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SELF-RULE AND UNREST: OVERSEAS CHINESE IN SINGAPORE

Disturbing Trends in an Overseas Chinese City
Which Is Moving from Colonialism toward Self-Rule

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The British colony of Singapore is the only political entity in Southeast Asia in which Overseas Chinese make up an **overwhelming** majority of the population. Close to four-fifths of the people living in the colony are Chinese. Those born or naturalized in Singapore, furthermore, are "citizens of the United Kingdom and the colonies" and therefore **have** full local political rights, even though Peking still regards them as Chinese citizens. The Chinese with British **citizenship** now outnumber the "**alien**" Chinese in the colony, and they form a majority of the qualified electorate in Singapore.

These facts assumed greatly increased importance in April of this year, when the British took the first major step toward granting Singapore self-rule. The prospect of self-rule has raised the possibility of a Chinese-controlled city located at the most strategic crossroads of Southeast Asia. In the past three months, this possibility has become a probability because the Chinese in Singapore, long described as apathetic about local politics under colonial rule, **have** rapidly become very active in the colony's **political** affairs. If, as most people expect, Singapore is ultimately merged into one political unit with the Federation of Malaya, the influence of the Malays may make **itself** felt. But this does not alter the fact that one of the key cities in Southeast Asia will undoubtedly be ruled by Chinese.

Singapore's situation is unique, therefore: **it** is one in which political questions about the Overseas Chinese community concern a majority group, not a minority. Now the important question in Singapore is not whether Chinese will ultimately control the colony politically, but what kind of Chinese they will be. Will they be Chinese who are primarily rooted in the colony, or **will** they have strong ties to their Chinese homeland? If the latter group predominates, to what extent will **it** be linked with the present Chinese Communist regime in Peking?

Recent trends are disturbing. They indicate that there is a definite possibility that Singapore may be ruled, at some time in the future, by Chinese groups which are Peking-oriented and either controlled or strongly influenced by the Communists.

Since last April, a radical party in Singapore called the People's Action Party' (PAP) has assumed the role of a potentially powerful opposition group in the Legislative Assembly, and has steadily forged strong links with organized masses of workers (predominantly Chinese) and militant Chinese students. A small group of PAP labor leaders has fomented increasing industrial unrest and has pushed union organization to the point where it may well be able to achieve control over a majority of organized laborers in Singapore during the months ahead. The Chinese middle school (high school) students, strongly nationalistic and tightly organized under pro-Communist leadership, have become increasingly defiant of all conventional authority. Twice during the past three months these forces working in close co-ordination have directly challenged the power of the existing government by mob violence or illegal strike action.

In the background of these developments, the influence of the Malayan Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Government in Peking is playing a very important role. The Malayan Communist Party, which is overwhelmingly Chinese in membership and maintains guerrilla headquarters in the Malayan jungles, shifted tactics in late 1951 from emphasizing open warfare and terrorism to developing subversion, infiltration, and agitation. It now, in effect, controls the Chinese middle school students in Singapore, and it has infiltrated PAP and the unions, obviously with considerable success. The Peking Government has exerted a strong influence over the entire Chinese community in Singapore, to such an extent that now there are very few vocal or active Chinese in the colony who are not either sympathetic to Peking or neutrally nonantagonistic. The Chinese press, Chinese business organizations, and almost everyone else, except for an ineffective pro-Kuomintang handful, play along. Furthermore, using devious channels of influence through Overseas Chinese fellow travelers now in Peking, the Chinese Communists have applied pressure on leading businessmen in Singapore in order to intervene directly for their own political ends in local Singapore affairs. These forces and influences have caused Singapore violent birthpains during the past three months of experimental self-rule.

On April 2, under the paternalistic guidance of Britain's colonial rulers, Singapore chose its first majority-elected representative body and Chief Minister, who were granted wide powers in many fields, even though London's representatives retained final control over foreign affairs, defense, security, and finance. The election was peaceful and orderly. Its outcome, however, was an unexpected victory for a left-wing Labor Front, much to the regret of most of the colonial administrators, who had hoped for a victory of conservatives.

