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Historical Background

On 12 August 1961, there passed away in Peking an extraordinary man at a ripe old age of 87. He was accorded a State funeral by the Government of the People's Republic of China in recognition of his deeds and achievements during his lifetime. Among his mourners were some of the top-ranking party, military and government officials in the land, including Chu Teh, Chou En-lai, Ch'en Yi, Ch'en Po-ta, Liao Ch'eng-chih and Tung Pi-wu. Mao Tse-tung, Liu Shao-ch'i, Madam Sun Yat-sen and many others laid their wreaths and sent their condolences to the deceased's family.[1] From Peking, the hearse was carried by train and arrived on 20 August for a final burial at the Ao Garden at Chi Mei on a grand and extensive ground covering some 8,789 square feet. There an ornate, elaborate and personally designed tomb had long been completed as his final resting place. Thousands of mourners from Fukien province lined the roads and streets from Chi Mei right up to the Ao Garden to pay their last homage to the best and proudest son ever produced in the area in modern times — Tan Kah-kee.

In the wake of his death, many returned Overseas Chinese held their own memorial services in twenty-three cities and towns in China including Peking, Foochow, Amoy and Canton. These were followed by the Chinese living in Hong Kong and Kowloon, Singapore, Rangoon, Jakarta, Semarang, Bandung, Surabaya, Palembang, Pontianak, Yokohama, Calcutta, Paris and Leipzig in Germany, as a sign of respect and sorrow.[2] Never in the history of the Chinese in South-East Asia had so many found it compelling to mourn the loss of a single man.

Born at Chi Mei village, T'ung An district, Fukien, China, on 21 October 1874, Tan Kah-kee spent over fifty years between 1890 and 1950 in Singapore, these being some of the best and most productive years of his life.

His life and times encompassed a vast and exciting era of revolutionary change in China and of rapid socio-political change in South-East Asia. Personally he witnessed the decline and demise of the Manchu regime, the rise and fall of the Kuomintang government under Chiang Kai-shek and the rebirth of a modernized China under communist rule. In South-East Asia generally, and in Malaya and Singapore particularly, he saw Western imperialism, gradually being eroded by the rise and development of the forces of nationalism in South-East Asia which aimed at the creation of modern independent nation-states.

Tan Kah-kee's Chinese background covered a traumatic and painful era. A generation before his birth, China had suffered military defeat at the hands of the British in the Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), followed by a series of mid-century peasant uprisings, notably the Taiping, the Nien and the Muslim. The combined impact of this so-called *nei-yu wai-huan* (external encroachments and internal rebellions) was gradually making itself felt throughout Chinese society — a loss of over forty million lives, the rise of the treaty ports and a Chinese comprador class, economic dislocation in rural China, the influx of foreign goods, the continuing importation of opium into the country and the familiar, gaunt faces of opium addicts, the final legalization of the opium trade in 1860 resulting in further draining of Chinese silver taels, war indemnities adding to the financial crisis, the process of militarization from 1800 culminating in the emergence of regionalism and modern warlordism, and the beginning of the exodus of millions of Southern Chinese to a better land and for a better life overseas. A Confucian China was under duress and mortally wounded.

Tan Kah-kee could be thankful for not living under such miserable circumstances as those mentioned above, but what he and his generation of Chinese were to live through was hardly any better. At the age of ten in 1884, war broke out between China and France which destroyed the Foochow shipyards and China's Southern Fleet. The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5 which was fought in Korea and on the Yellow Sea saw the destruction of China's Northern Fleet and of her military forces. The Treaty of Shimonoseki that followed ceded Taiwan to Japan and forced China to pay an indemnity of 200 million taels of silver to the Japanese. In 1949 Tan Kah-kee was to give a personal account of the impact of this treaty upon the Southern Chinese as he saw it. In his view, the Southern

Chinese traders suffered miserably because the Japanese dominated the barter trade between Taiwan and Fukien. Moreover, the breakdown of trade between the two territories ruined the handicraft weaving industry in Southern Fukien, while the free flow of immigrants between them came to a stop.[3] In his account, he also confirmed that he was conscious of the aggressiveness of the Japanese and of the impotence of the Manchu regime to uphold China's territorial sovereignty. Out of the experience of this first impact of the war and treaty arose a patriot for China's national cause of later years.

In the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War there came the scramble for concessions and spheres of influence in China by the foreign powers. The cutting of the Chinese melon was not only on the cards but imminent. In the midst of the scramble for concessions, the Boxer Rebellion (1900–1) erupted in North China. It brought combined Western and Japanese forces to Peking, resulting in the pillage of the capital and the signing of the Boxer Protocol. In this protocol, China was forced to pay 450 million taels as indemnity to the foreign powers involved, a figure ten times the annual national revenue of the Manchu regime. The Russo–Japanese War, in which China was an onlooker, was fought on Chinese land in Manchuria, leaving China to lick her wounds. With the West preoccupied with war in Europe between 1914 and 1918, Japan's ambitions towards China became more overt and pressing. In 1915, Japan presented the so-called Twenty One Demands to President Yuan Shih-k'ai. Had China accepted all the demands, she would undoubtedly have become Japan's protectorate, paying annual tributes to the Japanese emperor. Nothing could go right for China even as a victor in the First World War, for the Versailles Treaty added insult to injury by allowing Japan to take over former German rights in Shantung. This sordid affair precipitated the so-called May Fourth Movement, whose impact is still being assessed by historians. The Versailles Treaty sowed the seeds of further Sino-Japanese conflict, as is evidenced by the military clashes between the Japanese forces and Chiang Kai-shek's Northern Expedition Army in May 1928 at Tsinan in Shantung. While this Shantung incident soured the diplomatic relations between the two countries, it served as a prelude to the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). This protracted struggle saw Chiang Kai-shek's armies reeling back to Chungking, in Szechuan, South-west China, leaving

Japan to rule over much of traditional China. All in all, humiliating treaties signed between China and foreign nations involving indemnities, the ceding of territories, the opening up of new treaty ports for foreign economic penetration, and a loss of face for the Chinese, brought neither peace nor stability to a nation intent on modernizing herself. Their devastating results were to strike into the consciousness of millions of feeling and thinking Chinese, bringing a deep sense of shame, frustration and anger. Patriotism as expressed in the forms of liberalism, democracy, nationalism, anarchism, and communism began to stir up the minds and hearts of the Chinese, both within and without China. How could any Chinese who were proud of their culture and tradition remain unmoved and unruffled when *sheng-chou lu-ch'en* (China is sinking)?

As if foreign wars and aggression in China were inadequate to incite the passion and compassion of the Chinese people, internal political rivalries and warfare after the fall of the Manchu regime generated some of the worst and ugliest results in modern Chinese history. Numerous warlords between 1916 and 1927 trampled across the length and breadth of the Chinese land; many collected taxes years in advance, bringing nothing but human misery, tragedy and despair. The Kuomintang government after 1927 dissipated critics, dissidents and opposition parties through political persecution, terror and military campaigns. There was neither peace, stability nor effective government available to the Chinese people. Political rivalries and repression deepened the national crisis, resulting in the waging of three major civil wars between the nationalists and the communists. The first civil war (1924–27) saw many Chinese communists rounded up, imprisoned or summarily executed; many were forced underground. The second civil war (1928–35) involved five successive and costly military campaigns against the communist hideouts in Central China ending in the famous Long March by the communists through twelve provinces to Yenan. The final civil war (1946–49) reached a climax during 1948 and 1949 when the three major communist counter-offensives in Manchuria, North China and Central China swept Chiang Kai-shek's regime out of the Middle Kingdom, sending him scurrying for refuge to Taiwan. Together with the foreign wars, the losses in human life and property were only surpassed by those of the mid-nineteenth century rebellions. The sufferings and agonies of the Chinese people were almost beyond description.

One of the concomitants of the *nei-yu wai-huan* had been the occurrence of numerous natural calamities in China in modern times. Crises arising from drought, flood, pestilence and famine were not redressed because of misgovernment. They made life intolerable for the Chinese affected by these natural disasters. Their frequency and seriousness between 1890 and 1949 called for enormous sacrifice and compassion on the part of the economically better off *hua-ch'iao*.[4] Fund-raising campaigns for the relief of victims of natural disasters were generously and unfailingly promoted among them. Thus, to political feelings for China and Chinese civilization was added the sense of moral compassion and fortitude, a more gentle ingredient of modern Chinese nationalism overseas.

In response to the protracted and deepening political crisis in China, succeeding generations of Chinese from Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, K'ang Yu-wei, and Sun Yat-sen, to Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai attempted to effect political change through applying Western learning to Chinese conditions. These leaders were in the forefront of political struggle in China and they were often called the *hsien-chih hsien-chüeh* (pioneers), playing a leading role in various phases of modern Chinese political history. Tan Kah-kee, on the other hand, was physically away from the centre of these raging storms. However, socio-political changes and forces in China could not but capture his attention, colour his political thinking and motivate his political actions. Like most Chinese-educated emigrants of his generation to South-East Asia, he was dismayed when the country was misruled, worried when it was on the brink of civil strife, and angry when nothing seemed to be going right for China. As a concerned and politically motivated man who believed firmly in a famous Chinese dictum — *t'ien-hsia hsing-wang p'i-fu yu-tse* (fortune or misfortune of the world rests on the shoulders of each of us) — he was determined not to sit idly by if he could help it. Despite limitations and restrictions imposed on him by geographical barriers and British colonial rule, he was to play a significant role inside and outside China in socio-political change in a peaceful manner when opportunities arose.

To be sure, although the changing destiny of modern China coloured his political thinking and guided his political actions, the Singapore environment under a colonial government was to limit his role in politics. While Singapore's booming economy, based on entrepot trade and free

enterprise, shaped his moderate reformist ideology, the Chinese social and community structure posed no insurmountable problem to his community and political leadership role and ambition.

For a start, the Government of the Straits Settlements was responsible to no other authority but London. When the Settlements were brought under the direct control of the British Colonial Office in 1867, a legislative council and an executive council under the governor were established. The Legislative Council consisted of both official and unofficial members, the unofficials all being nominated and in a minority on the council. The Executive Council consisted of a smaller number, all of whom were colonial officials. From the 1920s, a few Asian members were co-opted into the Executive Council as participants and decision-makers in the colony. While the Legislative Council served merely as a debating, sounding and legislative body, the Executive Council was responsible for carrying out legislative and other administrative duties concerning the colony. In dealing with the Chinese population in the Straits Settlements on matters concerning them, the governor was advised by officers from the Chinese Protectorate. The Singapore Chinese Protectorate, later called the Chinese Secretariat, was set up in 1877. In 1889 the Chinese Protectorate set up the Chinese Advisory Board as a sounding board on Chinese affairs, with members drawn from various Chinese *pang*.[5] The colonial government used this as one of the major mechanisms for defusing tensions and potential threats between itself and the Chinese community.

The British colonial authorities were clearly and positively in favour of the Straits-born Chinese, many of whom were English-educated who became prominent professionals, including lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects and accountants. These were groomed and nurtured to serve as spokesmen for the whole Chinese community to the increasing resentment and envy of the *hua-ch'iao* community. Even so, there was only limited opportunity for political mobility for the King's favoured subjects as there was neither franchise nor parliamentary democracy as such in Singapore prior to 1945. A lack of genuine political mobility for competent and ambitious Chinese under colonial rule must, to a certain extent, be considered responsible for those immigrant Chinese who continued to look to China for inspiration and aspiration. This phenomenon, together with the colonial disinterest in Chinese culture and language, may even

explain why some of the brightest Straits-born scholars and professionals including Dr Ku Hung-ming (1856–1927), Dr Wu Lien-teh and Dr Lim Boon-keng (1869–1957) returned to serve China in various capacities.[6]

Like all Western colonial authorities in South-East Asia, the British jealously guarded their political power in Singapore and Malaya against real or imagined ideological and political 'subversion'. To this end they sought to regulate community actions through the legislation and operation of Societies Ordinances. Those 'deemed' to be 'subversive' and dangerous to law and order, such as Chinese secret societies, the Kuomintang branches, and later the Malayan Communist Party and its cells, were banned. Likewise, those committing 'criminal' or 'political' sins, such as taking part in 'illegal' organizations, were sentenced to a term of imprisonment or deported for life. Thus, through such rigid political control, the British authorities created a more 'acceptable' type of community or political leadership, moderate in ideology and reformist in action. Besides, the British legitimized those community and political leaders who often collaborated with them or abided by their rules when China politics was played locally. One of the reasons why Tan Kah-kee was to become such a 'legitimized' leader during the 1930s was that he knew the art of compromise and was prepared to accept rules of political control laid down by the British within the colonial framework.

A no less important form of control under colonial rule was ideological manipulation. The British jealously and zealously exerted such ideological control through Press and mail censorship as well as educational supervision. Press and mail censorship aimed at weeding out 'subversive' ideologies such as anti-Western, anti-British nationalist, or communist propaganda. School Ordinances were passed in the Straits Settlements and in the Federated Malay States in 1920 to effect control over the Chinese schools in particular. These ordinances empowered the respective education departments to register or deregister schools and teaching staff on political and ideological grounds. Likewise, any Chinese individuals who harboured 'subversive' ideologies would in no way be accepted and legitimized as community or political leaders under normal circumstances. Thus, ideological control on the part of the British authorities imposed further constraints on the emergence of a radical, volatile and colourful political leadership in the Chinese community of Singapore and

Malaya. Tan Kah-kee's socio-political thinking was largely acceptable to the British in pre-war Malaya, because it was aimed single-mindedly against the Japanese encroachments in China. Even so, tension between Tan Kah-kee and the British mounted as the British maintained a 'neutral' posture towards the Sino-Japanese War. It was to cause acute concern and anguish in the post-war era when Tan Kah-kee overtly condemned Chiang Kai-shek and his regime, because the British were on friendly terms with the Kuomintang government.

In sharp contrast to their rigid political and ideological control, the British adopted paradoxically a much more relaxed economic policy towards free and private enterprise. Their *laissez-faire* economic policy allowed industrious Chinese immigrants to accumulate capital, and to venture into all aspects of the economic arena in both Singapore and Malaya. British intervention in the civil war-ridden Malay States from 1874 onwards helped restore law and order and paved the way for new capital investment and expansion in the Malay Peninsula. The influx of cheap labour from China and India, and the Chinese ventures into risk-taking investments in the Straits Settlements, saw the boom of the tin-mining industry and the subsequent rise of the rubber plantation industry of the twentieth century in the Malay States. Both these industries promoted Singapore's entrepôt trade, helping to consolidate its position as the leading trading emporium and financial centre in South-East Asia for all nationalities. The Chinese accumulation of capital through the use of cheap labour, secured by their secret societies, in the tin-mining industry prompted them to branch into banking, insurance, manufacturing, shipping, and the import and export trade in direct or indirect competition with Western enterprises by the early years of the twentieth century.

Tan Kah-kee was fortunate enough to be living in such a favourable economic climate, revelling in conditions in Singapore which allowed ample opportunity for industrious, shrewd, farsighted, adventurous and determined men to amass riches, prestige and social position. He seized these opportunities and became a millionaire by 1911 and a multi-millionaire by the end of the First World War. With enormous wealth at his disposal, he was able and willing to make immense social and educational contributions to the Chinese communities in both Singapore

and in his home province of Fukien. In his autobiography, *Nan-ch'iao hui-i-lu,* he openly acknowledged that without the riches hitherto accumulated, he could not have laid the foundation for his social and political works.[7]

Although the society of Singapore since 1819 has always been multi-racial in structure and composition, the free port status and the *laissez-faire* immigration policy of the British soon brought waves of Chinese immigrants from maritime China to swamp the Malay population. From 1860 onwards the Chinese predominated in Singapore's population. Chinese immigrants accounted for 75 percent of the total Chinese population of 315,151 in 1921. Ten years later this was reduced to 64 percent of a total of 418,600 Chinese on the island. By 1947 this pattern of immigrant Chinese outnumbering the Straits-born was finally reversed; the 1947 census returns show that the Straits-born Chinese made up 60 percent of the total Chinese population of 729,473. Even at this late stage, it should be noted that a substantial number of the Straits-born Chinese were in fact Chinese-educated and Chinese speaking, and still culturally and mentally more attuned to the *hua-ch'iao* community.

