

COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS

Overseas Chinese Nationalism and Relief Efforts for China in the 1930s

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Dr Jason Lim reviews the contents of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry 80th Anniversary Souvenir, found in the National Library's rare books collection.



Cover of 新加坡中华总商会筹赈中国难民委员会大世界游艺会特刊 / [编辑者廖哲煥, 王少平]
Published by 新加坡中华总商会, 1932

Before citizenship was offered to the Chinese in Singapore in 1957, the Chinese were considered “aliens” by the British colonial authorities. The British colonial government would not protect the Chinese and left them to manage their own affairs through clan and dialect associations, trade associations, clubs and societies. The main Chinese organisation was the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC), founded by merchants in 1906. The SCCC, in turn, was a link between the Singapore Chinese and China. Before 1949, all overseas Chinese were citizens of the Republic of China (ROC) by *jus sanguinis* (where Chinese nationality was based on ethnicity and not on the place of birth) and the SCCC would act as the voice of the overseas Chinese to the National Government in Nanjing. As citizens of China, the overseas Chinese were concerned about the problems in China and did all they could to organise relief efforts whenever China faced natural disasters or military conflicts.

By the early 1930s, China had to defend itself and its interests against a militarily-resurgent Japan. On 18 September 1931, claiming that Chinese bandits had blown up a railway track in Mukden (now Shenyang), Japanese troops invaded Manchuria and displaced Chinese nationals in the process. The invasion created a storm of protests from the overseas Chinese and the Chinese community leaders were scathing in their criticism of Japan. As news of the Japanese invasion and the plight of Chinese refugees poured into Singapore, some community leaders began relief efforts for China. A decision was made by the council of the SCCC to establish a “Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce Committee of Relief Fund for China” (新加坡中华总商会筹赈中国难民委员会) on 23 September 1931, just five days after the Japanese invasion. In its inaugural meeting the next day, the committee of 20 members started work under the chairmanship of Lee Choon Seng (李俊承) with Yeo Chan Boon (杨缵文) as his deputy. It had seven sub-committees—Supervision, General Affairs, Finance, Publicity, Publications, Liaison and Donations. The work of the committee cut across dialect lines and many prominent merchants were

involved, including Hou Say Huan (侯西反), Lum Boon Tin (林文田), Lee Wee Nam (李伟南), Aw Boon Haw (胡文虎), Lim Kim Tian (林金殿) and Lee Kong Chian (李光前). A list of rules and regulations governing the composition and work of the committee was also drawn up, followed by appeals for funds and other donations. On 1 February 1932, Lee Choon Seng, who was also president of the SCCC, reported the formation of the committee to the council of the SCCC. The council called on every Chinese organisation in Singapore to send a representative for a general meeting on 4 February to discuss the work of this committee.¹

A souvenir book was published in 1932 to commemorate the work of the committee, highlighting its efforts to raise funds for China via organising entertainment and cultural activities in a carnival held at the Great World Amusement Park from 13 to 15 May. This rare publication is an exemplary showcase of overseas Chinese nationalism and the role played by the SCCC in promoting relief efforts for China in Singapore. Like many contemporary publications of Chinese organisations, it has a portrait of the revolutionary Dr Sun Yat-sen (孙中山) and the text of his last will and testament before the contents page. The book is divided into three distinct parts: a preface by various contributors spanning the first 12 pages; 43 pages of photographs; and 63 pages of news, appeals and personal reflections.

In his preface, Deputy Chairman Yeo Chan Boon explained that the committee had to be formed because of the need to provide aid to those displaced by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The work of the committee was then followed by a narrative on how Great World came to be used as a venue for the carnival; the organisation of another committee to oversee the proceedings of the carnival; and a full member list of those involved with the organisation of the carnival itself. Many prominent Chinese in Singapore were involved with both the committee and the organisation of the carnival. Yet, there is the noticeable absence of Tan Kah Kee (陈嘉庚), the main overseas Chinese community leader in Singapore who headed the Hokkien Huay Kuan and a power broker in the leadership of the SCCC. The publication makes no mention on why Tan was not involved.