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Since the election, however, the Labor Front Government has proved to be moderate, clearly anti-Communist, and almost **right-wing** by comparison with the radical politicians, students, and unionists now working against it. Almost from the day it came to power, this government has had to face an alarming series of crises involving disorder, lawlessness, fear, violence and **bloodshed**. While trying to establish **itself** within the new constitutional framework of the colony, **it** has been openly challenged, outside the realm of democratic political action, by organized masses and disorderly mobs. On several occasions, normal life in Singapore has been severely disrupted. In mid-May, there was an outburst of violence against government authority described in the Legislative Assembly as "**a night of terror in the streets of Singapore--a night of rioting and bloodshed and killing by wild mobs.**" More recently, in mid-June, the life of the colony **was** almost paralyzed by a politically-motivated attempt to call a general strike, labeled by the new Chief Minister as a "direct form of political coercion endangering the immediate welfare and security of the **people.**" Is Singapore to have law and order or rule by a "**coalition** of unorganized mobs and an organized minority of unions," asked one of the leading local newspapers. Although there is now a lull in the situation, this question has not by any means been finally answered.

Even if law and order do prevail, the organized strength of the radical politicians, students, and unionists, with communist and Peking instigation in the background, is still on the upswing, and there is a definite possibility that the power of these groups may reach the point where they could achieve control of the government even by legal parliamentary **means**.

Unless present political trends are checked, therefore, the British must give serious consideration to the future possibility of a pro-Peking, **pro-Communist** Chinese government in Singapore. If such a government came into power, **it** would have tremendous repercussions on the general British strategic position in Asia, as well as on the political climate of the whole **area**.

Until full independence is granted, of **course**, the **British** have firm military control over Singapore, and they can delay independence--they can, in fact, revoke the new constitution at any time, as they did in British Guiana--but if they were forced to do this, the political effects both in Singapore and in Asia as a whole might be extremely unfavorable and costly,

How has this situation arisen? Who are Overseas Chinese in Singapore? What has led to the existing Communist threat **pre-**sented by powerful groups within the colony's Chinese community? The need to understand the Overseas Chinese in Singapore is urgent, because here, as in no other place in Southeast Asia,

they dominate the political as well as the economic scene,

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THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE

When Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles founded the colony of Singapore in 1819, the only inhabitants of the place were some 120 Malays and 30 Chinese. By mid-1954, less than a century and a half later, Singapore had an estimated population of 1,168,000, of whom 893,000 were Chinese and only 144,000 Malaysians (Malays and Indonesians of Malay stock); the remainder of the population was made up of 91,000 Indians and Pakistanis and 40,000 Eurasians, Europeans, and others.

In a sense, virtually the entire population of Singapore, whether British, Chinese, Malay, Indonesian, or Indian, is made up of fairly recent immigrants to the small island on which Singapore is located, but the Chinese have far outnumbered all others. From the time the first junk out of Amoy sailed into the colony (in 1821) until World War II, the immigrants flowed southward from the China coast in increasing numbers. Like the colony of Hong Kong to the north, Singapore was created jointly by the British and the Chinese,

Until recently, one of the most striking characteristics of the Chinese population in both Singapore and Malaya was its transient character. A very high percentage of the immigrants who came here were floaters, who stayed for a few years and then returned home. This is clearly reflected in immigration statistics. In the ten-year period (1931-1941) just before the war, 2,295,000 Chinese came to Singapore-Malaya, but 2,050,000 left, so the net immigration was only 245,000, or an average of slightly less than 25,000 per year during the whole period. (The peak was during the mid-1930's. Wet immigration into Singapore-Malaya in 1937 was 181,000. During the early depression years, there was actually a reverse flow to China: in 1931, net emigration was 112,000. During the years just before the war, there was a surplus of immigrants over emigrants, but it was small, amounting to only 3,000 in 1940.)