However, unlike the *hua-ch'iao* community, the Straits-born Chinese, as a whole, were more Western-oriented in thinking and in their way of life. Also, they were the more modernized section within the larger Chinese community. This Straits-born community had a tradition of producing a host of able and respectable community leaders, legitimized by the colonial authorities. Being English-speaking, many of them sought employment in government departments as administrative officers, clerks and other functionaries. They could also be found in the private sector, especially in commercial establishments such as banks, insurance and shipping companies, and European agency houses. It is quite widely known that one of the highest objectives in life among the Straits-born was to become a comprador, either in a European bank or in agency houses, serving as a middleman between the commercial establishments and the public. In business, they were just as enterprising and skilful. Some of the leading figures of the twentieth century including Lim Boon-keng, Lee Choon-guan (1868–1924), Lim Nee-soon (1879–1936) and a host of others, were founders of local Chinese banks, insurance companies and other enterprises. Partly driven by the need to attract *hua-ch'iao* capital for

new ventures, they often co-operated with the *hua-ch'iao* community leaders and capitalists in social, economic and political matters concerning the Chinese community at large. In organization, the Straits-born community established many social and sporting clubs and societies. However, one of the most important bodies established by them in the pre-war years was the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) (1900) which became an effective pressure group, championing the cause of the Straits-born Chinese and promoting their interests.

Admittedly the Chinese community during the time of Tan Kah-kee was fragmented and often divisive, due largely to differences in dialect, education, territorial origin, profession, political outlook, and personal rivalry among leaders and among the various *pang* for *pang* power. In essence, the Chinese community in Singapore could conveniently be divided into seven uneven *pang* along the lines of dialect groupings. These included the Hokkiens, overwhelmingly dominated by those from the two prefectures in Fukien, namely, Changchou and Ch'uanchou, the Teochews, the Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka, the Straits-born English-educated and English-speaking, and the numerically smallest Sankiang, which represented immigrants from areas north of the two maritime provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung.

The Hokkien *pang* was historically and numerically the single largest *pang* throughout Singapore's history, ranging from 29 percent of the Chinese population in Singapore in 1881 to 43 percent in 1921, 1931 and 1947. The Hokkiens had been the merchant princes during the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century dominated the more modern sectors of the economy, such as banking, insurance, shipping, rubber-milling and manufacturing, and the export and import trade. The size of the Hokkien population and the sound financial resources at its disposal gave the Hokkien *pang* an edge over the others in terms of contending elites and power groups within the Chinese community of Singapore.

The Teochew and Cantonese *pang* were comparable in size, and between them they represented about 35 percent of the Chinese population in 1901 and 43 percent in 1947. The Teochews did well in the nineteenth century, dominating the pepper and gambier plantations and trade. Many of them owned land in Johore but due to their natural caution in economic management and expansion they failed to cash in during the

rubber boom times. The Cantonese, on the other hand, were well-known for their craft skills as artisans in the nineteenth century; but a great number of them became shopkeepers in the twentieth century. The Hainanese dominated the domestic services and merchant shipping, as well as the coffee shop catering business, while the Hakkas, who had traditionally been agriculturists in Singapore during the nineteenth century, had become more diversified in their economic interests by the twentieth century. The Sankiang *pang* was late on the scene but was consolidating its power in the 1920s and 1930s. It is a numerically small community even today.

The *hua-ch'iao* community was not only viable and virile but dynamic and enterprising, especially in the social and educational spheres. It often pooled its resources to establish schools, charitable organizations, guilds, social clubs, territorial and kinship associations, and numerous temples for worship. Although the Chinese secret societies still existed they had been on the decline as an effective community power since 1890 when the British banned their organizations and activities. In the twentieth century, the highest body within the *hua-ch'iao* community belonged to the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC), founded in 1906. This was an inter-*pang* organization with uneven numbers of office-bearers to represent each *pang*. As the Hokkien *pang* was the largest in size, it had more office-bearers than any other single *pang*. The Chamber's membership was recruited along *pang* lines and so were the elections of office-bearers to it. Moreover, the presidents of the Chamber were rotated between the Hokkien and all other non-Hokkien *pang* in each election. Thus, it can fairly be said that the *hua-ch'iao* community in Singapore was essentially and basically a *pang* society in character and in structure. Compared to the Straits-born community, it was more highly and elaborately organized in terms of the numbers of public and voluntary bodies founded by them and the manpower involved in them.

The *hua-ch'iao* community was numerically strong, economically powerful, and organizationally viable and sound. Its numbers, economic resources, organizational structure and skills could conveniently be channelled into community and political actions in the common interest in times of crises and stress. Thus, the *pang* structure of the Chinese community in Singapore was not unconducive to community and political

mobilization. Although Tan Kah-kee had been known to detest the concept and practice of *pang* and *pang* power, he, nevertheless, was realistic in utilizing and mobilizing his *pang* and *pang* organizations for the rise and consolidation of his leadership and power.

The class nature of the Chinese community in Singapore prior to the Second World War was still in the making. There was a very substantial working class in Singapore but due to the high rate of illiteracy and the inarticulateness of this class in politics, a working class consciousness was yet to make its presence felt. Moreover, the British policy of banning the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and preventing a trade union movement from being more effectively mobilized by communist forces, had the effect of stifling the growth of a Chinese working class organization and of smothering the widespread outburst of class conflict between workers and capitalists. Nonetheless, the communist elements were very successful in cashing in on China's national crisis arising from the war between China and Japan after 1937 by mobilizing Chinese workers in Singapore for socio-political purposes, such as fund-raising for China's cause, the recruitment of new cadres, demands for better working conditions, and strike action, etc. The class nature of Singapore society generally and the Chinese community in particular became emphatically more pronounced in the 1940s and 1950s when political parties began to mobilize workers for power.

Organizationally, the Chinese community of the Straits Settlements in the twentieth century was a complex one. It consisted of both modern and traditional institutions. While the traditional institutions were largely structured along the lines of kinship (for example, family, clan or surname associations), religion, secret society, guild and *pang* (for example, *hui-kuan,* or territorial associations, at village, district, prefectural and provincial levels), the modern institutions were by-products of modern capitalism and Western colonialism which comprised the Chamber of Commerce, social clubs, professional organizations, trade societies, cultural and sports bodies, political parties and trade unions. While it is true to say that most of these institutions were voluntary, innocuous and mutual self-help organizations, some (for example, political parties, trade unions, secret societies, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, etc.) belonged undoubtedly to the category of pressure groups.

These complex and interlocking community networks served as the institutional and power bases of the *pang* and community leaders. Through them, these leaders were to exert their influence and power, and to mobilize financial and manpower resources for *pang,* community or political action. Thus, it could fairly be said that both traditional and modern organizations were, often enough, nerve centres for Chinese community and political leaders.

As a young man of seventeen, Tan Kah-kee emigrated to Singapore in the autumn of 1890. In Singapore he spent over fifty years of his life, seeking and fighting for, winning and finally dominating the community and political leadership role until his return to the People's Republic of China in May 1950. His arrival in Singapore coincided with the beginning of the *hua-ch'iao* era and his exit signified the end of an important epoch in which the *hua-ch'iao* had forcefully and successfully claimed, challenged and dominated the community and political leadership within the Chinese society on the island. More than that, Tan Kah-kee blossomed forth as an ethnic Chinese, South-East Asian and Asian figure, through his founding of Amoy University, his assumption of leadership in the Shantung Relief Fund, Singapore China Relief Fund and Southseas China Relief Fund, his overt moral support for Indonesian and Indian nationalism in the 1940s, and his bold approval of Mao Tse-tung and Mao's regime in China in the post-war era.

1. *Ch'en Chia-keng hsien-sheng chi-nien ts'e,* Peking, All-China Returned Overseas Chinese Association, 1961, pp. 98–9.

2. Ibid., pp. 99–100.

3. Tan Kah-kee, *Ch'en Chia-keng yen-lun-chi,* Singapore, Southseas China Relief Fund Union, 1949, p. 1.

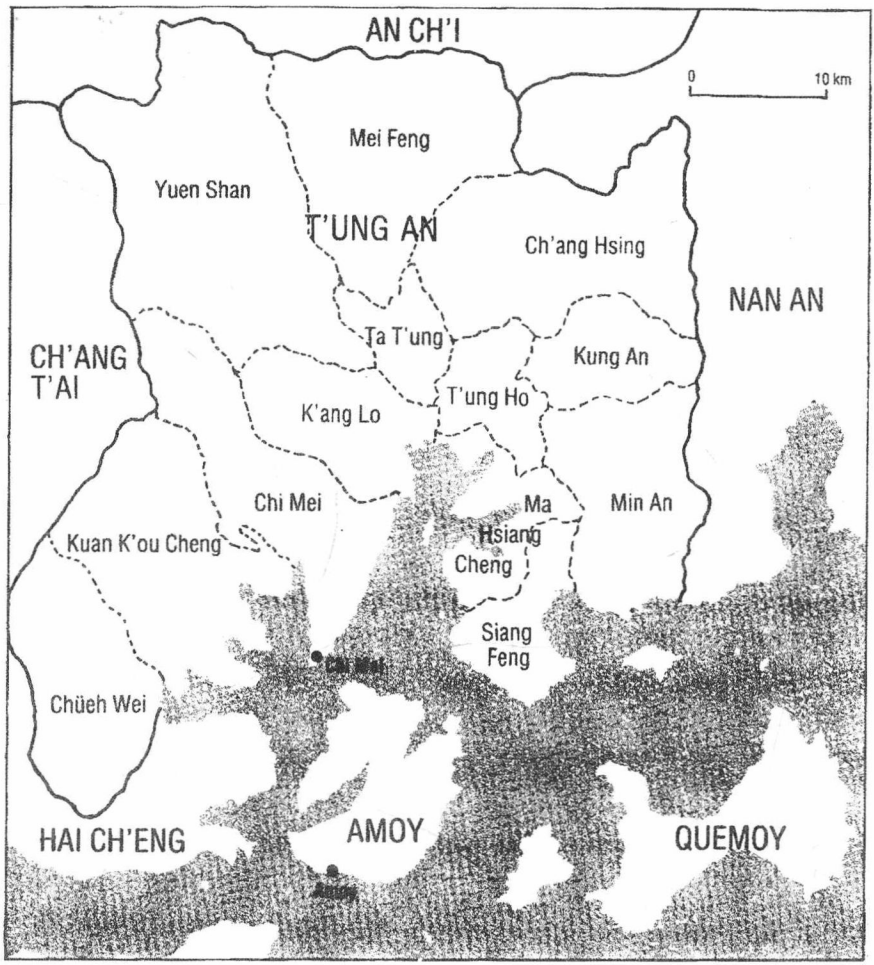
4. The term *hua-ch'iao* is to denote immigrant Chinese who were China-oriented and who received Chinese education and treasured Chinese culture and values. In the twentieth century this community also included Chinese-educated Straits-born Chinese. The period of history between 1890 and 1949 has been termed the *hua-ch'iao* era in South-East Asia, and for the arguments and documentation of this, see Wang Gungwu, 'Southeast Asian *Hua-ch'iao* in Chinese History-writing', *JSEAS*, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 1981, pp. 1–14.

5. *Pang* is a socio-political grouping; it denotes a bloc, a band or a sub-community. For more details, see C. F. Yong, *'Pang, Pang* Organization and

Leadership in the Chinese Community of Singapore during the 1930's', *JSSS*, Vol. 32, Pts 1 & 2, 1977, pp. 31–52.

6. Dr Ku Hung-ming was a Penang-born Chinese who studied English literature at the University of Edinburgh and returned to China to lecture at the National University of Peking in the 1890s. Dr Wu Lien-teh, a famous plague fighter in China, and a Queen's Scholar, served China between the 1900s and 1930s as a doctor of medicine. Dr Lim Boon-keng, one of the first Queen's Scholars from Singapore, served as Dr Sun Yat-sen's presidential advisor during 1912 and returned to China to take up a post as Vice-Chancellor of Amoy University for sixteen years between 1921 and 1937. For more on Dr Lim Boon-keng, see Chapter 4.

7. Tan Kah-kee, *Nan-ch'iao hui-i-lu,* reprint, Singapore, Tan Kah-kee, 1946, p. 1.



Map 1 The Homeland of Tan Kah-kee: Chi Mei, T'ung An District, Fukien Province, 1900

2
The Tan Clan

Think of the source of water when drinking, never forget the origins.

Tan Kah-kee on his homeland

LOCATED in the southern part of Fukien, T'ung An was one of the five districts of Ch'uanchou prefecture, separating Changchou prefecture to the south-west from Foochow prefecture to the northeast. The size of T'ung An was approximately that of the island of Singapore (225 square miles), its population of a quarter of a million in 1911 being equivalent to that of the total population of Singapore during the same period. The district is mountainous in its hinterland, becoming less undulating towards the coastal regions. On the north, it merges with the district of An Ch'i, a hilly and rugged tea-producing area. On the east, it is flanked by Nan An district, while on the west, its borders link up with Ch'ang T'ai and Hai Ch'eng districts of Changchou prefecture. On the south, the roaring South China Sea sweeps its coastlines with Amoy and Quemoy islands guarding its doorway. On a clear and calm day from the T'ien-ma mountain ranges at T'ung An, one can catch a glimpse of the Amoy island, for over a century one of the southern centres for the exodus of millions of Chinese from Fukien.

T'ung An has thirteen villages of varying sizes, and Chi Mei village is situated at the southern tip of the district. Protruding towards the sea, Chi Mei, being a peninsula, is the closest to the island of Amoy. This district had historically become a land of enchanting beauty to thousands of returning T'ung An immigrants from overseas. Getting off the liners at the port of Amoy, these immigrants would take a boat heading towards the various villages in T'ung An. And to Chi Mei village, the homeland of the Tan clan, and the birthplace of Tan Kah-kee, the trip would take less than an hour by boat. In 1955, an engineering feat was accomplished when

a causeway linking the island of Amoy and T'ung An was constructed, vastly reducing travelling time for homecoming immigrants or visitors. For the returning immigrants, as far as their eyes could see, the sparkling South China Sea would merge gradually and harmoniously with distant hills and mountain ranges at the back. For those Chi Mei visitors or homecomers, there would be a nostalgic and touching sight — the Shean river flowing quietly southwards from the hinterland against the rising contour of the T'ien-ma ranges. How the name T'ung An, literally meaning 'mutual harmony and peace', originated is immaterial. To the T'ung An folk, its meaning was most fitting as great harmony often descended between the landscape and seascape in their homeland.

Traditionally and historically, both Changchou and Ch'uanchou prefectures had been relatively affluent areas in South China, well-known for their trade relationships with foreign merchants from South-East Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Furthermore, these prefectures were two of the major centres for the shipbuilding industry in South China during the Sung and Ming dynasties. Trade and commerce had been the lifeline of these regions. In agriculture, they were the heart of double-cropping rice regions in the province.[1] Because of its geographical endowments, possessing numerous well-sheltered islets and harbours on its twisted coastline, fishing, seafaring and piracy had also been the traditional occupations of the T'ung An inhabitants.

The rugged and mountainous landscape and the ever-changing mood of seascape along the coast helped produce a number of diverse but forceful traditions among the T'ung An people. While the mountain ranges precipitated the creation of such qualities as frugality, simplicity and honesty, the seafaring traditions helped the T'ung An people acquire a love for independence, adventure, enterprise, doggedness, righteousness and belligerence. Their constant need to weather the storms at sea for a living and for survival made them a hardy stock. In addition, its trading tradition with foreign nations gave them business and commercial techniques and a sense of shrewdness and ruthlessness in business dealings. These attributes and qualities were transplanted to South-East Asia with the T'ung An immigrants over the centuries.

Added to the seafaring tradition was a historical tradition of anti-Manchu and anti-foreign nationalism. The anti-Manchu feelings of the people in