

## THE CHINESE COMMUNITY DURING THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF SINGAPORE

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**Abstract:** The Chinese community in Singapore was formed from the 1820s after the British colonialists occupied Temaseck in 1819. As of 2019, 74% of the Singaporean population is Chinese origin. The Chinese community has developed inside a sovereign state with a multi-ethnic cooperation environment, developed economy and comprehensive international integration from the 1960s. However, Chinese cultural identity in the Chinese community has been preserved with a rather specific nuance, and they increasingly play a greater role in the country's economic, social and cultural life. From a historical perspective, by exploiting government statistics as well as inheriting the results of previous scientists' research, the article discusses the foundation and changes of the Chinese community in Singapore in the context of the development process of this country.

### 1. The Chinese Community in Singapore's History

The Chinese community in Singapore is the portion of people who identify themselves as Chinese with Han or Sinicization origins, who have migrated to live permanently and regularly in Singapore, who hold Singaporean nationality, and still preserve the characteristics of Chinese culture. Besides China, Singapore is the only nation in the world having the Chinese community as a majority of the population. The community has been involved in all economic sectors, political and social organizations. It is also the fifth largest Chinese community in the world (followed by the Chinese communities in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the United States).

According to Chinese documents, the Chinese came to Temasek (Singapore) very early. Several documents indicated that Chinese people have lived on the island since 1330 (Dương Văn Quảng, 2007). Other arguments showed that Chinese population groups were formed in this land in the fifteenth century (Đỗ Ngọc Toàn, 2009, p. 21). However, until 1819 when the British colonized Temasek and invested in developing technical infrastructure as well as implementing free trade policies that attracted a large number of businesses from all over the world, the island has become a destination for immigrants, including Chinese people from China and some parts of Southeast Asia. In addition, the colonial exploitation, particularly the expansion of rubber plantation and tin mines in the Malay Peninsula, has increased the number of Chinese people in Singapore. Since then, Singapore has become an attractive destination for a long-term settlement of Chinese people, especially wholesalers and port workers, and a transshipment terminal for hired laborers (coolies) from China to Southeast Asian countries and many other British colonies as well (Chee Kiong Tong, 2010, p. 58).

During the first immigrations into Singapore, most immigrants were men at the age of 15 to 40 years old. They often went through two paths, either based on kinship or through recruiters<sup>1</sup>. The immigrants to Singapore originated from the southern provinces of China such as Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan...<sup>2</sup>. There were three major immigrant groups in Singapore at the beginning, including real Chinese people who used to live in the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia, followed by Chinese residential groups crossed with Malay or Thai people, and the third one in large number migrating directly from China in the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Such massive immigration of these groups made the Chinese community from minority become a major part of the population and ethnic structure in Singapore in 1849 (Kristina Goransson, 2009, p. 21; Tran Khanh, 1991).

The proportion of Chinese expats in Singapore showed a sign of reduction by the strict immigration control and restriction command enacted in 1938. After the People's Republic of China was established on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949, the immigration movement has been even more constrained by political factors. At the same time, many Chinese and Chinese Singaporeans in Singapore got married and had children. The number of people born in the island state accounted for approximately 70% of the total Chinese population in Singapore in 1957, increasing by 20% compared to 1911 (Chee Kiong Tong, 2010, p. 58).

The previous Chinese immigrants were mostly male, so the sex ratio was unbalanced in Singapore. In 1826, official population statistics showed that among 13,750 residents, there were 5,747 Chinese men, but only 341 Chinese women (Wright Arnold & Cartwright H. A., 1907, p. 37). Besides a large number of Chinese groups, some of them got married to the local Malay people, forming a group of hybrid Chinese (commonly known as Baba Nyonya). The majority still considered themselves as Chinese, maintaining Chinese cultural identity, but they also acknowledged many Malay customs, even wearing Malay-style costumes (Chee Kiong Tong, 2010, p. 58).

Regarding community structure, Chinese people in Singapore encompassed up to five dialect groups like those in Southern China. When they came to Singapore, they

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<sup>1</sup> Kinship plays a crucial role in business in Singapore. Employers desperately need qualified workers to work in their stores. Due to dialect differences, most shop owners want to employ their fellow countrymen from China or they recruit Chinese immigrants to Singapore. If immigrants cannot afford to come to Singapore, labor brokers, captains or labor agencies will deposit in advance. The immigrants will have to make labor contracts with employers for several years to pay for travel expenses. The system of immigration trust has spread in the nineteenth century, enabling many Chinese immigrants to make the journey to Singapore and Malaysia. Trafficking in these immigrants is therefore also thriving, known as coolie trade.

<sup>2</sup> In the middle of the nineteenth century, the hostile relations between the Manchu court and the southeastern provinces of China in the context of rapid population growth led to disturbance and outbreaks of violence and rebellion. At the same time, the pressure from Western empires was increasingly strong, which seriously affected the economy of Southern China. This made the poor strata especially difficult and they must seek their way to work in the promised land. The migration of Chinese people to Singapore from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century was largely natural. Unlike settlers, these immigrants are mostly male, leaving the countryside with the intention of going away to work. In fact, a long-term migration model has not been established until the 1950s (See also Tran Khanh, 2018; Kristina Goransson, 2009, p. 22)

brought their cultural traditions, social lifestyles, and business ways. Just like in Chinese people in other Southeast Asian nations, they set up traditional social institutions in dialect groups, fellow countrymen like States, blood-related organizations such as family lines, professional organizations such as wholesale associations, cultural clubs, religious groups, etc... Among them, the associations of fellow countrymen, commonly called the State of Chinese people with Fujian and Guangdong origins were the strongest. The Fujian group accounted for 40% of the total Chinese population in Singapore before Singapore gained independence (Trần Khánh, 1991; Yuan Li Wu & Chun Hai Wu, 1985, p. 135). The associations were formed in the nineteenth century and maintained until this day. This was one of the cultural characteristics of the Chinese community. In addition to supporting and helping members materially (funding for education and social welfare, organizing religious ceremonies), harmonising social relations in the community, ensuring the orderly control in the community, the Chinese associations played an important role in preserving customs, practices, spiritual lifestyles of Chinese culture in their community as well. At the same time, the associations were also considered as a bridge in relations with the colonial government... In fact, the associations existed and developed as a power in Singaporean society under the British colonial period (Kristina Goransson, 2009, p. 22).

Besides, in the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a form of Secret Society in the Chinese community. They developed a relatively stable structure, commonly known as the offspring of “Tiandihui” and “Triad” from China. These associations were often used by the Chinese aristocrats as a tool to protect and expand the business. The British colonial government gradually realized their disadvantages for the government, so it introduced the Ordinance on the Secret Society in 1867 and 1869 to limit and control their activities (Chee Kiong Tong, 2010, p. 63; Tran Khanh, 2018).

In the Chinese community, people from the first generation of immigrants who spent their youth and perceived education in China often had a close relationship with their homeland. They were interested in social-political issues in China. They sent money to relatives, donated to Chinese Relief Funds for natural disasters, and raised money to support the China Nationalist Party, etc. Many of them thought that they would return to their “home” one day. Nevertheless, after a period settling and containing a stable job in Singapore, they married Malay people or other ethnic groups, and no longer wanted to return to their fatherland. As a result, multicultural families have been formed in Singapore, although they still claim to be Chinese.

Concerning the distribution of residential area, due to the British policy deliberately separating different ethnic groups for easier management, most Chinese people in Singapore were accommodated along the southern bank of Singapore River, right next to the British administrative area (Kristina Goransson, 2009, p. 27). In that place, they easily accessed to the sea and it was convenient for them to carry out economic activities. Since then, the community expanded to the west, to the east, into Rochore. Later, this area became China Town. According to statistics, there were five

resident groups according to the local dialect in Singapore, of which 40% were of Fujian origins living primarily in the old town of Telok Ayer, where the giant Thian Hok Keng temple was located, 18% were a group of Cantonese who mainly resided in Kreta Ayer, Chaozhouese 23%, Hakka 9%, Hainanese 7% and others 3% living in certain places according to the dialect. Each such dialect group had its own culture characterized by worship rites, funeral rites and education (East Asia Analytical Unit, 1999, p.25; Kristina Goransson, 2009, p. 27).

It should be noted that Chinese people in Singapore under the British colonialism left their own imprints in education. Most Chinese schools were independently separated under the relative control of the government. Community and family associations invested resources in building schools, taking initiative in the source of teachers, curriculum as well as the learning language. The school education program tended to maintain Chinese identity. Therefore, Chinese language schools were often sensitive to political events taking place in China. This was also one of the reasons that in 1920, the British government introduced the Education Ordinance to control directly, especially programs and educational contents of these schools. Since that time, the education system has been differentiated in the Chinese community. The government has disseminated the general school education system and restricted education programs that tended to be close to China (Chee Kiong Tong, 2010, p. 6).

Under British colonialism, new Chinese immigrants had fewer opportunities to access economic activities. However, they were really skillful, doing many different things, and they worked for their fellow countrymen who had arrived earlier. This added to the abundance of commercial activities of the Chinese community. Fujian immigrants were primarily engaged in trading, import and export, sea transport, banking business, and occupied a relatively better position than others. Chaozhou people had similar occupational structures as well, but the number of craftsmen such as woodworking, metalworking, jewelry making, tailors was rather a lot... People with origins in Hainan Island often worked as porters in the plantations or mines (Trần Khánh, 1991).

Thus, the Chinese community in Singapore was formed and developed in association with the free trade policy to turn Singapore into a center for transitional trade, logistics and labor rotation in Southeast Asia by the British colonialists. Colonial exploitation attracted Chinese people to Singapore to seek their fortune. In the early period, Chinese immigrants from the island were primarily from neighboring countries, especially from the Malay Peninsula, followed by mostly China. This community became the largest immigrant group from the middle of the nineteenth century and the majority ethnic group in the population-ethnic structure of Singapore by the beginning of the twentieth century. By the middle of the twentieth century, the number of Chinese people born locally accounted for the majority of the island's Chinese population. Nevertheless, Chinese cultural identity remains prominent in the cultural and educational activities of Chinese people. Many of them have a close relationship with their fatherland and ancestral land.

## 2. The Chinese community during the development process of Singapore

Since 1965, when the independence of Singapore was officially recognized, the development of the Chinese community has occurred in all aspects. They account for the majority of the total population<sup>3</sup>, being the nucleus of the country's international socio-economic, political and state development.

The Chinese community in Singapore is constantly increasing in number. Beside natural population growth, thanks to the active economy, political stability and beneficial policies for attraction, Singapore becomes an ideal destination for excellent graduates as well as experts from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to settle down and secure long term employment. Singapore is also an appealing destination for many migrant workers from the continent. This is also a reason for the Chinese community to increase in number. In 1990, the total population of Chinese people in Singapore reached 2,252,700 people (Trần Khánh, 2018, p. 72; Leo Suryadinata, 1997, p. 21), by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were 2,300,000 Chinese people (Ta Thi Kien, 2001). The large quantity is one of the bases to show the position of Chinese people in Singapore society.

One of the features and highlights of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia in general, in Singapore, in particular, is the prevalence of social organizations and traditional unions. Nowadays, Chinese people in Singapore have 173 Kin groups, 245 Homeland groups, also called "Clans". In particular, Chaozhou Clan Association, Fujian Clan Association, Fong Yun Thai Association, Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Association are among the largest groups. From the interconnection based on the relationship of countrymen, clan, kinship and bloodline, Chinese people in Singapore have formed social and professional organizations with the function of regulating social, economic, and cultural relationships and mutually supporting within their community. Over a long time, Chinese social organizations have been growing and contributing effectively to the development of Singapore's economic and social life.

In terms of distribution, the Chinese community formerly often concentrated in certain areas under the influence of the British ruling policy. However, from the 1970s, when the urbanization process happened quickly, due to the impact of public housing policy of the government and the need to create a shared national identity for all ethnic groups in Singapore, the geographical boundary of the Chinese community in Singapore was no longer fixed as absolutely as under the British. Chinese people of the second, third and fourth generations lived in apartment blocks (mainly skyscrapers and apartments built and managed by the State) alternating with other ethnic groups like the Malay and the Indian. The intermingling of ethnic groups derived from the housing policy, which led to intimate relationships between Chinese and Indian, Malay, etc. and also a condition to form marriage relations among Chinese, Indian, and Malay. This is one of the important factors in narrowing the gap between ethnic groups, contributing to the creation of a harmonious and connected society in Singapore.