In recent years, however, it appears that the majority of Chinese in Singapore are here to stay, a fact which has already had, and will continue to have, a tremendous influence on the basic character of the colony's predominantly Chinese community. World War II, which for all practical purposes cut off the flow of migration between China and Singapore, was a major factor in bringing about this change. Another factor has been the increasing restriction of immigration by the British, begun in the 1930's but greatly tightened since the end of the war. According to new legislation introduced by the Singapore Government on August 1, 1953, immigration is barred except to persons

with British citizenship, small groups of technical specialists, and wives and children of Chinese already resident in the colony. During the year following introduction of this legislation, only about 4,000 Chinese were allowed to immigrate to Singapore, and of these about three-fourths were wives and children of persons already here.

The establishment of a communist regime in China has been another factor explaining the virtual stoppage of migration. Although many of Singapore's Chinese businessmen are for various reasons friendly toward Peking, very few of them would choose, even if they could, to return to live under a communist government. For the first time in its history, therefore, at least in terms of migrational flow, Singapore has a relatively stable population. (The total population, to be sure, is now increasing at the rate of about three per cent a year, and will thus reach two million by 1972.)

These changes taking place in the Chinese community have had effects which are politically very significant. The percentage of local-born persons among the Chinese in Singapore has increased rapidly from 25 per cent in 1921 to 36 per cent in 1931, 60 per cent in 1947, and over 70 per cent now. (The Singapore Government currently estimates 76 per cent, but this may be a little high.) The age structure has also undergone a remarkable change, and Singapore at present has one of the youngest populations of any important city in the world. Over one-half of all people in the colony are under 21 years of age; official figures released only last month indicate that 54 per cent of Singapore's Chinese are under 21 (495,000, out of 911,000). To keep up with present population trends, Singapore now must create about 16,000 new jobs and accommodations for 20,000 new primary pupils every year. It is obvious that what happens to the growing numbers of young Chinese workers and school children who will reach maturity and hold local citizenship in the years immediately ahead is of extraordinary importance to the future of Singapore.

Like most Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, the one in Singapore is a complicated mixture of people who come from different areas in South China, speak different dialects, organize on a regional basis, and stick together in their own groups to a significant extent. The Hokkiens from Amoy are in numbers, economic status, and influence by far the most important group in the colony. Next come the Teochius from Swatow and the Cantonese and Kwongsai from Kwangtung and Kwangsi. According to the 1954 census estimates, of the total Chinese population in Singapore 341,000 are Hokkiens, 186,000 Cantonese and Kwongsais, and 185,000 Teochius. Of the remainder, 62,000 are Hailams and 47,000 Hakkas. Although there are definite indications that the dividing lines between these groups are becoming less rigid, particularly among their children who are being educated in schools which teach in either kuoyu (mandarin) or English, they are still important. For example, a recent (still unpublished) social survey shows that about nine-tenths of the Hokkiens,

Teochius, and Cantonese marry within their own groups, Occupations still follow regional group lines to a considerable extent, and the Hokkiens dominate the lucrative rubber trade, which is of major importance in Singapore's economy. Among the Chinese as a whole, however, it is the Sinkheh, or newcomers, who show most initiative, energy, and enterprise, as in many Overseas Chinese communities. In Singapore, data on the relative occupational status of immigrant Chinese and local-born Chinese show that the immigrants are 7 per cent employers, 19 per cent self-employed, and 63 per cent employees, while of the local-born 81 per cent are employees, 3 per cent employers, and 10 per cent self-employed.

There is little doubt that the distinction between local-born and China-born is now more important in many respects than the inner divisions within the different immigrant communities. In Singapore, one constantly hears comparisons between local-born "Straits Chinese" and the China-born immigrants. Although the distinction is usually made on the basis of birthplace, the really important division within the Chinese community in Singapore is based upon language, education, and culture. In the colony's Chinese population, there is a wide divergence between an English-speaking minority (the group most people really have in mind when they use the term "Straits Chinese"), who have been educated in English schools, use English as their primary language, and have assimilated Western culture to a large degree, and the majority, whether born in China or Singapore, who speak Chinese and have clung stubbornly to Chinese customs and culture with little modification. A subtle but very important change has been taking place during the past few years in the relationships between these two groups. In the past, under a colonial administration, outstanding "Straits Chinese" very often had a social and political advantage, and because they were Anglicized they could achieve public prominence denied to those who did not speak English. Now it seems likely that the reverse may be the case in the future. The majority of non-English-speaking Chinese increasingly tend to regard the "Straits Chinese" with a certain contempt as cultural turncoats. Formerly Chinese who attended English schools used to feel superior, but now, particularly among the younger generation, many feel self-conscious about it, as "preservation of Chinese culture" has become a major public issue.

Traditional Chinese social organization, heterogeneous, complicated, and clannish, has been confined almost wholly to the Chinese-speaking group in Singapore, with the China-born playing the leading roles. In the colony there are still innumerable clan associations, with membership on a surname basis, and over one hundred regional associations, with membership on a geographical basis. Regional associations are established on several levels with provinces, prefectures, hsien and villages as units; in addition, groups such as the Hakkas organize in ways that cut across geographical lines. There is evidence, however, that clan and regional organizations have been declining in

importance. The development of kuoyu as a universal lingua franca among Chinese, overshadowing the importance of local dialects among youth, and the decline in contacts with homeland districts since the Communists came to power, have reinforced this trend.

Secret societies are another important form of traditional Chinese organization in Singapore, and they have survived here to a greater extent than in almost any other place in Southeast Asia. Despite the fact that the British have tried for decades to suppress and stamp them out, dozens of secret societies still operate in Singapore. Most of them are believed to be offshoots of the old Triad Society, or San Ho Hui, in China. Some informed persons claim that, for self-protection if for no other reason, the majority of lower-class Chinese in Singapore covertly belong to the societies. Their present activities are mostly criminal, with extortion in the best Chicago-gangsterism tradition being one of their important aims, but they are a force not to be underestimated. The hooligans and thugs whom they control can be used for political as well as for criminal purposes.

By far the most important traditional organization functioning in the Chinese-speaking community in Singapore is still the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Its several thousand members include the colony's most influential businessmen, many of them rags-to-riches Chinese millionaires who have made vast fortunes from trade in Malaya's rubber, tin, and other major products. This body has undoubtedly been the most important single Overseas Chinese organization in all of Southeast Asia, and traditionally its members have spoken for Singapore's Chinese community and have exercised undisputed leadership over it. It is highly significant, however, that in recent months there have been several fairly dramatic instances in which the Chinese Chamber of Commerce has not been able to dictate to, or speak for, the Chinese community as it has in the past. In the recent election, and in student activities and strikes, attempts by the Chamber of Commerce to exert control have been defeated, shouted down, ignored or undermined by new, powerful, organized forces--political parties, student organizations, and unions--which represent primarily the younger generation of Chinese, in contrast to the elder business leaders.

Two trends are now clearly evident within the Chinese community as Singapore undergoes its evolution toward self-rule. Political parties in modern form, student organizations, and labor unions are becoming increasingly important and may well overshadow traditional Chinese organizations in political influence. The old institutions will continue to exist, and there is little doubt that political parties will attempt to utilize them in many ways, but their role will be less important than before. Actually, the traditional organizations, which used to provide a sort of old-fashioned system of informal self-government within the Chinese community, will become increasingly anachronistic as self-rule and local politics in Singapore develop, with Chinese

playing a dominant political role in the community as a whole.

At the same time, radical youth is asserting itself among Singapore's Chinese at the expense of the business-minded community elders who have dominated the community in the past. It is the young and the radical who have enthusiastically entered the field of mass political organization. The Chamber of Commerce leaders are accustomed to talking things over in clubs, such as the Tanjong Rhu Club and E. Hoe Hean Club, and, because of their tremendous economic power, being able to make decisions which the majority of Chinese in Singapore would have to accept. The power of these elders, and the wealth and institutions which they control, are still extremely important. But their authority over the Chinese community as a whole is certainly no longer undisputed.

