activities. It also brought profit for further development."¹⁴ It should be noted that the art troupes or artists from China were not strictly confined to specific localities or provinces. They could be troupes from the ancestral hometowns of Chinese Singaporeans or from other provinces, as in the case of the 2005 performance.

Overall, inviting China's troupes to perform in Singapore to raise funds devoted to either the maintenance of voluntary associations or the general wellbeing of Singapore shows how Singapore's voluntary associations, consciously or unconsciously, used China's strategy of sustaining relations to the Chinese overseas by promoting Chinese culture for their own advantage. My findings suggest that the case of the SAA is not uncommon. In 2008, the CKHK also invited the Quanzhou Opera Troupe (*Quanzhou gejutuan*), which is from the native locale of the CKHK, to offer a performance for Singaporeans with the aim of raising funds for the renovation of the Singapore Tanjong Pagar Community Club (CKHK 2008,

¹³ Interview with a leader of the Tung Ann District Guild, October 29, 2013.

¹⁴ Interview with a SAA leader, October 19, 2013.

186), which is one of the community clubs (formerly known as community centers) managed by the People's Association "for people of all races to come together, build friendships and promote social bonding" (Community Clubs 2016).¹⁵ Thus, we can observe clear discrepancies between the goals of the Chinese government, which is dedicated to using cultural exchange visits as an important tactic for reaching out to the Chinese overseas by evoking their nostalgia for their ancestral homeland, and the multifaceted functions of these three cultural and recreational events for Singapore's voluntary associations.

Chinese authorities' support of and involvement in the revitalization of items of local culture, particularly southern Fujian opera, dance, and the worship of local deities, can be at least partially attributed to three factors: the need for establishing liaisons with the Chinese overseas, the PRC's aspiration for national reunification with Taiwan, and the pursuit of soft power. The first factor concerns the common culture shared by Chinese communities across the globe, particularly in Southeast Asia, where nearly four-fifths of all Chinese overseas reside, including more than eight million ethnic Chinese from Fujian Province in 1989 and twelve million in 2005 (Fujiansheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1992, 26; Government Information 2005). Common cultural elements, such as local deity worship, food, opera, and dialect, make it possible for local governments to nourish the bonds between the Chinese overseas and their ancestral homeland. Whereas religious activities are condemned as "superstitious" in many provinces, some local religions are vigorously promoted and patronized by local governments in Fujian and other "sojourner homelands" (Dean 1993, 9; Thunø 2001, 924-25). It is against this backdrop that the partial restoration of the Guan lineage institution has been tolerated by the local cadres of Kaiping County and that local temples, representative of the cultural roots of the Chinese overseas, were restored with the donations of the ethnic Chinese and endorsements from the local government in rural Chaozhou, Guangdong Province (Woon 1989, 343; Eng and Lin 2002, 1270). The different "destinies" of local deities in different regions demonstrated the pragmatism of the PRC government's policy toward the Chinese overseas. The second factor is related to the specific value of Chinese culture in cross-strait relations. Southern Fujian has much in common with Taiwan in terms of local culture and language. Given the sensitivity of cross-Taiwan straits relation issues and the murky future for potential reunification, cultural exchanges are perceived as acceptable mechanisms for interaction by both sides. Last but not least, the revitalization of local culture is linked to China's increasing interest in soft power since the 1990s, which has gained a great deal of attention among researchers within and outside China (Nye 2004; Cho and Jeong 2008;

¹⁵ The People's Association is "a statutory board under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) that was established on 1 July 1960." Politically, it "was created to help the People's Action Party government develop and maintain links with the people at the grassroots level through centralized control over the community centers." Its mission is to foster "national cohesion," train "future grassroots leaders," and maintain "links between government and people." See People's Association (PA). 2013. *Singapore Infopedia*. October 16. http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-10-18_183012.html?s=PA. Accessed March 22, 2016.