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<sup>3</sup> In terms of civil rights, since 1957, a decree issued by the British government in Singapore has regulated that Chinese people living in Singapore for eight years have the right to become British citizens in Asia. This ordinance helped about 220,000 Chinese born in China acquire British citizenship in Singapore. They were also citizens of Singapore after Singapore became independent.

Along with the development of Singapore, the career structure of Chinese people in Singapore has become diverse. In business activities, Chinese people still pursue the “family enterprise” model, especially in small and medium scales. The kinship association largely dominates the Chinese business. Since the 1990s, Chinese businesses in Singapore have switched to an affiliate business model, becoming corporations that are led by major companies and combined with small and medium-sized enterprises. With the encouragement of the state through investment policies, transnational companies, large financial corporations, as well as small and medium-sized enterprises led by Chinese people, have also continuously expanded their international market, thereby gaining enormous profits (Đỗ Ngọc Toàn, 2009, p. 61). The Chinese embraces Singapore’s key economic activities and dominates the banking - finance, insurance, real estate business, food processing, apparel and trade industries in the country (Trần Khánh, 1992). Besides, Chinese enterprises in Singapore are a significant part of Chinese business network in Southeast Asia. Currently, it is estimated that the Chinese population in Singapore controls 80% of publicly listed companies on the stock exchange and contributes 80% of Singapore’s total GNP. They act as the most important part of the national economy, promoting the rise of Singapore in an internationally competitive environment.

Politically, unlike the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Chinese people in Singapore participate in political activities. Accounting for more than 74% of the population, they play a considerable role in PAP (People’s Action Party) activities including leadership positions<sup>4</sup>. This helps to enhance the status of Chinese people in the community in Singapore. It should be noted that, due to the overwhelming proportion of the Chinese community in Singapore as well as playing a dominant role in the economy, policy introduction, including ethnic policy, is a relatively sensitive issue. However, the PAP and the Singaporean government have well dealt with ethnic issues in this island country by implementing a national adaptation policy, respecting cultural diversity and harmonizing benefits and equality among ethnic groups and encouraging the formation of national identity - unique Singaporean people.

In the course of existence and development, the Chinese community in Singapore experienced both contradictory and unified process. They expect to preserve traditional cultural values but at the same time, they are willing to receive new elements. In fact, the overwhelming number of citizens, the economic and political role of the Chinese community have contributed to maintaining their traditional cultural value. Along with the above process, globalization, regionalization, especially the ever-increasing influence of Western culture also enhance the cultural diversity in the Chinese community.

Increasingly, more and more Chinese people are Catholic or do not engage in any religion. The census in the year 2000 showed that 39.3% of Chinese respondents said they were Buddhists and 28.4% claiming to be Taoists. Those who believe in Chinese

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<sup>4</sup> Most of Singapore's politicians, PAP's leaders: Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Chock Tong, Lee Hsien Loong, who held the position of Singapore Prime Minister and PAP's Secretary-General, Chairmen of Chin Chye Toh Party, Ong Teng Chong, Tony Tan Keng Yam, Lim Bo Heng, Khai Boon Wan, Gan Kim Yong are all Chinese, belonging to the Chinese community in Singapore.

religious beliefs and pure conception only accounted for 67% of Chinese people in Singapore. Considerably, there were 14.2% claiming to be Christians and 18.3% of respondents said they did not practice any religion (Chee Kiong Tong, 2010, p. 72). The 2015 survey found that 42.29% of Chinese people were Buddhists, 12.93% Taoists, and 20.93% Christians. Other religions and non-religious people accounted for 0.59% and 23.29% respectively<sup>5</sup>.

The diversity of languages in the Chinese community in Singapore varies among age groups. Although the elderly can communicate in Mandarin Chinese, they like to use their native dialects like Fujian, Cantonese, Hainan, etc. While most young Chinese have a habit of using English or Mandarin in daily life. Many parents commence communicating with their children in English. Some of them are even incapable of using their mother tongue fluently.<sup>6</sup>

There is also the modification of ethnicity concept in the community. In the census in 1921, nearly 98% of Chinese people insisted that they were Chinese. However, the Chinese generation born in Singapore has different notions of their ancestors. Today, 90% of the residents said that they acknowledged the origin of China but always insisted that they were Singaporean with a new national identity that had been shaped (Chee Kiong Tong, 2010, p. 65). It is the mentioned new identity and unique cultural habits that make Singapore unique binding and connecting people born here together (Wang Gungwu, 2015). This is a success of Singapore national construction work.