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PEKING AND THE CHINESE COMMUNITY

Most Overseas Chinese in Singapore, like those throughout Southeast Asia, are devoted to pursuit of profit. The "typical" Chinese in Singapore is neither the radical student nor the manual laborer; he is the shopkeeper or businessman. Although they talk of "Chinese culture," few of these men know much of the aesthetic and philosophic achievements of that culture; they know more about markets, investments, and interest rates. The society in which they live is one in which money talks, and their leaders are millionaires. In Singapore there is tremendous accumulation of Chinese wealth. Malaya is a rich country, and the Chinese along with the British have profited handsomely from its development. There have been almost no economic restrictions on the Chinese in Singapore comparable to restrictions on most Overseas Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia.

Yet today almost all articulate opinion among the Chinese in Singapore is favorable to the present Communist regime in Peking. This includes not only groups such as the students and workers, among whom ideology is a factor, but also businessmen who are basically nonideological. With the exception of one Kuomintang organ, the Chung Shing Jit Pao (Chung Hsing Jih Pao), the Chinese press in Singapore is overwhelmingly pro-Peking. The two largest papers, Nanyang Siang Pau (Nanyang Shang Pao) and Sin Chew Jit Poh (Hsing Chou Jih Pao), sing the praises of Peking and generally support radical student activities. Both of these papers belong to Chinese millionaires' families, and I am told that their political line has a motivation which is to a considerable extent economic--i.e., they follow the line which they think will promote the highest circulation. (In May 1954, one of these papers opposed the student demonstrations, and its circulation dropped immediately; it has not tried to do so since.) Tabloids such as the Sin Pao (Hsin Pao) read almost like papers from the

mainland of Communist China. This press situation reflects the prevailing mood of Chinese opinion in the colony and also, of course, helps to mold it.

Although there have been fluctuations in attitudes toward Peking among Chinese in Singapore, in no other country that I have visited in recent months has pro-Peking opinion been so completely in the ascendancy. There are some Chinese in the colony who are anticommunist and for this reason oppose the present regime in China--I have myself talked with some of them--but their views at present are rarely heard publicly, and many of them are actually afraid to express their opinions. Intimidation and threats, especially by students, play a very important role in Singapore today,

There are many explanations for the present trend of Chinese opinion in Singapore, but certainly one of the most important has been the increasing importance of nationalist and racialist feeling among the colony's Chinese, Peking's emergence as a "Big Power" has increased their pride and their determination to preserve and assert their "Chineseness." It has also convinced many of them that China and communism represent the winning team in the existing international struggle.

Traditional ties with China proper are still strong, Normal travel back and forth to South China has virtually ceased, at least on the prewar scale, but many contacts are still maintained. Correspondence with relatives continues. Remittances are still sent home. (The Singapore limit on remittances is a liberal one--\$45 a month per person. Total remittances from Singapore Chinese to Communist China now average somewhere between \$15 million and \$21 million a year.) A sizable number of students return to China for free higher education, although this is a one-way traffic. (In the spring of 1954 as many as 500 students a month were returning to China from Singapore, The majority had not completed middle school, Recently there has been a shift in Peking's policy, and the Communists are encouraging more students to stay in Singapore. A flow continues, nonetheless, Just a few days ago one ship carried over 300 Singapore students to China, and a police official told me that he estimates the present rate might be 800 to 900 per year,)

Although there is no Chinese consulate in Singapore through which Peking can transmit its views to the Chinese community here, there is one man in the Peking regime who provides effective liaison. That man is Tan Kah-kee. Tan, now aged 81, was once the wealthiest, most influential Chinese in Singapore, and was the recognized leader of Singapore's Chinese. Now he is a member of the Chinese Communists' National People's Congress and Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission. Working through Tan, the Chinese Communists are able to exercise a direct influence in many phases of Singapore's affairs.