Wang 2008; Paradise 2009). Despite inconclusive debates on the definition and implications of China's soft power, it is generally agreed that Chinese civilization is an integral component of China's national power. In the Hu Jintao era, starting with the resolution on "Prosperity and Development of Chinese Philosophy and Social Science," top Chinese leaders seemed to take the initiative in strengthening China's soft power from a strategic perspective (Ren 2004). In 2005, Hu Jintao pointed out that the overseas Chinese affairs could contribute a great deal in "carrying out people-to-people diplomacy and diffusing excellent Chinese culture," during the national conference on overseas Chinese affairs (*Wen Wei Po*, March 1, 2005). In the state-run *People's Daily* (Renmin Ribao), a Chinese scholar contended that a "going abroad strategy" must be adopted to enhance the power of Chinese culture (Jia 2005). The cultural performances in Singapore and other similar activities mentioned above are indicative of the tendency to use Chinese regional culture to win the hearts of the Chinese overseas, as well as to strengthen China's soft power.

A total of sixteen items on the playbill for the 2004 performance imply a strong sense of "love the nation, love your native place" (*aiguo aixiang*) that China attempts to convey to the Chinese overseas. The songs "Egret, Fly" (*Feixiangba bailu*) and "Bougainvillea" (*Sanjiaomei*), for example, respectively extol the bird and flower that are symbols of Xiamen. It appears that through the careful selection of the contents of performance, the Chinese government aims to subliminally influence the Chinese overseas. After the 2004 performance in Singapore, the Xiamen art troupe proceeded to Malaysia to visit Malaysian Chinese voluntary associations and present similar performances. The tour to Singapore and Malaysia constituted a typical itinerary with the definite objectives of fostering friendship with the Chinese overseas and reinforcing their sense of loyalty to the native land.

The Politics of Belonging in China and Singapore

The relationship between ethnic Chinese and China, the ancestral homeland of three-quarters of Singapore's population, has been an important issue in Singapore-China relations since the city state's independence in 1965. China's active support for communism in Southeast Asia and its influence over the political orientations of Chinese-educated Chinese drove the Singapore government to adopt a policy of "de-Chineseness" from 1965 to 1979 to discard the image of "a third China" in a predominantly Malay-Muslim geopolitical setting (Tan 2003, 753-54). The post-independence Singapore government has, through the education system and media propaganda, consciously sought to create a "Singaporean Singapore identity" while strictly limiting the ideological influence of China on ethnic Chinese. The government of Singapore not only "required all Singapore Chinese firms that dealt with China to be registered with a government agency that controlled trade with communist countries," but, prior to Lee Kuan Yew's first visit to China in 1976, also prohibited Singaporeans under the age of thirty from visiting China (Lee 2000, 638 and 655).

Over time, Singapore has largely won the tug of war over the ethnic

Chinese as an evolving Singaporean identity took root in the city-state. This was accompanied by the dwindling of China-born generations and the successful cultivation of a national identity, as well as a conscious citizenship policy (Lee 2001; Yow 2005, 566). A breakthrough in Singapore's relations with China emerged in the 1970s, which contrasted starkly with China's previous perceptions of Singapore as a part of Malaya and of Lee as a "running dog" of American and British imperialism. The recognition of Singapore's independence was deemed necessary, especially as the Soviet Union increased its presence in Southeast Asia (Latif 2007, 52). In addition, Sino-Singapore relations have also been facilitated by the emergence of informal ties, such as religious exchanges (Chia, 2008). The age limit on visitors to China was soon removed after Lee's first visit in 1976. Although Singapore was the last nation in Southeast Asia that formalized diplomatic ties with China, there were frequent exchanges before the official relationship was forged. Singapore, which increasingly strayed from the image of "the third China" over time, has been more confident in encouraging government-linked companies and local firms to invest in China. Lee Kuan Yew repeatedly stressed that it would be foolish not to seize the opportunity to benefit from China's economic rise that cultural affinity and ethnic networks afforded (Latif 2007, 170). In view of a combination of several factors, ethnic Chinese identity, which was once considered "an obstacle to Singapore's survival and nationalism," is now celebrated as an asset for Singapore's development. "Chineseness" is stimulated by "the hues of Confucian-inspired political governance, economic imperatives linked with China's burgeoning market, the influence and potential threat China poses, and the ever-present need to ensure electoral support" (Tan 2003, 773).

