

Chinese Merchants in Singapore and the China Trade, 1819-1959

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Abstract

Chinese merchants in Singapore were involved with the China trade after the British established a trading post in Singapore in 1819. These merchants were regarded as Chinese citizens by the Chinese state and expected to be engaged in patriotic activities such as the promotion of Chinese goods as “national products” in the 1930s, and comply with Chinese government regulations during the Sino-Japanese War and after the communist victory in China in 1949. This paper traces the vicissitudes of the China trade for the Chinese merchants in Singapore as the island went through phases of political and economic stability, international competition, military conflict and the early years of the Cold War.

Keywords: Chinese merchants; Singapore; China trade; overseas Chinese nationalism; Cold War

Introduction

The Chinese had been trading in the Malay Peninsula long before Europeans set foot in the region. British colonial policy of *laissez-faire* and the declaration of Singapore as a free port for the entrepôt trade played an important role in the Malayan economy following its intervention in the Malay Peninsula in 1874. Singapore became the key port-city for the import of Chinese goods and the export of Malayan goods to China. As China faced political and economic problems by the end of the 19th century, more Chinese migrated to Malaya and Singapore. This was a potentially dangerous step for the Chinese to take as the Qing court deemed emigration to be illegal; anyone caught trying to emigrate could face the death penalty in China. However, the situation in China had become so dire towards the later part of the nineteenth century that migration became a feasible (if risky) option for the Chinese.

Studies on the transnational perspectives of the Chinese diaspora are fairly well developed.¹ This paper looks into the Chinese merchants in Singapore who had a role in the China trade. In 1893, the Qing dynasty conceded that it had become impossible to monitor emigration levels as too many people were leaving China. They repealed the law prohibiting it and the number of traders leaving the ports of Fujian and Guangdong provinces in southern China to settle in the urban, crowded cities of Malaya and Singapore grew even larger. Merchants who set up shop dealing with the China trade in colonial Singapore used their family and friends back home as business

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¹ Prasenjit Duara, “Nationalists Among Transnationals: Overseas Chinese and the Idea of China, 1900-1911”, in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Donald M Nonini (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 39-60; Adam McKeown, “Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 58, 2 (1999): 306-337; Adam McKeown, “Chinese Emigration in Global Context, 1850-1940”, *Journal of Global History*, 5, 1 (2010): 95-124; Carl A Trocki, “Boundaries and Transgressions: Chinese Enterprise in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Southeast Asia” in *Ungrounded Empires*, ed. Ong and Nonini, pp. 61-85.

contacts.² They regarded themselves as “sojourners” who would return to their home villages when conditions improved in China.³

Research on the overseas Chinese has hitherto largely focussed on a few areas of concern. Wang Gungwu identified two such areas when he noted that researchers have studied the investments by the overseas Chinese in China for profit,⁴ as well as the contributions of overseas Chinese towards China such as Tan Kah Kee (陳嘉庚) who made huge contributions to the building of educational institutions in his home province, and to the anti-Japanese cause acted out of a sense of overseas Chinese nationalism.⁵ This paper explores the new dimension of the significance of the China trade for the Chinese merchants in Singapore from the proclamation of the establishment of a trading port in 1819 to self-government in 1959.

What China Trade?

The “China trade” refers to the import of Chinese merchandise into Singapore and the export of Malayan products through Singapore to China.⁶ Chinese merchants in Singapore imported a variety of Chinese commodities such as tea, silk and porcelain for consumption by the Chinese communities in British Malaya. China imported rubber and tin produced in Malaya through them. Chiang Hai Ding noted that Chinese merchants had a numerical advantage over European traders in Singapore, forming between 55 and 70 per cent of the population in the Straits Settlements, and that the European and Chinese merchants complemented each other – the former depended on the Chinese to sell manufactured imports from Europe and export Southeast Asian produce, while the Chinese depended on the Europeans for credit facilities to conduct their trade.⁷ The importance of the China trade for the Chinese merchants is evident from the founding of trade associations such as the Singapore Piece Goods Traders’ Guild 新加坡布行商務局 (1908), Singapore Rattan Industry Association 新加坡沙藤行 (1910), Singapore Chinese Tea Importers and Exporters’ Association 新加坡華僑茶業出入口商公會 (1928), Singapore Chinese Drug Importers and Exporters’ Guild 新加坡中藥出入口商公會 (1941) and the Singapore Chinaware Merchants Association 新加坡瓷商公會 (1951).⁸

There are two impediments to research work on the trading patterns of Chinese merchants in Singapore. First, the history of Singapore has been artificially divided according to the changes in leadership and/or forms of government. In *A History of Modern Singapore*, the noted scholar C M Turnbull divided Singapore’s history into eight distinct epochs between 1819 and 1959.⁹ These time periods are

² Wang Gungwu, “Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia”, in *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid (St Leonards, NSW: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 1-14.

³ Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), pp. 24-45.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Wang Gungwu, “The Southeast Asian Chinese and the Development of China”, in *Southeast Asian Chinese and China: The Politico-Economic Dimension*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995), pp. 12-30.

⁶ There were three administrative entities in Malaya until 1946: the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca and Singapore), the Federated Malay States and the “Un-federated Malay States” of Perlis, Kedah, Trengganu, Kelantan and Johor. All these entities made up “British Malaya”. The coolie trade in Singapore is excluded from this study as the focus is not on human trafficking. For more about the coolie trade, see Wong Lin Ken, “The Trade of Singapore with China, 1819-69”, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 33, 4 (1960): 111-114; and Yen Ching-hwang, *Coolies and Mandarins: China’s Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch’ing Period (1851-1911)* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985), pp. 32-134.

⁷ Chiang Hai Ding, *A History of Straits Settlements Foreign Trade, 1870-1915* (Singapore: National Museum, 1978), p. 53.

⁸ A list of trade associations can be found in Peng Song Toh, *Directory of Associations in Singapore, 1982-83* (Singapore: Historical Culture Publishers, 1983), pp. C-1 to C-90.

⁹ C M Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009). The eight time periods are: “The New Settlement” (1819-1826), “This Spirited and Splendid Little Colony” (1826-1867), “High Noon of Empire” (1867-1914), “The Clapham Junction of the Eastern Seas” (1914-1941), “War in the

divided from the point of view of British imperialism. After British “intervention” in Malaya in 1874, for instance, Singapore developed rapidly as a port-city suitable for the Malayan economy. The involvement of the British in Malayan affairs came just seven years after the administration of Singapore was transferred from India to the Colonial Office in London. Turnbull called the period from 1867 to the start of World War I in 1914 the “high noon of empire”. However, such a periodisation is meaningless for understanding the problems and challenges which the Chinese merchants in Singapore faced in trading with China.

The other historiographical problem is that we know very little about the China trade and the Chinese merchants in Singapore. Trade statistics (such as the ones used here) tell us the value of the trade but do not differentiate between the Chinese and non-Chinese merchants. Also, studies on the Chinese merchants have tended to focus on their nationalistic and philanthropic spirit. This narrow view serves an instructional purpose as young Singaporeans are encouraged time and again by the current People’s Action Party (PAP) government to emulate the philanthropic spirit of the merchants by involving themselves in social and charitable work. The rags-to-riches experiences of merchants such as Lee Kong Chian (李光前) have been used as life lessons for the young to work hard and be thrifty:

Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans, can learn much from the examples of these two pioneers – their determination, their commitment to education, and their philanthropic spirit... [T]he spirit of these pioneers – a willingness to venture into areas that are new and untested, and a desire to contribute to something much larger than oneself – remains relevant to all of us today, and to future generations of Singaporeans.¹⁰

The Chinese merchants migrated to Singapore to conduct trade, but what this actually involved has been glossed over.

The China trade can be divided into several distinct phases:

Period	The Chinese Merchants in Singapore and the China Trade
1819 – 1893	Early promotion of the China trade
1893 – 1928	The China trade seen as a panacea by the Chinese government
1928 – 1949	The China trade as a showcase of patriotism
1949 – 1959	The China trade as a pawn in international relations

There was constant need for the merchants to maintain a balance between business considerations and patriotism. Patriotic overseas Chinese saw it their duty to send remittances to their families and invest in reconstruction projects in China. Even though not all overseas Chinese were recognised as citizens of the Republic of China (ROC) before 1949 by *jus sanguinis* (where Chinese nationality was based on ethnicity and not on the place of birth) China needed financial support and investments from the overseas Chinese, and did all it could to accommodate them.

Most of the challenges faced by merchants involved in the import and export of good between Singapore and China were the result of the introduction of new government policies in *both* Singapore and China. The Cold War for instance complicated matters for Chinese merchants in Singapore after 1945. Questions arise as to whether the patriotic acts of the Chinese merchants were really committed out of love for their country or concern for their businesses within the context of international trade and competition.

East” (1941-1942), “Syonan: Light of the South” (1942-1945), “The Aftermath of War” (1945-1955) and “The Road to Merdeka” (1955-1965).

¹⁰ Speech by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the official launch of “The Legacy of Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian” Exhibition at the National Library Building, 18 July 2008.

The first period: Early promotion of the China trade (1819-1893)

Singapore became an entrepôt port for free trade after it was established as a trading station by Sir Stamford Raffles for the East India Company in 1819. As a free port, "Vessels of all Nations are on a perfect equality".¹¹ Chinese merchants began to move to Singapore from Penang and Malacca (two other territories that would be administered with Singapore as the "Straits Settlements" from 1826) and from the Qing Empire. The first junk from Xiamen arrived in Singapore in February 1821.¹² With the end of the Opium War and the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, the Qing Empire was forced to open five new treaty ports (including Xiamen and Guangzhou) for international trade. The opening of the ports, however, would not have had a major impact on the Chinese merchants in Singapore involved in the China trade as they had already been importing goods from Guangzhou and Xiamen, ports of Guangdong and Fujian respectively, the home provinces of the majority of the Chinese in Singapore. Those with business acumen or who had family businesses took the opportunity to migrate to Singapore as merchants; the easiest form of business would be to import Chinese goods and/or export Malayan goods to China.

The forced opening of China for international trade benefitted Western imperial powers. The overseas Chinese merchants were left largely on their own to take advantage of the new world order and make plans for any expansion of their business interests and/or trade opportunities. The colonial authorities assumed that the opening of China would lead to a new role for Singapore as a springboard for European powers to enter the Chinese market, and presumably would benefit Chinese merchants in Singapore, but statistics compiled were only for trade between territories and not between one country (Qing Empire) and one ethnic group (overseas Chinese).

