

Editors' Introduction

As guest editors of the CSDS issue on the diaspora in Singapore, we had hoped to showcase the works of the growing number of younger Singapore scholars. However we ended up with fewer contributions than we had hoped for.

The post-war period of decolonization saw the intensification of labeling the Sinophone Chinese anti-colonial activists as “chauvinists” and “communists” by the colonial authorities and its successor, the PAP government.

Huang Jianli dissects the oeuvre of historian Lee Guan Kin of the Nanyang Technological University. The Sinophone community in post-colonial Singapore had to grapple with English becoming the medium of instruction in Singapore schools, in part an outcome of the labeling. Lee came to terms with this development in her academic and writings as a public intellectual.

The labels are critiqued in PJ Thum's examination of the Sinophone Chinese leadership in the early years of PAP rule. The Tunku had invoked the labels to reject merger proposals, but he succumbed when the PAP lost two by-elections. The Chinese-language press regarded the communist scare as a means to disguise the intra-PAP struggle, but they nevertheless supported merger. Their votes gave the PAP a decisive win in the referendum, and the confidence to detain the left wing en masse without trial. Ernest Koh's subjects of study were Chinese who defended the Empire at war. One was a young dockyard coolie who loved the yarns of Chinese sailors and himself went to sea; it was Chinese seafarers in Liverpool who taught the merchant marine crew member to love the mother country, he told the author, speaking in mandarin. Another was a wealthy Chinese who converted to Anglicanism; a decorated RAF pilot who saw action in Italy, where he was a curiosity—“a man from China, speaking Italian with a broad English accent”. The third was an Anglophile peranakan technician captured by the Japanese en route to Australia to join the air force squadrons, and was beaten up for “betraying the skin”. The British Empire was clearly home to the broadest spectrum of diasporic Chinese.

Nevertheless, the ability to accumulate wealth is what they are usually known for. Jason Lim's study of the merchants who traded with China however stresses that they had to contend with the vagaries of two political masters: the governments of China, and the Singapore authorities. They had more than their fair share of adversity.

Nola Cooke has translated Claudine Salmon's study of the commercial networks of the leading Baba families and their business interests in China. Salmon translated into French, an account by a merchant of his 1889 sojourn covering cities in China, Japan, and Vietnam.

Wong Yee Tuan's Research Notes ascertains that scholars have mistaken “Khoo Tiong Poh” and “Khoo Thean Poh”, the names of two nineteenth century Hokkien merchants, to be spelling variations of the one name. Hue Guan Thye and Shen Lingxie return this issue to the present. Hue looks at the dynamics of the ‘United Temples’, where temples which had had to relocate ended up sharing premises in land-scarce Singapore. Shen studies the minority Sanjiang community, including the current wave of migrants to a globalised Singapore.

The stories of the Chinese diaspora continue to grow and multiply.

Hong Lysa and Kwee Hui Kian