It was in the context of a new role for Chinese culture and language that the survival of Singapore voluntary associations was anchored in the multilateral relations between China and Chinese overseas communities. In recent years, the SAA has played an active role in Sino-Singapore relations by organizing a wide range of cultural events, and, like other associations in Singapore, is actively engaged in the process of the globalization of Chinese overseas voluntary associations. The SAA effectively serves as a bridge for Chinese local authorities to reach out to the Chinese overseas communities, despite its limited manpower and financial resources. These joint events, nevertheless, reveal neither a mindset of the Chinese in Singapore as "sojourners" nor a possible breach of the national security of Singapore. As mentioned previously, most members of Singapore's voluntary associations are locally born and identify Singapore as their home rather than their ancestral home region in the PRC. The pragmatism and disposition of the Chinese overseas towards cultural events in 2003, 2004, and 2005 illustrates the localization of voluntary associations and their political reorientation vis-à-vis China with the change of generations. Interaction with the ancestral homeland is not felt to contradict one's loyalty and patriotism with regard to the nation of residence. As Laurence J. C. Ma has pointed out, "it is not unusual for a diasporan to activate one identity while suppressing others to deal with a particular issue or to achieve a specific goal" (Ma 2003, 32).

Aware of the sensitivity of China's relations with ethnic Chinese, Chinese

authorities were fully conscious of the potential suspicions that may arise because of China's intentions of liaising with ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian countries. In response, a set of alleged "non-governmental organizations" have been established in China to promote contact with the Chinese overseas under the auspices of Chinese authorities. In 1990, the China Overseas Exchange Association (*Haiwai jiaoliu xiehui*) was set up by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO, a major state agency in charge of "overseas Chinese affairs") to maintain extensive contacts with "Hong Kong and Macau compatriots" (*gang'ao tongbao*), "Taiwan compatriots" (*Taiwan tongbao*), and Chinese overseas, and to boost cooperation and exchange in trade, science, and technology. The Xiamen Overseas Exchange Association, affiliated to the Xiamen OCAO, was established to highlight the non-governmental aspects of exchanges between China and the Chinese overseas and dispel the misgivings of Southeast Asian governments.¹⁶ As a matter of fact, this organization shared facilities with the Xiamen OCAO and was staffed by Xiamen OCAO officials. "The policies of the Chinese government consistently revolved around the emotions of foreign nations," recalled a leader of the SAA, "despite the fact that one performance was virtually supported by the Xiamen OCAO, Chinese officials finally determined to remove its name from the posters, substituting the name of the Xiamen Overseas Exchange Association instead."¹⁷

Joint cultural events in association with China are only a fraction of the many events that occur in a year. The fact that Chinese culture is mostly utilized by the SAA to respond to the call of Singaporean authorities in connection with local affairs is another example of the local-oriented nature of voluntary associations. As Singapore's birthrate fell below the replacement level in tandem with the shift from a labor-intensive to a technology-intensive economy, the Singaporean government was compelled to encourage population and economic growth by relaxing immigration controls and attracting more foreign talent. Singapore authorities maintained that the policy would be implemented under the premise of a smooth integration of migrants into Singapore society without upsetting the existing delicate racial fabric. This is because they believed that immigrants who share a common cultural identity with local residents can integrate into Singapore society more easily. However, public concern over the influx of immigrants expressed in Singapore media, regarding job competition, school placement, and the impact of migrant communities on the social fabric of society, is in stark contrast with these official expectations.

Given that it is unrealistic to exclude non-native residents, particularly highly skilled foreign talent, Singapore authorities set up the National Integration Council in April 2009 for promoting and fostering social cohesion and integration among Singaporeans and new immigrants (Li 2009). The Singapore government values the role of Chinese culture in fostering national cohesiveness and has provided S\$10 million to the Community Integration Fund to finance grassroots

¹⁶ Interview with an official in Xiamen, April 18, 2014.