Early trading figures showed that the China trade was important for Singapore. However, once the Opium War ended in 1842, Hong Kong became the entrepôt port for the China trade, not Singapore.¹³ Trade figures compiled by Wong Lin Ken suggested that the China trade constituted about a quarter of Singapore's overall trade; it is likely that the figures included trading with Hong Kong (see Tables 1 and 2).¹⁴ The actual trade with China constituted a very small portion of Singapore's overall trade after 1870. Based on the import and export figures from 1870 (when the *Straits Settlements Blue Book* began publication) to 1893, we can see that trade with China constituted less than 5% of the island's trade (see Tables 3 and 4). Even if we consider that Chinese goods could have been imported or exported through Hong Kong, the trade did not exceed 12½ per cent (with the exception of imports in 1870 and exports in 1871). Chinese goods continued to be imported and sold by Chinese merchants. Yow Lup Nam arrived in Singapore from Guangzhou in 1841 and opened a shop that sold Chinese sundries, tea, tobacco and silk piece goods.¹⁵ The first Chinese-language newspaper in Singapore, *Lat Pau* (叻報), hit the streets in 1880 and the extent of the China trade can be seen in the advertisements. They not only informed readers about products sold by the shops that had placed those advertisements but also highlighted them as imports from the Qing Empire. These advertisements merely inform consumers where to purchase the goods and do not have any nationalistic messages. Tea firms such as Jinxiang Zhan Wuyi Chazhuang (錦祥棧武夷茶莊) placed an advertisement in the *Lat Pau* in December 1900, informing readers that the proprietor

¹¹ "Report from the Resident Councillor of Singapore to the Governor dated 8 November 1845", *Tabular Statements of the Commerce and Shipping of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca for the Official Year 1844-45* (Calcutta: W Ridsdale, 1847), p. 109.

¹² Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore from the Foundation of the Settlement under the Honourable the East India Company, on February 6th, 1819, to the Transfer to the Colonial Office as part of the Colonial Possessions of the Crown on April 1st, 1867*, Volume I, originally published in 1902 (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965), p. 67.

¹³ Wolfgang Keller, Ben Li and Carol H Shiue, "China's Foreign Trade: Perspectives from the Past 150 Years", *The World Economy*, 34, 6 (2011): 873.

¹⁴ Wong, "Trade of Singapore": 252-254.

¹⁵ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, first published in 1921 (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967), p. 463.

had purchased tea from the Wuyi Mountains in northern Fujian; he would be opening a shop in Singapore within a week and customers would be given a 10 per cent discount for their purchases.¹⁶ The Singapore Chinaware Merchants Association, writing in 1970, noted that very little was known about the history of the ceramics industry in Singapore and that “a good guess would trace its history back to more than a century ago”.¹⁷ By the late 19th century, there was a lack of vibrancy in the China trade and the overseas Chinese merchants did the bare minimum to promote it by giving publicity for China products. Some merchants ventured into new Malayan markets, such as for rubber, to export to China.

The trade figures show that the main imports into Singapore from China were tea, silk and porcelain and the main exports were opium, bêche-de-mer (sea cucumber), birds' nests and rattan (see Table 5). Opium accounted for almost half of all Singapore's exports to China in the 1840s and 1850s. However, these figures do not indicate the proportion of the trade carried out by the Chinese merchants. It is assumed that the Chinese were involved with the China trade because of family business networks, consumer demand of the Chinese in Singapore and that the trade would have been transacted using a Chinese dialect. The trade flourished in the 1840s until the 1850s when there was a decline, indicating that Chinese merchants faced problems with securing imports and exports until the end of the 19th century.

¹⁶ *Lat Pau*, 26 to 31 December 1900.

¹⁷ Singapore Chinaware Merchants Association, *Commemorative Souvenir: 19th Anniversary and Official Opening of New Premises* (Singapore: Singapore Chinaware Merchants Association, 1970), foreword, n. p.

Table 1

IMPORT OF CHINESE GOODS INTO SINGAPORE, 1823/24-1868/69*In Straits dollars*

Year	From China	Total Imports	Percentage
1823 – 1824	816,557	6,560,153	12.45
1824 – 1825	651,699	6,478,980	10.06
1825 – 1826	1,780,020	6,269,336	28.39
1826 – 1827	719,029	6,471,168	11.11
1827 – 1828	851,626	7,076,628	12.03
1828 – 1829	2,670,850	9,317,869	28.66
1829 – 1830	3,413,023	9,977,728	34.21
1830 – 1831	2,857,505	8,910,352	32.07
1831 – 1832	2,433,959	8,462,039	28.76
1832 – 1833	1,963,668	9,102,531	21.57
1833 – 1834	1,796,586	8,679,148	20.70
1834 – 1835	766,956	7,031,580	10.91
1835 – 1836	735,540	7,367,880	9.98
1836 – 1837	790,735	8,244,853	9.59
1837 – 1838	659,272	8,881,672	7.42
1838 – 1839	687,614	8,267,833	8.32
1839 – 1840	1,109,264	10,579,215	10.49
1840 – 1841	2,142,504	14,158,324	15.13
1841 – 1842	1,947,304	13,910,771	14.00
1842 – 1843	1,990,810	13,154,842	15.13
1843 – 1844	2,072,233	12,675,884	16.35
1844 – 1845	2,073,541	11,759,817	17.63
1845 – 1846	1,401,609	12,896,337	10.87
1846 – 1847	1,907,487	12,905,845	14.78
1847 – 1848	1,483,544	12,300,510	12.06
1848 – 1849	2,248,895	12,381,637	18.16
1849 – 1850	1,731,879	13,315,018	13.01
1850 – 1851	1,847,463	13,744,266	13.44
1851 – 1852	1,539,842	13,919,337	11.06
1852 – 1853	1,871,841	15,535,390	12.05
1853 – 1854	1,935,812	19,961,936	9.70
1854 – 1855	2,654,447	17,704,342	14.99
1855 – 1856	3,111,927	22,903,886	13.59
1856 – 1857	2,760,724	23,579,735	11.71
1857 – 1858	3,927,825	29,711,810	13.22
1860 – 1861	2,091,556	25,891,706	8.08
1861 – 1862	3,511,271	24,821,872	14.15
1862 – 1863	4,021,922	28,201,591	14.26
1863 – 1864	4,320,042	28,271,739	15.28
1866 – 1867	4,626,946	37,204,949	12.44
1867 – 1868	4,102,177	31,579,926	12.99
1868 – 1869	3,879,139	31,961,941	12.14

Source:

Calculated from: Wong Lin Ken, "The Trade of Singapore with China", pp. 252-254. Figures are not available for every year.

Table 2

EXPORTS OF GOODS FROM SINGAPORE TO CHINA, 1823/24-1868/69

In Straits dollars

Year	To China	Total Exports	Percentage
1823 – 1824	526,815	4,856,883	10.85
1824 – 1825	1,065,030	5,872,663	18.14
1825 – 1826	743,623	5,358,464	13.88
1826 – 1827	1,170,934	6,596,258	17.75
1827 – 1828	722,041	6,591,017	10.95
1828 – 1829	861,152	8,574,482	10.04
1829 – 1830	656,696	8,914,629	7.37
1830 – 1831	899,305	8,678,894	10.36
1831 – 1832	735,412	7,436,531	9.89
1832 – 1833	743,819	7,591,200	9.80
1833 – 1834	1,014,000	9,439,568	10.74
1834 – 1835	1,213,695	7,412,354	16.37
1835 – 1836	1,073,525	6,961,534	15.42
1836 – 1837	1,312,051	7,808,124	16.80
1837 – 1838	1,169,775	7,971,776	14.67
1838 – 1839	1,137,492	7,605,057	14.96
1839 – 1840	1,499,136	9,375,874	15.99
1840 – 1841	2,892,837	11,908,160	24.29
1841 – 1842	3,058,202	11,423,397	26.77
1842 – 1843	3,627,802	11,558,140	31.39
1843 – 1844	3,256,260	11,775,972	27.65
1844 – 1845	2,929,526	10,498,317	27.90
1845 – 1846	2,566,424	10,498,319	24.45
1846 – 1847	2,193,100	10,732,026	20.44
1847 – 1848	1,807,358	11,189,618	16.15
1848 – 1849	2,434,966	11,050,710	22.03
1849 – 1850	1,911,754	10,457,072	18.28
1850 – 1851	2,328,439	11,366,151	20.49
1851 – 1852	2,830,982	12,222,857	23.16
1852 – 1853	2,585,375	13,482,237	19.18
1853 – 1854	3,953,384	16,699,063	23.67
1854 – 1855	3,367,395	15,144,487	22.24
1855 – 1856	4,198,646	19,697,780	21.32
1856 – 1857	4,649,363	21,311,413	21.82
1857 – 1858	5,874,806	25,734,303	22.83
1860 – 1861	3,318,580	18,654,230	17.79
1861 – 1862	3,070,045	22,100,458	13.89
1862 – 1863	5,564,085	24,244,196	22.95
1863 – 1864	5,791,996	24,043,402	24.09
1866 – 1867	4,446,144	26,679,681	16.66
1867 – 1868	4,429,352	26,670,989	16.61
1868 – 1869	3,420,293	26,982,200	12.68

Source:

Calculated from: Wong Lin Ken, "The Trade of Singapore with China", pp. 252-254. Figures are not available for every year.

Table 3

IMPORTS OF CHINESE GOODS INTO SINGAPORE, 1870-1893*In Straits dollars*

Year	From China	From Hong Kong	Total Imports	Percentage (China)	Percentage (Hong Kong)	Percentage (China & Hong Kong)
1870	813,176	4,449,967	45,058,564	1.80	9.88	11.68
1871	638,415	3,489,710	36,766,530	1.74	9.49	11.23
1872	1,196,349	3,872,821	43,415,383	2.76	8.92	11.68
1873	738,787	5,222,928	47,880,090	1.54	10.91	12.45
1874	845,955	5,976,427	46,887,070	1.80	12.75	14.55
1875	1,121,943	3,355,241	43,766,201	2.56	7.67	10.23
1876	1,196,063	1,932,054	45,466,070	2.63	4.25	6.88
1877	1,083,005	5,814,389	49,327,317	2.20	11.79	13.99
1878	1,157,349	5,421,062	47,259,337	2.45	11.47	13.92
1879	1,912,703	7,326,906	56,278,292	3.40	13.02	16.42
1880	1,114,017	6,430,675	60,675,733	1.84	10.60	12.44
1881	1,318,794	5,952,516	70,699,682	1.87	8.42	10.29
1882	1,746,662	6,598,676	57,343,978	3.05	11.51	14.56
1883	1,367,171	7,756,942	79,175,687	1.73	9.80	11.53
1884	2,014,253	7,622,494	73,597,020	2.74	10.36	13.10
1885	1,993,018	7,962,515	70,238,765	2.84	11.34	14.18
1886	2,048,047	8,812,047	72,618,427	2.82	12.13	14.95
1887	3,123,948	10,968,433	86,910,898	3.59	12.62	16.21
1888	4,829,906	12,622,701	100,401,187	4.81	12.57	17.38
1889	3,342,752	11,119,863	104,917,978	3.19	10.60	13.79
1890	3,770,032	8,988,064	105,029,389	3.59	8.56	12.15
1891	3,393,884	9,905,967	97,961,326	3.46	10.11	13.57
1892	4,108,858	9,977,404	101,852,137	4.03	9.80	13.83
1893	4,156,370	11,548,129	119,017,280	3.49	9.70	13.19

Source:Calculated from: *Straits Settlements Blue Book*, 1870-1893

Table 4

EXPORTS OF GOODS FROM SINGAPORE TO CHINA, 1870-1893

In Straits dollars

Year	To China	To Hong Kong	Total Exports	Percentage (China)	Percentage (Hong Kong)	Percentage (China & Hong Kong)
1870	966,290	2,720,434	31,731,022	3.05	8.57	11.62
1871	813,425	3,596,606	32,002,807	2.54	11.24	13.78
1872	1,086,508	3,693,015	39,020,121	2.78	9.46	12.24
1873	1,514,522	3,498,763	41,752,145	3.63	8.38	12.01
1874	877,949	3,790,542	41,508,798	2.12	9.13	11.25
1875	957,260	2,707,156	41,619,519	2.30	6.50	8.80
1876	818,289	3,168,916	40,617,783	2.01	7.80	9.81
1877	1,016,139	2,515,490	41,428,107	2.45	6.07	8.52
1878	861,810	2,780,769	40,021,921	2.15	6.95	9.10
1879	757,129	3,712,366	49,250,238	1.54	7.54	9.08
1880	2,429,230	3,667,422	54,578,981	4.45	6.72	11.17
1881	1,725,814	4,614,176	58,001,188	2.98	7.96	10.94
1882	2,163,157	3,805,066	61,192,458	3.54	6.22	9.76
1883	1,434,581	4,393,854	68,174,220	2.10	6.45	8.55
1884	1,253,010	4,391,532	61,991,902	2.02	7.08	9.10
1885	1,063,547	5,906,720	59,099,309	1.80	9.99	11.79
1886	1,498,160	4,526,247	58,292,259	2.57	7.76	10.33
1887	1,254,985	5,302,568	71,980,634	1.74	7.37	9.11
1888	1,991,575	5,465,445	84,263,837	2.36	6.49	8.85
1889	2,583,918	4,295,710	86,555,473	2.99	4.96	7.95
1890	1,979,107	5,979,432	91,651,174	2.16	6.52	8.68
1891	2,237,442	1,458,497	88,647,930	2.52	1.65	4.17
1892	2,618,650	6,507,487	95,262,798	2.75	6.83	9.58
1893	3,331,332	6,536,120	104,555,838	3.19	6.25	9.44

Source:

Calculated from: *Straits Settlements Blue Book*, 1870-1893

Table 5

SINGAPORE-CHINA TRADE – TOP 5 COMMODITIES TRADED

	1845-1846		1847-1848		1848-1849	
	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China
1	Crockery (17.34)	Opium (46.62)	Porcelain & earthenware (11.52)	Opium (44.92)	[Item unclear in record] (19.44)	Opium (50.55)
2	Raw silk (12.58)	Bird's nest (6.20)	Tea (8.38)	Bird's nest (9.55)	Porcelain & earthenware (9.42)	Cotton (6.76)
3	Sundries (9.48)	Cotton piece goods (6.16)	Paper (6.09)	Bêche-de-mer (6.48)	Raw silk (5.23)	Bird's nest (4.34)
4	Tea (9.17)	Cotton (5.53)	Raw silk (4.89)	Cotton (5.69)	[Item unclear in record] (3.04)	Bêche-de-mer (3.10)
5	Camphor (8.59)	Bêche-de-mer (4.14)	Silk piece goods (4.33)	Rattans & canes (2.51)	Silk piece goods (2.63)	Rattans & canes (2.76)
	1849-1850		1852-1853		1855-1856	
	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China
1	Porcelain & earthenware (11.11)	Opium (31.51)	Tea (10.80)	Opium (39.09)	Sundries (10.80)	Opium (19.34)
2	Raw silk (6.79)	Cotton (10.29)	Silk piece goods (8.15)	Bird's nest (7.11)	Porcelain & earthenware (7.67)	Rice (10.56)
3	Tea (6.19)	Bird's nest (7.98)	Porcelain & earthenware (7.48)	Cotton piece goods (4.01)	Wearing apparel (5.40)	Cotton wool (8.54)
4	Silk piece goods	Bêche-de-mer	Tobacco (7.24)	Rice (3.72)	Tobacco (5.12)	Cotton piece

	(4.30)	(3.86)				goods (3.97)
5	Sundries (4.15)	Timber – rafters (3.23)	Raw silk (5.90)	Rattans & canes (3.14)	Camphor (3.84)	Bird's nest (3.68)
	1870		1871		1872	
	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China
1	Tea (11.59)	Unwrought tin (18.47)	Chinaware (13.20)	Unwrought tin (17.67)	Earthenware (9.08)	Opium (23.63)
2	Preserved provisions (8.47)	Opium (11.02)	Tea (8.43)	Plain cotton goods (17.04)	Tea (6.65)	Tin (13.54)
3	Joss paper (6.18)	Cotton twist (8.35)	Joss paper (7.25)	Opium (12.24)	Joss paper (6.23)	Cotton goods (12.68)
4	Chinaware (5.97)	Plain cotton (7.73)	Sugar candy (6.91)	Cotton twist (8.01)	Hardware & cutlery (4.95)	Bêche-de-mer (7.67)
5	Spice (5.08)	Timber (5.23)	Stationery (5.71)	Rattan (5.90)	Fresh fruits (4.32)	Sawn timber (6.04)
	1873		1874		1875	
	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China
1	Salted provisions (11.96)	Tin (14.92)	Earthenware (8.52)	Tin (16.1)	Raw silk (13.98)	Opium (21.58)
2	Paper (8.93)	Sawn timber (10.67)	Silk pieces (8.43)	Opium (12.79)	Tea (10.88)	Wood – other sorts (9.72)
3	Silks (8.65)	Cotton goods (7.09)	Raw silk (7.01)	Bêche-de-mer (9.72)	Silk piece goods (9.36)	Rattan (8.60)
4	Earthenware (8.58)	Bêche-de-mer (5.64)	Tea (5.35)	Cotton goods (7.04)	Earthenware (6.61)	Tin (8.38)
5	Tea (8.06)	Wood – other sorts (4.52)	Paper (4.95)	Rattan (6.29)	Salted vegetables (4.83)	Birds' nest (6.49)

	1876		1877		1878	
	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China
1	Earthenware (7.77)	Tin (13.58)	Raw silk (24.98)	Timber (20.13)	Raw silk (26.37)	Rattans (11.61)
2	Tea (6.62)	Birds' nest (8.12)	Tea (7.46)	Sawn timber planks (12.07)	Earthenware (7.92)	Tin (11.05)
3	Paper (6.05)	Bêche-de-mer (7.03)	Salted & fresh vegetables (6.84)	Gunnies (8.45)	Tea (5.69)	Bêche-de-mer (9.63)
4	Peanut oil (5.68)	Rattans (6.40)	Earthenware (5.82)	Cotton goods (8.16)	Joss paper (3.30)	Cotton goods (8.20)
5	Salted & fresh vegetables (5.36)	Cotton goods (4.97)	Joss paper (3.92)	Bêche-de-mer (6.65)	Mats & matting (3.29)	Opium (6.17)
	1880		1881		1882	
	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China
1	Raw silk (33.92)	Timber (5.31)	Raw silk (30.10)	Plain cotton (8.87)	Earthenware (9.09)	Timber (15.19)
2	Earthenware (8.92)	Rattans (4.13)	Earthenware (9.83)	Rattans (8.07)	Silk piece goods (8.02)	Plain cotton (8.54)
3	Silk piece goods (5.72)	Cotton goods (3.96)	Tea (6.83)	Bêche-de-mer (7.41)	Tea (7.01)	Tin (6.28)
4	Fresh & salted vegetables (4.46)	Bêche-de-mer (3.85)	Silk piece goods (5.65)	Opium (4.83)	Fresh, salted & preserved provisions (5.30)	Bêche-de-mer (5.68)
5	Joss paper (3.37)	Tin (3.23)	Fresh & salted vegetables (4.96)	Gunnies (4.70)	Paper (4.63)	Rattans (4.15)

	1883		1888		1889	
	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China	Imports & as a percentage of value of imports from China	Exports & as a percentage of value of exports to China
1	Silk piece goods (9.82)	Plain cotton (15.11)	Fresh & salted provisions (5.92)	Cotton goods (11.33)	Fresh vegetables (10.03)	Opium (22.42)
2	Paper (8.14)	Timber (11.53)	Preserved vegetables (4.57)	Opium (8.81)	Tea (6.55)	Sandalwood (5.89)
3	Fresh, salted & preserved vegetables (7.83)	Opium (10.35)	Tea (4.19)	Dried & salted fish (4.82)	Fresh & salted provisions (5.90)	Woollen cloth (5.82)
4	Tea (7.78)	Tin (8.95)	Raw silk (3.17)	Bêche-de-mer (3.97)	Joss-sticks & joss paper (5.61)	Rattans (4.94)
5	Earthenware (6.93)	Bêche-de-mer (8.53)	Silk piece goods (2.86)	Tin (2.56)	Silk piece goods (5.30)	Bêche-de-mer (4.75)

Sources

Calculated from:

Straits Settlements Blue Book, 1870-1889 (information not available for the years 1879 and 1884-1887)

Tabular Statements of the Commerce and Shipping of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca, 1844-45 to 1855-56

The second period: The China trade seen as a panacea by the Chinese government (1893-1928)

In the last years of the Qing dynasty, the crumbling government attempted to seek support from overseas Chinese merchants for limited political and economic reforms. Awards were given to Chinese merchants in Malaya and Singapore if they contributed to China's industry and economy.¹⁸ However, Singapore exported relatively little to China in the early 1900s.¹⁹ In *One Hundred Years of the Chinese in Singapore*, Song Ong Siang recorded several Chinese stores in the city that imported goods from China, such as Wee Bin & Co. Chop Hong Guan which "traded in all kinds of earthenware, and later on built up a fleet of over twenty vessels for the Chinese and Dutch East Indies trade".²⁰ There was the shop Guan Whatt Seng that sold mainly tea and salt.²¹ Lim Leack, a "well-known and much-respected" merchant, was involved in "a large business with China".²² Yap Whatt & Co. served as an "intermediary in business" between Chinese traders and European manufacturers, and it opened a branch in Shanghai in 1902.²³ The first Chinese bank in Singapore – Kwong Yik Bank – was established in 1903, although it collapsed a decade later "through the mismanagement of some of the Directors".²⁴

Yen Ching-hwang has noted the Qing court's intention of "exploiting the economic potential of its overseas subjects" after 1893.²⁵ By the first decade of the 20th century, Qing officials called for the establishment of Chinese chambers of commerce in British Malaya to galvanise overseas Chinese support for the dynasty. The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC) was founded on 16 March 1906, at the instigation of Zhang Bishi (张弼士), the Chinese Imperial Commissioner for Investigating Commercial Affairs in Foreign Countries.²⁶ The aim of this chamber was to promote Chinese business in Singapore and trade benefits for merchants.²⁷

Some Chinese merchants however supported the republican revolutionaries. The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 brought new hope for China and the China trade:

The early days of November 1911 saw the Chinese in Singapore in a state of jubilation over the information that Peking was in the hands of a revolutionary party and that the Emperor and Prince Ching were prisoners. The adherents to the creed of Dr Sun Yat Sen were numerically strong in this part of the world.²⁸

There was an air of expectation that the new regime would make the terms of the China trade favourable for the Chinese merchants in Singapore and promote the production, manufacturing, transport and export of Chinese products in China. There was optimism that "China will share in the wealth of the world, and will be at once a large producer and a large consumer".²⁹ There were favourable reports of a "possible trade boom" in Shanghai and record figures for China's trade in 1918.³⁰ Silk exports from China "might be easily doubled".³¹

¹⁸ Michael R Godley, *The Mandarin-Capitalists from Nanyang: Overseas Chinese Enterprise in the Modernization of China, 1893-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁹ Keller, Li and Shiue, "China's Foreign Trade": 875-876.

²⁰ Song, *History of the Chinese in Singapore*, p. 114.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

²⁵ Yen Ching-hwang, *Studies in Modern Overseas Chinese History* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995), p. 31.

²⁶ Yen Ching-hwang, "Ch'ing China and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1906-1911", in *Southeast Asian Chinese and China: The Politico-Economic Dimension*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995), pp. 133-160.

²⁷ Peng, *Directory of Associations in Singapore*, p. C-25.

²⁸ Song, *History of the Chinese in Singapore*, p. 471.

²⁹ William Gascoyne-Cecil and Florence Cecil, *Changing China* (New York: Appleton, 1913), p. 29.

³⁰ *The Straits Times*, 24 September 1919; and *The Straits Times*, 7 October 1919.

³¹ *The Straits Times*, 20 June 1917.

The Chamber was responsible for ensuring the smooth conduct of trade between China and Singapore and the Republic of China (ROC), and saw the opportunity to serve the interests of the new regime. Calls had been made by the ROC to the Chinese merchants in Singapore to give their wholehearted support through appeals to overseas Chinese nationalism and advertisements on Chinese goods in souvenir publications.³² The founding of the ROC in 1912 also represented a new hope for China to the overseas Chinese – after all, Dr Sun Yat-sen and the Kuomintang (KMT) had the combined agenda of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and implementing an industrialisation programme in China. Overseas Chinese merchants began to realise the importance of the China trade and the export of commodities such as rubber for China's modernisation programme and industrialisation efforts. Those of them who had given their unequivocal support to Dr Sun and the KMT expected to reap rewards in a new China. Furthermore, the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty meant the end of Manchu, or foreign, rule in China. A new China represented by the ROC marked the return of the Han (Chinese) to political dominance. The ROC meant more to overseas Chinese merchants than did the Qing Empire; they had to make the new political entity work. Trade associations were called on to verify trademarks and the location of goods manufactured. In 1915, the Singapore Piece Goods Traders' Guild was asked by the SCCC to confirm if a product bearing a particular trademark was a Chinese product and manufactured by Chinese.³³

A modernised and industrialised China would be part of the international economy. International competition became a major source of concern for the Chinese merchants in Singapore. The rise of Japan was particularly worrisome as Japanese officials and researchers were studying the potential of the Southeast Asian market for Japanese exports. The Chinese tea merchants in Singapore, for instance, knew about detailed surveys done by Chinese and Japanese governments comparing Chinese and Japanese tea trade in Southeast Asia.³⁴ Japan had actively cultivated, produced and exported Formosan (Taiwanese) teas to Malaya and Singapore. Tokyo also promoted the sale of Japan teas. Black teas were imported from India and Ceylon by non-Chinese merchants. By the late 1910s and early 1920s, even Chinese tea merchants saw a potential market in Singapore and began to make their first appearance in these territories.³⁵

The British continued to be impressed with Chinese involvement with the China trade, noting that China led as the source of silk goods, earthenware, crockery and porcelain, paper, joss-sticks and fireworks, and that Hong Kong had “practically a monopoly” of the bamboo and rattan trade.³⁶ The period immediately after the end of World War I was considered a “boom” and China continued to supply silk piece goods, provisions, earthenware, crockery and porcelain to British Malaya.³⁷ Despite the high

³² For example, souvenir publications of the SCCC could feature Sun Yat-sen's last will and testament, a history of the China trade with Singapore, a summary of Chinese goods imported into Malaya and Singapore and the prospects of that trade as well as advertisements from Chinese firms that pledged to import more and better Chinese goods into the territories.

³³ Singapore Textile Traders Association, *100th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine of the Singapore Textile Traders Association* (Singapore: Singapore Textile Traders Association, 2008), p. 16.

³⁴ Li Wenquan 李文權, “Nanyang Xiao Baozhongcha Zhi Diaocha” 南洋銷包種茶之調查 [A survey of the sale of *baozhong* tea in Southeast Asia], *Zhongguo Shiye Zazhi* 中國實業雜誌, 6 (1914): 589; Chen Ciyu 陳慈玉, *Chulun Riben Nanjin Zhengce Xia Taiwan Yu Dongnanya De Jingji Guanxi* 初論日本南進政策下臺灣與東南亞的經濟關係 [Economic relations between Taiwan and Southeast Asia in the Japanese “southward advance” policy], Occasional Paper No. 10, Academia Sinica Program for Southeast Asian Area Studies, December 1997, p. 17; Chen Ciyu 陳慈玉, *Taipei Xian Chaye Fazhan Shi* 台北縣茶業發展史 [Development of the tea industry in Taipei County] (Banchiao: Daoxiang Chubanshe, 2004), pp. 105–121.

³⁵ David D. Buck, *The Declining Role of China in the International Tea Trade, 1880–1910*, Occasional Paper No. 97–05, Centre for International Studies, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and Madison, October 1997; and Jason Lim, *Linking an Asian Trans-regional Commerce in Tea: The Overseas Chinese in the Fujian-Singapore Trade* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010).

³⁶ *British Malaya: Trade and Commerce* (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1912), p. 22.

³⁷ *British Malaya: Trade and Commerce* (London: Malay States Information Agency, 1924), pp. 17 and 23.

hopes, however, the China trade never took off for the Chinese merchants in Singapore as the ROC descended into political chaos. Tables 6 and 7 reveal that despite the work of the SCCC, the China trade remained negligible for Singapore, and trade with Hong Kong also declined. The share of imports from China and Hong Kong fell to 10.76% for the period 1906-1909 and dropped further to 8.79% from 1910 to 1919. Exports fared even worse. Between 1906 and 1909, merchandise sent to China and Hong Kong formed 5.42% of Singapore's exports; it dropped to 3.33% for the period 1910-1919. China remained largely agricultural with almost no industrialisation programme. The central government in Beijing remained weak and warlords occupied several provinces. The KMT governed only southern China with Guangzhou as the capital. Under such conditions, national unity and political reforms were paramount. China needed the support of overseas Chinese merchants but both the rival regimes at Beijing and Guangzhou could not help the merchants in any way because of the political troubles they faced.

Chinese businesses in Singapore were opened to the international economy.³⁸ Unfortunately, the trade depression in Singapore in the early 1920s forced some of them to close.³⁹ There was also the concern that the China trade would suffer even more if the ROC remained divided. Chinese merchants firmly believed that until the different "governments" put their differences aside and work towards unity, China would remain weak. They had supported Dr Sun when he planned the establishment of a republic. They also subscribed to the belief that the country had to be unified under one National Government committed to the Three Principles of the People, the central tenet of the KMT that had been formulated by Dr Sun. The Chinese merchants in Singapore remained loyal supporters of the KMT throughout the 1920s as they believed that it was the only party that could unify China. Merchants involved in the China trade also began to find their businesses threatened by other countries that produced or manufactured similar goods.

³⁸ Lee Poh Ping, *Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 119.

³⁹ Choo Eng-kang, "The Singapore Trade Depression, 1920-22", Academic Exercise, University of Singapore, 1976.

Table 6

IMPORTS OF CHINESE GOODS INTO SINGAPORE, 1893-1919

In Straits dollars

Year	From China	From Hong Kong	Total Imports	Percentage (China)	Percentage (Hong Kong)	Percentage (China & Hong Kong)
1893	4,156,370	11,548,129	119,017,280	3.49	9.70	13.19
1894	3,808,306	11,380,224	158,484,286	2.40	7.18	9.58
1895	2,871,171	11,355,877	150,555,692	1.91	7.54	9.45
1896	3,247,401	12,529,708	151,351,473	2.15	8.28	10.43
1897	5,385,126	14,812,087	173,175,888	3.11	8.55	11.66
1898	4,668,765	17,667,804	191,221,324	2.44	9.24	11.68
1899	3,871,258	21,692,731	216,995,997	1.78	10.00	11.78
1900	3,384,794	27,151,132	245,499,791	1.38	11.06	12.44
1901	3,653,888	22,679,679	249,100,076	1.47	9.10	10.57
1902	4,275,044	24,193,679	273,990,891	1.56	8.83	10.39
1903	6,771,874	41,139,420	292,096,911	2.31	14.08	16.39
1904	5,227,249	21,111,915	268,569,072	1.95	7.86	9.81
1905	5,429,603	20,952,962	243,300,225	2.23	8.61	10.84
1906	5,295,266	21,083,789	247,195,304	2.14	8.53	10.67
1907	5,866,029	22,164,867	255,999,469	2.29	8.66	10.95
1908	5,429,007	17,319,793	225,215,332	2.41	7.69	10.10
1909	6,347,686	18,978,571	223,936,079	2.83	8.47	11.30
1910	7,549,262	22,972,009	296,406,703	2.55	7.75	10.30
1911	7,282,737	24,601,475	305,751,777	2.38	8.05	10.43
1912	8,004,324	24,273,594	346,130,136	2.31	7.01	9.32
1913	9,898,147	28,851,040	380,522,785	2.60	7.58	10.18
1914	8,421,227	20,221,498	312,420,279	2.70	6.47	9.17
1915	9,578,386	20,426,144	355,267,662	2.70	5.75	8.45
1916	10,928,087	23,274,255	443,701,262	2.46	5.25	7.71
1917	12,137,779	25,464,885	530,797,977	2.29	4.80	7.09
1918	15,060,526	25,672,988	577,159,964	2.61	4.45	7.06
1919	19,314,375	41,318,696	739,805,841	2.61	5.59	8.20

Source

Calculated from: *Straits Settlements Blue Book*, 1893-1919. Trading figures were available only for the Straits Settlements (not Singapore) from 1919 and no longer reported from 1928.

Table 7

EXPORTS OF GOODS FROM SINGAPORE TO CHINA, 1893-1919*In Straits dollars*

Year	To China	To Hong Kong	Total Exports	Percentage (China)	Percentage (Hong Kong)	Percentage (China & Hong Kong)
1893	3,331,332	6,536,120	104,555,838	3.19	6.25	9.44
1894	2,955,410	7,594,303	129,778,176	2.28	5.85	8.13
1895	2,949,888	8,070,636	129,817,929	2.27	6.22	8.49
1896	3,257,607	7,060,527	129,226,478	2.52	5.46	7.98
1897	2,872,422	9,476,821	146,640,008	1.96	6.46	8.42
1898	3,907,109	12,152,760	159,485,460	2.45	7.62	10.07
1899	5,275,688	11,258,660	180,125,960	2.93	6.25	9.18
1900	5,025,922	11,432,953	199,155,372	2.52	5.74	8.26
1901	3,505,308	13,240,709	206,320,243	1.70	6.42	8.12
1902	4,289,926	11,714,101	226,946,225	1.89	5.16	7.05
1903	7,112,655	14,465,620	249,833,269	2.85	5.79	8.64
1904	6,063,753	16,999,115	234,362,941	2.59	7.25	9.84
1905	3,678,247	11,002,073	203,895,037	1.80	5.40	7.20
1906	3,991,003	9,830,289	221,269,848	1.80	4.44	6.24
1907	3,405,090	7,406,348	211,376,410	1.61	3.50	5.11
1908	2,680,100	6,833,913	183,734,560	1.46	3.72	5.18
1909	3,153,106	6,649,109	190,365,253	1.66	3.49	5.15
1910	3,751,381	6,625,944	269,957,393	1.39	2.45	3.84
1911	4,545,390	8,024,181	257,905,403	1.76	3.11	4.87
1912	2,567,308	8,469,906	274,443,128	0.94	3.09	4.03
1913	2,607,967	7,916,781	294,663,619	0.89	2.69	3.58
1914	2,100,293	4,813,932	261,906,576	0.80	1.84	2.64
1915	2,616,034	6,056,230	329,265,981	0.79	1.84	2.63
1916	2,322,653	8,175,334	404,799,847	0.57	2.02	2.59
1917	2,433,610	10,266,065	513,770,633	0.47	2.00	2.47
1918	2,471,614	14,193,438	507,019,592	0.49	2.80	3.29
1919	7,910,865	18,088,732	777,001,000	1.02	2.33	3.35

Source

Calculated from: *Straits Settlements Blue Book*, 1893-1919. Trading figures were available only for the Straits Settlements (not Singapore) from 1919 and no longer reported from 1928.

The third period: The China trade as a showcase of patriotism (1928-1949)

A National Government was installed in the new capital of Nanjing in 1928 and this was met with enthusiasm by the Chinese merchants in Singapore. Once again, they held the hope that China would progress economically and politically, and the conditions of the China trade would improve. China needed the overseas Chinese merchants to promote Chinese products and manufactured goods, but it could not simply assume that the ethnic Chinese would automatically want to export and promote commodities from China. Nanjing had to demonstrate that the commodities from China were at least equal to the standards of similar commodities in the world market.⁴⁰

From 1928, Chinese trade directories began listing many firms in Singapore which conducted trade in Chinese merchandise.⁴¹ The list increased with each publication as firms realised the value of publicity. There was also an increase in the number of trade associations established in Singapore. However, the Great Depression "hit Singapore particularly hard" because it was dependent on international trade.⁴² Chinese businesses suffered. The prominent overseas Chinese community leader Tan Kah Kee lost his business empire in February 1934, for which he blamed the board of directors of Tan Kah Kee & Co Ltd for wanting to continue business dealings with an individual from London whom he denounced as an 'evil merchant'.⁴³

With Chinese nationalism (including overseas Chinese nationalism) on the rise following reunification of the country in 1928, the production, promotion and export of Chinese goods as "national products" (國貨) played an important economic and political role for both the National Government and the merchants in Singapore.⁴⁴ The latter openly supported the campaign to promote Chinese goods as "national products" as a patriotic activity, which also benefitted their business. Under the guise of a "national products" campaign, the National Government embarked on a policy of trade protectionism by encouraging the Chinese community in Singapore to buy Chinese goods, even though China enjoyed a favourable trade balance with Malaya and Singapore.⁴⁵

A "national products exhibition" was included in the agenda of a meeting of the SCCC in October 1931.⁴⁶ Annual national products exhibitions were organised in Singapore in 1935 and 1936 by Chinese chambers of commerce in Malaya and Singapore, which showcased Chinese goods to the region.⁴⁷ The first exhibition

⁴⁰ Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003).

⁴¹ See, for example, Tong Zida 童子達, *Xinjiapo Geye Diaocha* 新加坡各業調查 [A survey of various trades in Singapore] (Singapore: Xinjiapo Nanyang Gongshang Buxi Xuexiao, 1928); Pan Xingnong 潘醒農, *Xinjiapo Zhinan* 新加坡指南 [Directory of Singapore] (Singapore: Nanyang Chubanshe, 1932); C W Moses Yang, *Anglo-Chinese Commercial Directory of Malaya* (Singapore: n.p., 1935).

⁴² Turnbull, *History of Modern Singapore*, p. 146.

⁴³ Tan Kah-kee, *The Memoirs of Tan Kah-kee*, edited and translated with notes by A H C Ward, Raymond W Chu and Janet Salaff (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1994), pp. 332-333; C F Yong, *Tan Kah-kee: The Making of an Overseas Chinese Legend* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 64-78.

⁴⁴ Pan Junxiang 潘君祥, *Jindai Zhongguo Guohuo Yundong Yanjiu* 近代中國國貨運動研究 [Analysis of the promotion of national products in modern China] (Shanghai: Shanghai Shehui Kexueyuan Chubanshe, 1998); Hwei-ying Kuo, 'Rescuing Businesses through Transnationalism: Embedded Chinese Enterprise and Nationalist Activities in Singapore in the 1930s Great Depression', *Enterprise & Society*, 7, 1 (2006): 98-127.

⁴⁵ Fukuda Shozo, "China and the Overseas Chinese Economy", in *China and Southeast Asia*, volume 5, ed. Geoff Wade (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 205.

⁴⁶ Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, *80th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry* (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1986), p. 124.

⁴⁷ Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, *Xinjiapo Zhonghua Zongshanghui Guohuo Kuoda Zhanlan Tuixiao Dahui Tekan* 新加坡中華總商會國貨擴大展覽推銷大會特刊 [Special publication on the exhibition and sale of national products organised by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce] (Singapore: Xinjiapo Zhonghua Zongshanghui Guohuo Kuoda Zhanlan Tuixiao Dahui, 1935); and Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, *Xinjiapo Zhonghua Zongshanghui Dierjie Guohuo Zhanlan Tuixiao Dahui Tekan* 新加坡中華總商會第二屆國貨展覽推銷大會特刊 [Special publication on the second exhibition of national products organised

displayed a wide array of Chinese products such as tea, biscuits, liquor, cigarettes, clothing, medicine, silk pieces and even monosodium glutamate. Advertisements in the published report carried patriotic slogans – companies promoted themselves as traders of national products or manufactured goods using only national products.⁴⁸ On 8 August 1936, the SCCC welcomed a ‘Nanyang Trade Mission’ (南洋商務考察團) from China which came with 30 chests of “national products” to be displayed at the national products exhibition at Great World Amusement Park.⁴⁹ There were instances where the sense of patriotism went overboard. Inferior or shoddy Chinese goods were passed off as “non-Chinese” or “un-Chinese” in Singapore by the Chinese merchants for fear of retaliation from zealots who rejected any notion that China would ever produce goods that were below international standards.⁵⁰ The China trade became a patriotic act which involved taking personal risks. Merchants importing Chinese products such as tea, silk and porcelain were expected to continue importing these goods in larger quantities and to promote them aggressively in Singapore.⁵¹

The British colonial authorities recognised the importance of the Chinese merchants for Singapore as an entrepôt port; at the same time they were concerned about increased Japanese competition.⁵² Japan had begun marketing its goods such as tea and silk aggressively in Singapore.⁵³ The Chinese merchants in Singapore were monitoring Japanese competition and used the national products campaign to promote the China trade at the expense of Japan and its colonies Korea and Formosa. The rise of militarism in Japan resulted in the Japanese finding ways and means to gain a permanent foothold in China. The Chinese merchants in Singapore saw the promotion of Chinese “national products” as a golden opportunity to do their part for China while attempting to stave off the Japanese challenge. They met with some success and Taiwanese products such as tea were exported to the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo instead of Southeast Asia. The Great Depression had affected some Chinese businesses badly and the promotion, import and sale of China goods were ways to pick themselves up from near collapse.

Merchants who depended on the export of Malayan goods such as rubber and tin found it difficult to maintain their business empire during the Depression. Britain promoted the trade in “empire products” and that worked against the Chinese merchants engaged in the import of silk and textiles into Singapore. According to the Importation of Textiles (Quotas) Ordinance (Chapter 162), merchants could only import the following quantities from China: 800,051 linear yards of unbleached cotton, 10,145,075 linear yards of dyed cotton, 236,184 linear yards of printed cotton, 1,468 linear yards of woven coloured cotton, 292 linear yards of cotton sarongs, 1,005,331 linear yards of artificial silk piece goods, and 2,158 linear yards of silk sarongs.

by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce] (Singapore: Xinjiapo Zhonghua Zongshanghui Dierjie Guohuo Zhanlan Tuixiao Dahui, 1936).

⁴⁸ Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, *Xinjiapo Zhonghua Zongshanghui Guohuo Kuoda Zhanlan Tuixiao Dahui Tekan* (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1935).

⁴⁹ Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, *80th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine*, p. 127.

⁵⁰ Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea*, pp. 122-123; and Yen, *Modern Overseas Chinese History*, p. 146.

⁵¹ One example would be the visit by Wu Juenong (吳覺農) (representing the National Economic Council in Nanjing) and Kuah Chong Cheng (柯仲正) (representing the Fujian Provincial Government) to Singapore in May 1935. They urged the Chinese tea merchants to import more tea but were told that the tea industry in Fujian should be modernised first. Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea*, p. 115.

⁵² Straits Settlements Trade Commission, *Report of the Commission Appointed by His Excellency the Governor to the Straits Settlements to Enquire into and Report on the Trade of the Colony 1933-1934* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1934), pp. 41 and 55.

⁵³ Li Yuping 李宇平, “1930 Niandai Chuqi Dongya Quyu Jingji Zhongxin De Bianhua – Riben Kuozhang Shuchu Yu Zhongguo Jingji Xiaotiao” 1930年代初期東亞區域經濟重心的變化~日本擴張輸出與中國經濟蕭條 [The transformation of East Asia’s economic core during the early 1930s: Japan’s expanded exports and China’s economic depression], *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica*, 43 (2004): 57-116; and Lin Manhong 林滿紅, “Ribei Zhengfu Yu Taiwan Jimin De Dongnanya Touzi” 日本政府與臺灣籍民的東南亞投資, 1895-1945 [Japanese government and Taiwanese investment in Southeast Asia, 1895-1945], *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica*, 32 (1999): 1-56.

Chinese merchants, however, continued to promote Chinese textiles. Merchants who dealt with the import and sale of other China merchandise in Singapore found that their open support for the import and sale of “national products” worked to their business advantage.

China’s call to the overseas Chinese merchants to promote their “national products” continued relentlessly even after Japan invaded China on 7 July 1937. In October 1938, with large parts of eastern China in the hands of the Japanese, the National Government retreated inland and moved the capital to Chongqing. A rival puppet regime headed by Wang Jingwei (汪精衛) was installed by the Japanese in Nanjing in March 1940. The invasion and subsequent division of China ignited overseas nationalism among the Chinese merchants in Malaya and Singapore. From a promotion of things Chinese, the merchants changed tactics and adopted an outright anti-Japanese stance. To the merchants, the China trade had come under direct threat from the Japanese and they should provide support for the beleaguered National Government and promote the China trade in areas that had not fallen to the Japanese. This psychological boost to the National Government complemented the China trade as trading links with Chongqing continued.

Most overseas Chinese merchants refused to trade with Chinese merchants based in Japanese-occupied areas of China, the State of Manchukuo and northern China under the Wang Jingwei regime. There are exceptions, of course: a notable one might be Aw Boon Haw (胡文虎), a Hakka merchant of Chinese medicinal goods born in Rangoon. The fact that he was denied entry into Singapore by the Governor in 1949 on the grounds that he was a collaborator could be perceived as a public acceptance (but not confirmation) that Aw had placed business and personal interests before national interests.⁵⁴ Until the 1930s, there were Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia who took on multiple citizenships in order to protect their families and businesses during uncertain times.⁵⁵ The assumption that all Chinese merchants in the 1930s remained steadfastly loyal to China was not necessarily well-founded.

The situation was not any brighter for those who remained loyal to the ROC. The outbreak of war with Japan in July 1937 meant that, for the National Government, the survival of the country was paramount. If it meant brushing aside overseas Chinese merchants’ concerns on the China trade, it had to be done. The National Government needed financial, material and psychological support from the overseas Chinese; yet the China trade needed to remain under the control of Chongqing in order to ensure that the flow of money would not end up in the hands of the Wang regime or the Japanese. Bureaucratic channels increased and the merchants found that they had to complete paperwork from one department to the next and punishments were enforced if the flow of documents was disrupted in any way.⁵⁶

Rather than trade with the Wang regime, Manchukuo and Taiwan, which would have made them part of the Japanese-sponsored Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, most overseas Chinese merchants chose to restrict themselves to domestic trade in Malaya or shut down their businesses altogether during the Pacific theatre of World War II from 1941 to 1945. Some merchants fled to China as conditions worsened.⁵⁷ Most trade associations suspended their activities. The Singapore

⁵⁴ For more about Aw’s possible collaboration with the Japanese, see Huang Jianli, “Entanglement of Business and Politics in the Chinese Diaspora: Interrogating the Wartime Patriotism of Aw Boon Haw”, *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 2, 1 (2006): 79-110. See also Sherman Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men: Consumer Culture in China and Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 118-150.

⁵⁵ Man-houng Lin, “Overseas Chinese Merchants and Multiple Nationality: A Means for Reducing Commercial Risk (1895-1935)”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 35, 4 (2001): 985-1009.

⁵⁶ Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea*, pp. 134-137.

⁵⁷ Xie Peiping 謝培屏, *Zhanhou Yifan Huaqiao Shiliao Huibian – Yuenan, Heshu Dongyindu, Bei Boluozhou, Malaiya, Xinjiapo, Nanyang Huaqiao Jigong Pian* 戰後遣返華僑史料匯編 (3) ~越南、荷屬東印度、北波羅洲、馬來亞、新加坡、南洋華僑機工篇 [Repatriated Overseas Chinese Sending Abroad Again after World War II – A Documentary Collection, Vol. III: Vietnam, Dutch East Indies, North Borneo, Malaya, Singapore, Overseas Chinese Mechanics] (Taipei: Academia Historica, 2005), pp. 249-250.

Chinese Tea Importers' and Exporters' Association did not hold any meetings.⁵⁸ The Singapore Rattan Industry Association recorded that "though the association's business did not come to a complete halt, it was in the state of inactivity".⁵⁹ Business associations only became active again after the Japanese surrender in 1945, "like the surging bamboo shoots after the rain in spring".⁶⁰ New Chinese businesses that appeared in post-war Singapore meant the potential for the formation of new trade associations. There were about 50 shops dealing with porcelain and ceramics after the war, leading to the formation of the Singapore Chinaware Merchants Association in 1951.⁶¹

With the end of World War II, Singapore Chinese tea merchant Lim Keng Lian (林慶年), who worked as a wartime parliamentarian in Chongqing, wrote to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September, urging it to make arrangements to send Chinese from Malaya and Singapore who had fled the Japanese invasion in 1942 back to their homes so that they could re-establish their businesses.⁶² Merchants involved with the rubber and mining industries were given priority to return to Malaya and Singapore.⁶³ The colonial government in Singapore continued to recognise the importance of the Chinese merchant in the entrepôt trade. However, it also recognised that the trade could not be immediately re-established because of trade restrictions imposed by other states and colonies.⁶⁴

The National Government expected the merchants to restore rubber and tin exports to China. It attached a high level of importance to China's trade with Malaya and Singapore and established a permanent office of the "Commercial Adviser to the Consul-General" in Singapore. The first Commercial Adviser, Lee Chi Fu (李直夫), was appointed by Nanjing in November 1946 and his role was to promote better trade relations between Singapore, Malaya and China. He would be the key person to provide assistance to any local merchant who had problems in their business with China.⁶⁵ The colonial government in Singapore, however, placed great importance on Singapore's trade with the Dutch East Indies,⁶⁶ to the detriment of those involved in the China trade, who had to refer their problems to the Commercial Adviser rather than the government of the new Crown Colony of Singapore. However, the National Government had to fight for its own survival with the outbreak of civil war between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Merchants who had placed so much hope on the revival of the China trade found themselves let down once again by the National Government.⁶⁷

The fourth period: The China trade as a pawn in international relations (1949-1959)

By early 1949, it had become clear that China was either going to be split into two like Korea and Germany, or that the CCP would win the civil war. Overseas Chinese merchants were caught between the KMT and the CCP. Several merchants in

⁵⁸ Records of the Singapore Chinese Tea Importers' and Exporters' Association, Minutes of Annual General Meetings and Executive Committee Meetings, 1928-1976, Microfilm No. NA 531, National Archives of Singapore [hereafter NAS].

⁵⁹ Singapore Rattan Industry Association, *Singapore Rattan Industry Association 70th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine* (Singapore: Singapore Rattan Industry Association, 1979), p. 63.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Singapore Chinaware Merchants Association, *Commemorative Souvenir*, foreword, n. p.

⁶² Xie, *Zhanhou Yifan Huaqiao Shiliao Huibian*, p. 241.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-260 & 269.

⁶⁴ Singapore, British Military Administration, Department of Trade and Industry, *The Entrepôt Trade of Singapore* (Singapore: Department of Publicity and Printing, 1945), pp. 16-21.

⁶⁵ *The Straits Times*, 13 February 1947.

⁶⁶ He Fengjiao 何鳳嬌, *Dongnanya Huaqiao Ziliao Huibian (Yi)* 東南亞華僑資料匯編 (一) [Documentary Collection on Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, Volume 1] (Taipei: Academia Historica, 1999), pp. 510 & 524-526.

⁶⁷ "Yu Qiaowehui Fu Weiyuanzhang Lin Qingnian Tan Qiaowu" 與僑委會副委員長林慶年談僑務 [Interview with Lim Keng Lian, deputy chairman of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, on overseas Chinese affairs], *Huaqiao Gongshang Daobao* 華僑工商導報, 6 (1948): 22-23.

Singapore decided to test the waters and began negotiations for trade with communist-occupied North China (which included Manchuria). In February 1949, a group of Chinese merchants in Singapore planned to set up a \$1,000,000 syndicate with merchants in Hong Kong to conduct trade with North China. Lee Kong Chian, a prominent rubber magnate based in Singapore, insisted that 'in the interest of Malaya's prosperity, trade with China must be encouraged'.⁶⁸ Shipments of rubber from Malaya were sent to Hong Kong on a barter basis for soya beans from Manchuria.⁶⁹

An early act of the Central People's Government after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was proclaimed on 1 October 1949 in Beijing was to maintain the KMT government's policy of seeking overseas Chinese support. The CCP 'devoted much attention "to overseas Chinese affairs and encouraged them to return by assuring them of 'favourable circumstances for living" in China.⁷⁰ The new Constitution of the PRC passed in September 1954 continued to recognise that the rights and interests of the overseas Chinese would be protected by the new regime. However, Beijing created a system of "somewhat bewildering complexity" to implement this.⁷¹ Party politics and government responsibilities were indistinguishable as the work of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (OCAC) seemed to follow closely that of the Overseas Work Committee of the Central Committee of the CCP.⁷² Added to that, the OCAC worked closely with the United Front Work Department and the Propaganda Department of the CCP.⁷³ It left Chinese merchants wondering if it was safe to return to China and/or continue with the China trade.

China was embroiled in an ideological conflict with the Western powers in the Cold War and had to deal with any threat, military or otherwise, that could see the collapse of the PRC. The government's concern with the overseas Chinese further declined when it found that the overseas Chinese could not be depended on as "an unflagging source of foreign exchange".⁷⁴ While the CCP targeted merchants at home as "capitalists" or "bourgeoisie", they chose to treat the overseas Chinese differently in the early years of the PRC. It could not afford to be alienated from them by appearing to be anti-capitalist. The PRC encouraged the overseas Chinese to return to their hometowns to conduct the China trade. These "returned migrants" could participate in the development of Chinese agriculture and industry, and the goods produced could be exported to their clients overseas.⁷⁵ A category of *youdai* (優待) was created for overseas Chinese merchants in the 1950s.⁷⁶ At the same time, the rival National Government in Taipei urged the overseas Chinese to continue their support for the ROC by transferring the China trade to Taiwan (whatever remained of the ROC), and promised that the merchants would enjoy favourable exchange rates when they imported goods from Taiwan.

However, the overseas Chinese merchants were imbued with political and economic realism. Despite the official statements from Beijing, they felt marginalised, forgotten and were afraid of threats of punishment if they set foot in China. Not only

⁶⁸ *The Straits Times*, 5 February 1949.

⁶⁹ *The Straits Times*, 11 February 1949.

⁷⁰ Zhuang Guotu, "The Policies of the Chinese Government towards Overseas Chinese (1949-1966)", in *The Chinese Diaspora: Selected Essays (Volume I)*, ed. Wang Ling-chi and Wang Gungwu (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), p. 15.

⁷¹ Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. xiii.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Chan Ngor Chong, "PRC Policy on the Overseas Chinese", in *ASEAN and China: An Evolving Relationship*, ed. Joyce K Kallgren, Noordin Sopiee and Soedjati Djihadono (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1988), p. 129.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

⁷⁵ The Fujian People's Government even produced a booklet on life for "returned overseas Chinese" in the province after 1949. Fuzhou Shi Guiguo Huaqiao Lianyihui 福州市歸國華僑聯誼會, *Fujian Guigiao Shouce* 福建歸僑手冊 [A handbook for returning overseas Chinese in Fujian] (Fuzhou: Fuzhou Shi Guiguo Huaqiao Lianyihui, 1955), pp. 1-84.

⁷⁶ Glen Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 55-74.

were they merchants – which made them “enemies of the people” because of their wealth – many prominent overseas Chinese merchants such as Lee Choon Seng (李俊承), Lim Keng Lian and Tan Chor Nam (陳楚楠) were supporters of the KMT.⁷⁷ There was the possibility that either Chinese government policies or the Cold War situation in eastern Asia could lead to the closure of the China trade. The loss of such a huge market would be a major blow to overseas Chinese merchants, who responded with a two-pronged approach. First, they tried to negotiate with both the governments of China and Singapore for better conditions to trade with China. Secondly, they looked for alternative markets for their exports and imported similar goods from outside China. This was the opposite of the “national products” movement a decade earlier – it was now rational to import tea, silk and ceramics from Ceylon, India and Japan instead of relying on Chinese imports. The merchants in Singapore were caught in between the ROC and the PRC amidst the decolonisation of Southeast Asia. As Wang Gungwu described the situation:

The new nation-states [in Southeast Asia] found themselves divided between those that sided with the Western powers and those that leaned towards China and the Soviet bloc. In this context, the Chinese sojourners in the region were much more vulnerable than others. If they remained sojourners, they were forced to choose between mainland China and the Republic of China in Taiwan. If they decided to settle and become citizens of the newly independent states, they had to convince the national governments of their change of loyalties. Even then, they remained politically suspect.⁷⁸

Merchants such as Tan Lark Sye (陳六使) supported the PRC because they regarded the former KMT regime in Nanjing as corrupt and inefficient. Tan was at the forefront of the call for the end to British embargo on the export of Malayan rubber to China that had been enforced in 1951 after China entered the Korean War on the side of North Korea. Yet Tan, like many Chinese traders in Singapore, would not cast aside their businesses and return to China. In June 1956, Tan Kah Kee – as Vice-Chairman of the People’s Political Consultative Conference in Beijing – called on all overseas Chinese to return to China to “take part in the socialist construction to help raise living standards and promote the unity of Chinese living abroad”.⁷⁹ However, Tan’s own family chose to remain in Singapore, explaining that overseas Chinese with established businesses in Malaya and Singapore were “not likely to throw these away and return to China”.⁸⁰

Singapore attained some degree of internal self-government in 1955. In March 1956, Chief Minister David Marshall urged the British government to lift the ban on rubber exports from Malaya.⁸¹ The Marshall government was “anxious to reopen trade relations” with China to ensure the survival of Singapore’s status as an entrepôt port.⁸² Tan Lark Sye also called on other rubber merchants to negotiate with China as soon as possible “if they did not want to be left behind in the rubber trade”.⁸³ In a change of policy, J M Jumabhoy, the Singapore Minister of Commerce and Industry, announced on 4 June 1956 that some restrictions on rubber exports to China would be lifted. Recognising that the embargo had been “a source of great dissatisfaction to the trade”, the Minister announced in the Singapore Legislative Assembly two days later that “reasonable quantities” of rubber could henceforth be exported to China. Jumabhoy gave a statement to the effect that individual applications for exports would be dealt with by the Ministry but “larger quantities” for export would be referred to the Colonial

⁷⁷ C F Yong and R B McKenna, *The Kuomintang Movement in British Malaya, 1912-1949* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), pp. 199-225. Many of these “old timers” died by the mid-1970s.

⁷⁸ Wang Gungwu, “Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia”, p. 10.

⁷⁹ For more on Tan’s life after 1949, see Yong, *Tan Kah-Kee*, pp. 298-348.

⁸⁰ *The Straits Times*, 19 June 1956; and *The Straits Times*, 22 June 1956.

⁸¹ *The Straits Times*, 29 March 1956.

⁸² *The Straits Times*, 9 May 1956.

⁸³ *The Straits Times*, 27 June 1956.

Office in London. He did not define what constituted “reasonable” or “larger” quantities.⁸⁴

The high point of the China trade for the pro-PRC merchants was a pan-Malayan Trade Mission to the PRC in June 1956 with former Chief Minister Marshall as the mission’s advisor. Organised by the SCCC, the mission were introduced to various industrialisation projects as they negotiated with the Central People’s Government on the possibilities of greater trade between China, Malaya and Singapore.⁸⁵ China needed Malayan rubber for its fledgling industries but Marshall got the impression that the Chinese Government was not interested in trade *per se*, and were more eager to discuss citizenship for the Chinese community in Singapore and the “liberation” of Taiwan.⁸⁶ Chinese officials brushed aside the trade mission, insisting that the rubber trade between China, Malaya and Singapore should only be conducted through the Singapore Rubber Trade Association (SRTA) rather than the Singapore Chamber of Commerce Rubber Association (SCCRA).⁸⁷ The former association comprised local Chinese merchants whereas the latter was an internationally-recognised association. Furthermore, China insisted that she would not accept any rubber unless Malaya and Singapore accepted China’s condition that payment would be made *after* delivery, which went against international norms.⁸⁸ The Chinese merchants from Malaya and Singapore caved in to the Chinese demands and announced within three days that China had placed an order for 3,000 tons of Malayan rubber worth \$6,100,000 – its the first order since 1950.⁸⁹ By the time the mission left Beijing for Manchuria three weeks later, about \$25 million worth of business was sealed, mainly in rubber, rice and other foodstuffs but including a large variety of small contracts.⁹⁰

The China trade was no longer about business and commerce – it had become political. While not a member of the mission, Tan Keong Choon (陳共存), nephew of Tan Kah Kee, knew that “China always viewed her business transactions with Singapore in a political perspective”. With the end of private enterprise by the mid-1950s, trade came under the purview of Chinese government officials who were “not very conversant with business transactions” while those who were capable of conducting trade had no real power.⁹¹ The colonial powers remained suspicious of both Beijing and the Chinese merchants in Singapore. Internal notes in the Department of External Affairs (DEA) in Canberra recorded that “Singapore, with its 80% Chinese population, is regarded as a particularly fertile ground for this ‘trade subversion’”. The interest shown by Beijing to participate in a Singapore International Trade Exhibition in 1957 was viewed with suspicion by the DEA, since the organising committee was dominated by members of the Trade Mission to China and “all indications are that the exhibit was financed by the Chinese Government through the Bank of China”.⁹²

⁸⁴ *Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates Official Report: First Session of the First Legislative Assembly*, 6 June 1956, cols 1951-1952.

⁸⁵ Chan Heng Chee, *A Sensation of Independence: David Marshall – A Political Biography* (Singapore: Times Books International, 2001), pp. 201-229; and David Marshall, *Letters from Mao’s China*, edited by Michael Leifer (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1996).

⁸⁶ Chan, *A Sensation of Independence*, p. 223.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; and *The Straits Times*, 3 September 1956.

⁸⁸ *The Straits Times*, 4 September 1956.

⁸⁹ *The Straits Times*, 11 September 1956.

⁹⁰ *The Straits Times*, 13 September 1956. For more about the trade missions to China and Taiwan, see Jason Lim, “To Negotiate Trade and Avoid Politics: The Overseas Chinese Trade Missions to China and Taiwan, 1956-1957”, in *Studying Singapore’s Past: C. M. Turnbull and the History of Modern Singapore*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), pp. 207-227.

⁹¹ Accession number A000052/24, reel 22, interview with Tan Keong Choon by the Oral History Centre (OHC), 1981, NAS.

⁹² Series number A1838, Control symbol TS383/5/3 Part 2, *Singapore – Top Secret Documents, 1956-66*, folios 109-110, National Archives of Australia (NAA).

To complicate matters, there were also merchants in Singapore who remained loyal to the KMT. This group of pro-Taipei merchants was smaller in number than the pro-Beijing group and, therefore not very vocal. The colonial (and later national) government of Singapore also placed restrictions on the activities of the KMT within their borders because the party had insisted that the overseas Chinese should pledge their loyalty only to the ROC.⁹³ Furthermore, the pro-KMT merchants could not effectively promote the import and sale of Taiwanese goods into Malaya and Singapore for Taiwan, a small island, produced far fewer goods than the mainland for the overseas Chinese communities. All that the pro-Taipei merchants in Malaya and Singapore could do was to go on a trade mission to Taiwan in 1957 (in response to the mission sent to the PRC a year earlier) and contribute financially to various projects on the island.⁹⁴

The introduction of citizenship to residents in Singapore as the British withdrew from Southeast Asia was another issue that affected the Chinese merchants. During the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (周恩來) encouraged overseas Chinese to take up citizenship in their countries of residence. Once they did so, the Chinese merchants could continue to conduct the China trade as “foreigners”. These merchants then looked towards the home governments for improvements to the China trade as well as protection should they go to China. The Chinese traders saw the dangers of returning to China as the Anti-Rightist campaign had targeted some families of overseas Chinese and the returned overseas Chinese as being in the landlord or bourgeois class.⁹⁵ The Chinese government also saw the need to sever political and ideological links with the overseas Chinese in order to ensure smooth relations with Sino-Southeast Asian governments. Work was also scaled down in the United Front Department of the CCP.⁹⁶ Leo Suryadinata has argued that the overseas Chinese were discouraged by the Chinese authorities from returning to China because “this was not just the most effective means of improving relations with Southeast Asia but was the most practical means of unburdening itself of its own Overseas Chinese problem”.⁹⁷

The PRC continued to export products such as tobacco, medicines, tea, porcelain, silk and handicrafts.⁹⁸ Although it was claimed that “the economic development in China has created very favourable conditions”⁹⁹ for the further development of China trade with Singapore, the PRC intended to maintain and assert control over it. Beijing insisted that merchants in Singapore could no longer import goods from China on their own. With the end of private property came the end of private enterprise in China and trade was transferred from the hands of private entrepreneurs with family business networks across China and Singapore into those of Chinese government officials working in state enterprises. Overseas Chinese merchants who had returned to China for trade purposes had to join state companies to form “state-private ownership companies” (公私合營). It was declared that “all local governments” exercised caution and “adopted steady measures” during the “socialist transformation” of their

⁹³ Jens Damm, “Overseas Chinese and Taiwan: Unresolved Questions of Identity and Belonging”, in *Taiwanese Identity from Domestic, Regional and Global Perspectives*, ed. Jens Damm and Gunther Schubert (Berlin: LIT, 2007), p. 85.

⁹⁴ Jason Lim, “The Education Concerns and Political Outlook of Lim Keng Lian (1893-1968)”, *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 3, 2 (2007): 211; and Xingma Kaochatuan Zai Taiwan 星馬考察團在臺灣, *Xingma Kaochatuan Zai Taiwan 星馬考察團在臺灣* [The Singapore and Malaya Mission in Taiwan] (Singapore: Dacheng Tushu Zazhi Chubanshe, 1957).

⁹⁵ Zhuang, “The Politics of the Chinese Government towards Overseas Chinese”, p. 27.

⁹⁶ Chan, “PRC Policy on the Overseas Chinese”, p. 131.

⁹⁷ Leo Suryadinata, *China and the ASEAN States: The Ethnic Chinese Dimension* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985), p. 63.