Tan Kah-kee was born in Tungan, Fukien, a region which

provided Singapore with many of its immigrants. Like most immigrants, he started life abroad with almost nothing. But he built up a vast fortune in rubber. A leading Chinese citizen of Singapore recently told me that he believed Tan once had perhaps as many as 85 branches of his companies scattered throughout Southeast Asia. "I wouldn't be surprised," this man added, "if 70 per cent of the leading rubber men in Singapore were once Tan's employees." He was chairman of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and exercised tremendous influence throughout Southeast Asia.

After accumulating his fortune, Tan Kah-kee became interested in education. In 1918, he established in Singapore the Chinese High School (the Chinese name is Hua Chiao Chung Hsueh, or Overseas Chinese High School), one of the two main centers of present student activities. In Fukien he established Amoy University and Chi Mei School, two of the leading institutions for Overseas Chinese in China. His interest in homeland politics predated the revolution of 1911. He joined the Tung Meng Hui, predecessor of the Kuomintang, and helped finance Sun Yat-sen. Later, he supported Chiang Kai-shek and mobilized Overseas Chinese financial support for the war against the Japanese. But during the war he became disillusioned with Chiang (he visited the Communist wartime capital of Yenan in 1940) and began actively denouncing him. After the Communists came to power, he joined their regime and went to work for them, using his influence among the Overseas Chinese to get contributions for causes in China and in general to affect Overseas Chinese opinions and actions.

Tan has two ready-made groups through which to work. One is made up of persons who used to be employed by him or in his huge business network in Southeast Asia. Another consists of alumni in Southeast Asia of his university and middle school in Fukien; even before the war the Southeast Asia alumni association of these institutions had over 2,000 members. Partly because of loyalty and gratitude--many of the people in the two groups owe all that they have to Tan--and perhaps partly because of fear--these groups hold great economic power which can be used against those who are disloyal--a large number of these people, almost all of whom are themselves very influential, respond to appeals and requests made by Tan Kah-kee. Tan's present job in the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission in Peking is to use his influence in conformity with Peking's policies,

The two men who are the recognized present leaders of the Singapore Chinese Community both used to work for Tan Kah-kee, and they themselves now have tremendous fortunes based primarily on rubber. Lee Kong-chian is Tan Kah-kee's son-in-law. He made a killing in rubber right after World War II and during the Korean War; he is now reputed to control one-eighth of the world's total trade in natural rubber. Lin Yu-tang, who was appointed first Chancellor of the planned Nanyang University for

Overseas Chinese in Singapore--but later resigned--has called Lee a "charming, intelligent, ruthless and utterly cynical businessman," and has labeled him a "key instrument of Peking's policy" in Singapore. Tan Lark-sye started as an employee of Tan Kah-kee. Although not related, they come from the same village in China, Tan Lark-sye was one of seven poor brothers and never had an education, Since acquiring his fortune he has emulated Tan Kah-kee's example by becoming interested in education, and Nanyang University was his project. The bulk of his fortune, like that of Lee Kong-chian's, was made after World War II and during the Korean War.

The network of the business interests of Lee Kong-chian and Tan Lark-sye is incredibly complex and touches thousands of people in Singapore. They have other interests as well, which are so diversified that it is difficult to find consistency in them. Lee Kong-chian's brother owns the Nanyang Siang Pau. It is also reliably reported that he has an interest in the Sin Pao. At the same time, he is linked to the conservative Progressive Party. Tan Lark-sye, for all practical purposes, controls the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. It was his men who organized the Democratic Party, and his nephew heads it. Lee Kong-chian is head of the management committee of Chinese High School, while a brother of Tan Lark-sye heads the management committee of Chung Cheng High School, The network of influence could be explored at length.

There is very little ideology involved in all of these activities, Overseas Chinese businessmen tend to act on the basis of their own conception of self-interest, But they are subject to many kinds of pressure. Direct pressure from Peking is one form. Pressure from local student, labor and political organizations is another. In turn, they themselves exert an important influence over the entire Chinese community.

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