¹⁷ Interview with a SAA leader, October 19, 2013.

projects aimed at promoting the social integration of new immigrants (Chia 2009). This scheme provided a great opportunity for the SAA to hold an annual Mid-Autumn Festival Party in collaboration with the new Chinese immigrant associations, such as the Hua Yuan Association (*Huayuan hui*) and the Tian Fu Association (Singapore) (*Xinjiapo tianfuhui*), and to allow “new Chinese migrants” (*xin yimin*) to interact with local-born Singaporeans through the traditional Xiamen dice game.¹⁸ While the SAA demonstrated its support for government policies by aiding Chinese immigrants’ integration into native communities, this event also served as a conduit to help SAA form friendships and connections with the Singapore government and new immigrant associations. Through these interactions both leaders and members accumulated social capital. “Through this dinner, we built friendships and attracted new immigrant members and volunteers,” said a leader of the SAA (Cai 2011). Small associations like the SAA raise their reputations from such an event, which can be seen as a platform for them to “meet on equal terms with large associations.”¹⁹ The SAA received the 2011 Clan of the Year Award from the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, an umbrella organization in the Singapore Chinese community. It also received the Special Award for Excellence in the following year. These awards, which were given to the SAA for its contribution in preserving Chinese culture and promoting social integration, subsequently enhanced its influence and reputation.

Concluding Remarks

The Chinese cultural events jointly organized by China and Singapore voluntary associations opened new ways to understand China’s relationships with the Chinese overseas. As in other parts of the world (Li 1995; Liu 1998), contemporary Chinese associations in Singapore are influenced by two intertwined factors: the changing political landscape in Singapore and external factors. Organizational reconfiguration and functional transformations should be perceived as adaptive strategies exerted in response to ever-changing socio-economic and political contexts. Although voluntary associations faced severe challenges, special importance has been attached to various cultural and recreational activities to ensure their survival and development. By and large, the merits of Chinese cultural activities lie in the fact that they serve multiple purposes for voluntary associations (e.g., fund raising, fostering the unity of members, and fostering relationships among related associations), and Singapore society (e.g., support for both the national integration and the promotion of Chinese cultural values), as well as ancestral homeland governments. Both the leaders and the ordinary members

¹⁸ “New Chinese migrants” generally refer to those PRC nationals emigrating abroad since the late 1970s. Both the Hua Yuan Association and the Tian Fu Association (Singapore) (formerly the Singapore Tianfu Hometown Association) were established by mainland-China born new migrants in Singapore. See, Hong Liu, “New Migrants and the Revival of Overseas Chinese Nationalism.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 43, 2005, 291-316; “Transnational Chinese Sphere in Singapore: Dynamics, Transformations and Characteristics.” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41, no. 2, 2012, 37-60.

¹⁹ Interview with a SAA leader, October 19, 2013.

have been able to broaden their business networks, seize business opportunities, and attain social capital and a sense of accomplishment by actively engaging in cultural events. The interrelation between the local governments of Fujian and Singapore's voluntary associations is part of a broader dynamic in the relationship between the Chinese state and the Chinese overseas. The historical conditions after 1965 were particularly challenging. Nonetheless, the image of the Chinese overseas as "economic energizers" for China's reform (Cheung 2005), and the rapid expansion of China's economy and voluntary associations' abilities to adapt and self-adjust while acquiring resources in the current and ancestral homeland, have demonstrated the significance of ethnic, economic and cultural factors in an unprecedented way. Although the economic and cultural links remain vibrant, the content and context of the ethnic Chinese's involvement with China is by no means merely targeted at the collective memory and moral responsibility towards the ancestral homeland. Scholars (Zhuang 2002; Yow 2013) show that business calculations and economic rationales were the significant factors that led to the involvement of the Chinese overseas in economic activities in China in the late twentieth century. Chinese authorities have realized that investment in China by the Chinese overseas was mainly motivated by the need for survival and development rather than philanthropy or support for socialist construction. As presented by the Deputy Director of Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, the overseas Chinese who originated from Guangdong may not care about the economic development of Guangdong. Instead, they may invest and develop careers in other regions with more attractive opportunities (Zhao 2005, 9). This attitude toward the home region, as this article shows, can also be observed in cultural activities in Singapore. To put it simply, the roles played by Chinese Singaporeans in the process of cultural interaction with China are not motivated purely by cultural affinity, but inextricably linked to multifaceted factors such as benefit calculation and the accumulation of social and symbolic capital against the wax and wane of Sino-Singapore relations. Despite the fact that the majority of new PRC immigrants come from places other than Fujian and Guangdong, recent years have seen some traditional associations recruiting Fujian-born new migrants, a few of whom were even elected to committee leadership.²⁰ More research is needed to more closely examine the impact of these new features on the voluntary associations in question.

²⁰ Interviews with a staff member and a leader of the Tung Ann District Guild, October 29, 2013; Interview with a staff member of the Hui Ann Association, July 10, 2015.

GLOSSARY

<i>aiguo aixiang</i>	爱国爱乡	Singapore Ann Kway Association
Chang Chow General Association		(Xinjiapo Anxi huiguan)
(Zhangzhou zonghui)	漳州总会	新加坡安溪会馆
<i>chuandeng</i>	传灯	Singapore Chin Kang Huay Kuan
Ee Hoe Hean Club		(Xinjiapo Jinjiang huiguan)
(yihexuan julebu)	怡和轩俱乐部	新加坡晋江会馆
Eng Choon Hway Kuan, Singapore		Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan
(Xinjiapo Yongchun huiguan)		Associations (Xinjiapo zongxiang
	新加坡永春会馆	huiguan lianhezonghui)
<i>Feixiangba bailu</i>	飞翔吧 白鹭	新加坡宗乡会馆联合总会
<i>gang'ao tongbao</i>	港澳同胞	Singapore Hainan Hwee Kuan
<i>haiwai huaqiao huaren</i>	海外华侨华人	(Xinjiapo Hainan huiguan)
Haiwai jiaoliu xiehui	海外交流协会	新加坡海南会馆
Hangzhou gewutuan	杭州歌舞团	Singapore Hui Ann Association
Ho San Kong Hoey		(Xinjiapo Huian gonghui)
(Heshan gonghui)	禾山公会	新加坡惠安公会
Hua Yuan Association		Singapore Kwangtung Hui Kuan
(huayuanhui)	华源会	(Xinjiapo Guangdong huiguan)
<i>huaqiao</i>	华侨	新加坡广东会馆
<i>huiguan</i>	会馆	Singapore Lam Ann Association
Kim Mui Hoey Kuan		(Xinjiapo Nan'an huiguan)
(Jinmen huiguan)	金门会馆	新加坡南安会馆
<i>nanyin</i>	南音	Singapore Tung Ann District Guild
<i>qiaoban</i>	侨办	(Xinjiapo Tongan huiguan)
<i>qiaolian</i>	侨联	新加坡同安会馆
<i>qiaowu</i>	侨务	Siong Leng Musical Association
<i>qiaoxiang</i>	侨乡	(Xiangling yinyueshe)
Quanzhou gejutuan	泉州歌剧团	湘灵音乐社
Quanzhou laoniandaxue yishutuan		<i>Taiwan tongbao</i>
	泉州老年大学艺术团	台湾同胞
<i>sanjiaomei</i>	三角梅	Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan
<i>sige xiandaihua</i>	四个现代化	(Chaozhou bayi huiguan)
Singapore Amoy Association		Tian Fu Association
(Xinjiapo Xiamen gonghui)		(Xinjiapo tianfuhui)
	新加坡厦门公会	新加坡天府会
		Traditional Southern Fujian Music Society
		(Chuantong nanyinshe)
		传统南音社

Xiamen laoniandaxue yishutuan

厦门老年大学艺术团

xin yimin

新移民

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