⁹⁸ Ta Kung Pao, *Trade with China: A Practical Guide* (Hong Kong: Ta Kung Pao, 1957), pp. 1-10.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

businesses.¹⁰⁰ The category of *youdai* was done away with.¹⁰¹ The merchants in Singapore had to form a single company to trade with a state enterprise for the purchase, transport and import of any Chinese commodity.

The merchants regarded the demand from Beijing for them to be organised into single companies in their territories of residence in order to trade with China was unreasonable. Many of them had built up a clientele over the decades of operating their business and the idea of coming together to register a single company per commodity was deemed to be unsound. The new arrangement benefitted China because a state enterprise conducting the China trade in one commodity would only need look to a single company in Singapore for exports. The Chinese merchants in Malaya and Singapore had to send their orders to a single company, which would then forward the consolidated order to the relevant state enterprise in China. It was under such circumstances that the tea merchants in Singapore formed Giam Kay Tea Company (Pte) Ltd (巖溪茶行有限公司) to trade with the China Tea Company in Xiamen in February 1960.¹⁰² Similarly, Teochew, Cantonese and Hokkien silk and cloth traders in Singapore organised themselves into a single company to trade with China. Hakka traders formed another company.¹⁰³

However, rather than rely on the China trade for a living, Chinese merchants in Singapore continued to look for other trading partners. There were also problems with the availability and standards of Chinese goods. Agricultural goods were becoming more expensive as a widespread famine had led to limited production of commodities for export. Chinese products were regarded as shoddy and unreliable. The merchants could no longer depend on the China trade to survive. Tea merchants in Singapore looked towards Taiwan, India, Ceylon and Indonesia for supplies. Herbal specialists purchased their supplies from Hong Kong and Taiwan.¹⁰⁴ The Singapore Piece Goods Traders' Guild went on a trade mission to South Korea and South Vietnam in August 1956 and reported the opening of 25 Japanese textile firms in Singapore.¹⁰⁵ By 1956, more cloth was imported from Japan than China and new export partners included Indonesia (despite a trade embargo that year), Thailand, South Vietnam and Burma.¹⁰⁶ Land and economic reforms in Taiwan also meant that the island had become an economic powerhouse and more of its products were making an entry into the Malaya and Singapore markets.¹⁰⁷

In 1958, the Labour Front government noted that 'the greater part of the international trade of Singapore is entrepôt trade'.¹⁰⁸ By 1959, as self-government loomed ahead for Singapore, the British colonial government continued to express its concern about the possibility of China dumping its goods on Singapore since 75 per cent of the population were ethnic Chinese. It began to review Singapore's position as an entrepôt for free trade and accused Beijing of "spreading goods...at prices that have taken even Hongkong and Japan aback".¹⁰⁹ Sir William Goode, the Governor of Singapore, was

¹⁰⁰ Zhuang, "The Policies of the Chinese Government towards Overseas Chinese", p. 21.

¹⁰¹ Peterson, *Overseas Chinese*, pp. 138-162.

¹⁰² Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea*, p. 182.

¹⁰³ Singapore Piece Goods Traders Guild, *85th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine* (Singapore: Singapore Piece Goods Traders Guild, 1994), p. 96.

¹⁰⁴ Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea*, p. 166; and accession number A002526/87, reel 20, interview with Theng Kar Pheng by the OHC, 2001, NAS.

¹⁰⁵ Singapore Textile Traders Association, *100th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ *Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce Annual Report 1956*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ Sun Zhen 孫震, "Taiwan Zhidui Dongnanya Maoyi" 臺灣之對東南亞貿易 [Taiwanese trade with Southeast Asia], *Taiwan Yinhang Jikan* 臺灣銀行季刊, 15, 3 (1964): 148.

¹⁰⁸ Singapore, Legislative Assembly, *The External Trade and Balance of Payments of Singapore, 1956*, Legislative Assembly Sessional Paper No. Cmd. 3 of 1958, 20 March 1958, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Singapore: Newspaper Clippings, 1959-60*, "Singapore Ends Free Trade", *The Times*, 15 August 1958, NAA. Series and item numbers are unavailable as I found this newspaper clipping, and others, among the collection of files from the NAA in the Library of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) in Singapore in 2010.

concerned that "Singapore is particularly suitable as a target for the Chinese trade drive" and that "cheap Chinese goods have been eagerly received by Chinese importers". However, Sir William also had a comforting message that "Chinese goods have not flooded or even dominated the market in any field".¹¹⁰ The reality for the Chinese merchants, however, was that the China trade continued to be crucial for the survival of their businesses and that the trade with Taiwan was almost negligible with the exception of 1959 (see Table 8). The low volume of exports to China from 1952 to 1958 was on account of the Singapore government's suspicions of China during the Cold War.

¹¹⁰ CO 1030/610, *Suspension of Exports from China to Singapore*, letter from Sir William Goode to A M MacKintosh, 24 November 1958, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA).

Table 8

SINGAPORE-CHINA TRADE, 1950-1959

In Singapore dollars

Year	Imports			Exports		
	From China	Total Imports	Percentage	To China	Total Exports	Percentage
1950	76,851,746	2,124,451,945	3.62	106,024,350	2,480,203,882	4.27
1951	98,869,651	3,593,683,855	2.75	83,429,223	4,016,008,428	2.08
1952	85,096,168	2,596,620,908	3.28	5,156,976	2,340,896,775	0.22
1953	81,848,910	2,343,206,246	3.49	4,131,678	1,990,867,098	0.21
1954	67,986,948	2,330,141,041	2.92	13,934,686	2,054,334,428	0.68
1955	91,236,308	2,865,436,208	3.18	10,849,186	2,781,798,833	0.39
1956	102,676,705	3,098,288,050	3.31	15,221,644	2,732,820,168	0.56
1957	123,668,869	4,062,131,053	3.04	20,379,562	3,478,132,952	0.59
1958	150,383,644	3,740,065,027	4.02	7,996,041	3,140,455,652	0.25
1959	131,374,377	3,908,307,986	3.36	115,972,895	3,440,262,558	3.37

Year	Imports			Exports		
	From Taiwan	Total Imports	Percentage	To Taiwan	Total Exports	Percentage
1950	11,189,696	2,124,451,945	0.53	696,878	2,480,203,882	0.03
1951	22,393,776	3,593,683,855	0.62	3,393,249	4,016,008,428	0.08
1952	15,424,780	2,596,620,908	0.22	236,804	2,340,896,775	0.01
1953	15,614,473	2,343,206,246	0.21	5,661,701	1,990,867,098	0.28
1954	8,865,518	2,330,141,041	0.68	5,293,972	2,054,334,428	0.26
1955	17,634,253	2,865,436,208	0.39	6,318,950	2,781,798,833	0.23
1956	30,538,367	3,098,288,050	0.56	9,282,441	2,732,820,168	0.34
1957	31,796,749	4,062,131,053	0.59	17,600	3,478,132,952	0.0005
1958	19,066,050	3,740,065,027	0.25	30,344	3,140,455,652	0.001

Year	Imports			Exports		
	From Taiwan	Total Imports	Percentage	To Taiwan	Total Exports	Percentage
1959	17,611,978	3,908,307,986	3.37	9,679,056	3,440,262,558	0.28

Sources:*External Trade of Malaya, 1950-1955**Singapore External Trade, 1956-1959*

Conclusion

Chinese merchants in Singapore had to adapt to the political situation in China and face the changing demands and expectations from the Chinese governments. The merchants also had to negotiate with China for better terms of trade or seek other trading partners to ensure that their livelihood would not be adversely affected. The trade with China was important, not for Singapore, but for Chinese merchants on the island. There was an early attempt to promote the China trade but it had declined by the late 19th century. It was up to the Chinese merchants to promote and sell Chinese merchandise in Singapore. Between 1893 when the Qing court began wooing Chinese merchants for the royalist cause to 1928 when the National Government was organised at Nanjing, the trade was considered a panacea for the economic woes faced by China. Overseas Chinese nationalism was a means by which the Chinese merchants could achieve economic survival during the Great Depression and Japanese competition from 1928 to 1949. Trade with China was badly hit after 1949 due to the Cold War.

The China trade should not be dismissed as one which the Chinese participated in simply because they came from China or that they were ethnic Chinese. The Chinese merchants saw a market for imported goods for the consumption of the Chinese community in Singapore. The governments of Singapore stood in their way during the Cold War, while China flexed its muscles and placed its own interests above that of overseas Chinese merchants. From domestic conflicts to war and revolution, politics played a key role in how the Chinese government tried to use, or distance itself from, the Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia when it suited them.

The China trade remained crucial to the livelihood of the Chinese merchants in Singapore, particularly for those who directly imported Chinese goods for the Chinese community. They threw their support behind the KMT, which had ended imperial rule and then led China through the Sino-Japanese War. However, China's internal problems and those with Japan put the China trade in jeopardy. After the founding of the PRC, those who believed that the CCP could make China rise from the economic doldrums urged for greater trade with the PRC; this group also included merchants who saw the potential of a huge market. The merchants also saw the advantages of trading with either the PRC or the ROC from Singapore, as Singapore citizens. They monitored the political ties between China and Singapore closely.

The Chinese merchants in Singapore had always realised that the conditions of the trade was beyond their control. It is unlikely that most of them were either "agents" for the Nationalists before 1949 or "fifth columnists" for communists following that, with special political connections.¹¹¹ The merchants were not even able to negotiate with the Chinese government on how best to improve the terms of trade. For its part, the Chinese governments did not see the trade as one between two equal partners even as contemporary researchers in China argued that trade with Singapore was vital for China.¹¹²

¹¹¹ The British monitored the activities of the Chinese community leaders in Malaya and Singapore in the 1920s and 1930s, many of whom were members or sympathisers of the KMT. The British reports were published in *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs* in the CO273 series held at The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA) at Kew. From the 1950s to the 1970s, authors such as Fitzgerald and Andreyev wrote about how the Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia were potential "fifth columnists" for the CCP or "a Peking tool". See C P Fitzgerald, *China and Southeast Asia since 1945* (Camberwell: Longman Australia, 1973), and M A Andreyev, *Overseas Chinese Bourgeoisie: A Peking Tool in Southeast Asia* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975).

¹¹² He Bingxian 何炳賢, "Fazhan Nanyang Maoyi De Jiben Gongzuo" 發展南洋貿易的基本工作 [The basic work for developing trade with Southeast Asia], *Guoji Maoyi Daobao* 國際貿易導報, 7, 5 (1935): 81-85; Zou Lin 鄒琳, "Woguo Duiwai Maoyi Zhi Fazhan - Zhongguo Zhi Mingyun Zhongde Qishi" 我國對外貿易之發展-中國之命運中的啟示 [The development of China's foreign trade], *Xin Zhonghua Fukan* 新中華復刊, 1, 7 (1943): 50-58; Lou Liqi 婁立齊, "Zhongguo Duiwai Maoyi De Huigu He Qianzhan" 中國對外貿易的回顧和前瞻

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