The foundation and development of new identity from the mid-1960s of the twentieth century up to now in Singapore have made an important contribution to creating solidarity, safety, and prosperity for this island country. Discussing the development of Chinese culture in Singaporean cultural identity, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that although the new generation and new immigrants<sup>7</sup> largely participated in the community, Chinese cultural identity in Singapore would keep developing. Newcomers will enrich Singapore's cultural heritage with their different experience and perspectives. They will adjust their standards to fit the local context and adopt the unique cultural habits of Singaporean over time.

Chinese people in Singapore are integrating into a larger and more identifiable entity. In that process, Chinese people in Singapore remain different from the Chinese communities elsewhere including Chinese in China, in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Chinese minority in Southeast Asia and the West. This is also the way to help the Chinese community in Singapore continue developing and integrating completely as well as make Singapore open, flexible and strong in the future (<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/pm-lee-singaporean-chinese-identity-unique-but-evolving-11200478>).

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<sup>5</sup>Read more: Statistics of Singapore government, *Household Survey in 2015, Religion data* <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/ghs/ghs2015>. Update on 21/3/2019.

<sup>6</sup> The proportion of Chinese people in Singapore speaking dialects has gradually decreased from 30.7% in 2000 to 19.2% in 2010.

<sup>7</sup> New immigrants: they are mainland Chinese, people from Taiwan and Hong Kong who immigrated to Singapore after this country loosened Immigration Law in 1989.

### **3. Conclusion**

It can be seen that the Chinese community in Singapore has a major change in the lines of history. From a minor immigrant group, they have been a major community, playing a significant role in the economic and political development and world integration in this island nation. When almost the entire community followed Buddhism, worshiped Chinese ancestors and mostly spoke Mandarin Chinese (dialects of Cantonese, Fujian, etc.), concentrated on living closely according to the States in certain territories and often had marriages in dialect, at the same time, many of them tended to be politically pro-Chinese under the British colonialism, since after the island nation had been an independent nation (after 1965), the ethnic communities in Singapore, in general, and the Chinese, in particular, moved on all aspects, from economy, politics to culture. From this time, under the impact of the policy of national ethnic identity and economic development, and world integration set forth by the People's Action Party, a group of Chinese community became attached to Singapore land, considered it as their homeland. They became masters, playing a prominent role in economic activities, and being the main nucleus of the political process in this island nation. Culturally, although the traditional values of Chinese culture have been preserved, the globally cultural integration in the community is more and more common. Many people in the younger Chinese generation become more receptive to the Western cultural lifestyle. This also affects the traditional family of Chinese people. It can be seen that despite being in the flow of forming the national identity of Singapore, the traditional cultural identity of the Chinese community in this country is still well-preserved, integrated and promoted.

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## TÓM TẮT

### BÀN VỀ CỘNG ĐỒNG NGƯỜI HOA Ở SINGAPORE

Cộng đồng người Hoa ở Singapore được hình thành từ những năm 20 của thế kỷ XIX sau khi thực dân Anh chiếm Temaseck vào năm 1819. Tính đến đầu năm 2019, dân số đảo quốc này có hơn 5,8 triệu người, trong đó có khoảng hơn 74% là người Hoa. Nếu như trước đây, cộng đồng người Hoa sinh tồn gắn liền với chính sách tự do thương mại và luật pháp của người Anh thì từ những năm 60 của thế kỷ XX cộng đồng này phát triển trong lòng một quốc gia có chủ quyền với môi trường hợp tác đa dân tộc, có nền kinh tế phát triển và hội nhập quốc tế sâu rộng. Tuy vậy, bản sắc văn hóa Trung Hoa trong cộng đồng người Hoa vẫn được lưu giữ với một sắc thái khá đặc trưng và họ ngày càng đóng vai trò lớn hơn trong đời sống kinh tế, xã hội và văn hóa của đất nước. Cộng đồng người Hoa ở Singapore đã có sự tiến triển như thế nào trong tiến trình lịch sử và họ đóng vai trò ra sao trên con đường phát triển của Singapore là những vấn đề được bàn luận trong bài viết này.