The rest of the publication includes appeals by members of the committee; personal aware-

¹ Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry, *Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry 80th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine*, (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 1986), p. 124.

ness of raising funds for China; ravages of war; advertisements; and the carnival programme at Great World. There is also the personal impression of an individual who had returned home to China for a short visit.² It is noteworthy that he used the pseudonym “*zhongli*” (中立), which means “non-partisan”, implying that his views would be independent ones. He had not been influenced by the Kuomintang (KMT) or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as both parties had ended their United Front in 1927 and were, by 1932, openly fighting each other in the interior provinces of China. There is an article entitled “Sole Obligation” where the writer argues that there must be a balance struck between rights and obligations. He calls for a spirit of self-sacrifice—those who could donate money should do so willingly. He reminds readers that the overseas Chinese were the “mother of the revolution” and that it was time to bring forth that spirit of self-sacrifice and work hard for the survival of the Chinese. The same impassioned plea to the Chinese in Singapore to do whatever they could to save their motherland—China—is repeated throughout the book. The English manifesto of the Committee of Relief Fund for China is also included in the book and it tells readers that “although subscriptions have been pouring in daily, we feel that unless the public continuously render their support, the relief work in China cannot be carried on incessantly”. The English manifesto also makes appeals to “the Straits Chinese and sympathetic foreign communities” to make any donations (including medicine, food and clothing) to the Committee at the SCCC. The 43 pages of photographs depict mainly Japanese atrocities, Chinese refugees, members of the Committee and participants in the carnival (including students involved with Chinese opera, musical performances and games).

There are some general themes that can be gleaned from this publication. The first and most unmistakable is that of overseas Chinese nationalism, which manifests in two ways: a heavy criticism of Japan and a call for China to strengthen itself. Contributors condemned Japan for its imperial ambitions over China. In his foreword, Lü Weijue (吕伟觉), the principal of Yeung Ching School (养正学校), noted that with the end of World War I, the Treaty of Versailles was signed and the League of Nations was founded in order to end all wars. However, Lü noted that as the world was going through the Great Depression, “a certain side” decided to break world peace by invading Manchuria and attacking Shanghai. He noted with sadness the

powerlessness of the League of Nations and the endless suffering of the “peace-loving” Chinese.³ There is also an article that links relief efforts with “self-strengthening”, a reference to the Self-Strengthening Movement (自强运动) that took place in the Qing Empire just a few decades earlier (1861–95). Zheng Zhaowu (郑照吾) suggests that by participating in relief efforts, the overseas Chinese would have contributed to the strengthening of China.⁴

The book also appeals to overseas Chinese nationalism through advertisements highlighting “national products” (国货) or goods produced and/or manufactured in China. After the National Government was formally installed in Nanjing in 1928 after 16 years of division, a sense of nationalistic pride swept China and the overseas Chinese communities. Purchasing Chinese goods was seen as a patriotic act.⁵ Between pages 28 and 29 of the main text, for instance, there are two advertisements for liquor from Gong Yu Hang (公裕行) and Wan Xing National Products Company (万兴国货公司) companies. Gong Yu Hang reminded readers not to forget to “save the nation” (救国) by promoting “national products”. Wan Xing National Products Company had a tagline—“Love the country and fellow overseas citizens by drinking Five Star Beer (五星啤酒), a national product”.⁶

This book is a showpiece of overseas Chinese nationalism through the public appeal of Chinese leaders in Singapore to the sense of patriotism of the members of the community. The committee informed the Chinese in Singapore of the Japanese atrocities in Manchuria and the plight of Chinese refugees who were forced to flee the war zone. Some of the articles published in this book are cause for reflection on overseas Chinese nationalism. The detailed programme given in the publication included Chinese historical plays, Cantonese opera, performances by Chinese musical groups, and volleyball and basketball matches between several Chinese schools.⁷ The advertisements calling on the Chinese in Singapore to consume national products followed the practice of merchants in China who called on the Chinese to buy Chinese goods in order to save Chinese businesses and contribute to the Chinese economy. The book also reveals the leadership role of the SCCC in the Chinese community when Singapore was still a British colony. The content of the publication and the tumultuous times during which it was published (when Japan was encroaching into Chinese territory) makes this book an important source for researchers on overseas Chinese nationalism.

² Liao C Fan and Wang Siew Peng, *Xinjiapo Zhonghua Zongshanghui Chouben Zhongguo Nanmin Weiyuanhui Dashijie Youyibui Tekan* (A Special Guide to the Great World Entertainment in aid of the China Relief Fund organised by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce), (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1932), pp. 15–16 in the main text.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6 in the preface.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15 in the main text.

⁵ Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, c. 2003); Jason Lim, *Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea: Overseas Chinese Merchants in the Fujian-Singapore Trade, 1920–1960*, (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010).

⁶ Liao and Wang, *Dashijie Youyibui Tekan*, between pages 28 and 29 in the main text.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–39 in the main text.

About the author

Dr Jason Lim is an Asian History lecturer with the University of Wollongong’s School of History and Politics. He started off his career with the National Archives of Singapore before moving on to the Oral History Centre as a researcher and interviewer. From 2008 to 2010, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of History at the National University of Singapore and joined the University of Wollongong in 2010. He is currently also serving as the China representative in the 2011–2012 Council of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA).