

WANG GUNGWU

## CHAPTER 1

### SOCIAL BONDING AND FREEDOM

#### PROBLEMS OF CHOICE IN IMMIGRANT SOCIETIES

I would like to begin by saying a few words about Tan Kah Kee (Chen Jiageng), whom we are honoring today through the International Society carrying his name. His is a classic case of the immigrant entrepreneur-philanthropist who made his fortune abroad, in this case in British Malaya, and became famous for his philanthropy not only among the Chinese communities there but in China as well, notably in the Hokkien speaking areas of Fujian province from where he had come. His greatest contribution was to introduce modern education, not only to immigrant communities, but also to those at their place of origin. He is the inspiration that linked immigrant communities to modern education in the Immigrant Societies and Modern Education Conference (held in Singapore in 2000). His story has been told many times over, notably by scholars in China, but also by many in Singapore and Malaysia (Wang & Yu 1981). Nothing, however, can match his own story as told in various sections of his autobiography, his *Nanqiao huiyilu* (*Memoirs of a Southern Sojourner*), which has been selectively translated into English (Chen 1979; Ward, Chu & Salaff 1994). Also, there is a full and authoritative account of his life in Singapore (Yong 1987).

Let me highlight a few points about him that underline his relevance to the theme of this conference. Many have wondered at the many things he did for education and have puzzled over what it was that drove him to do so much in this area. Others have asked whether he was typical for his time, or was he the exception? It would be hard to answer such questions without reference to what others did and what were regarded as the norms in Tan Kah Kee's lifetime. Clearly what he did was not conventional. Like his attitude towards his enterprises, whether commercial, agricultural, or industrial, his dedication to education and building schools at every level was nothing if not radical. His goal of modernizing, through education, the Chinese in Singapore, as well his people at home in southern Fujian, might not in itself have been an original idea, but his commitment to using his wealth directly and almost exclusively for that purpose certainly was.

For example, in his ideas about education, he parted from his own orthodox teachers in his village of Jimei (Chen 1979, 393). He had gained much from his

experiences in a modern city like Singapore to believe that children should not only learn the classics, but should go beyond them to seek practical knowledge from those who were the most advanced. In his day, he was thinking of the West as represented by the British in Asia. He thought that children should be encouraged to learn the latest advances in how things were done. Their teachers should be trained to respond to new demands for the necessary skills that children would need if they were to take advantage of a rapidly changing world. He was quick to see the importance of business and industrial training, including subjects like commercial law, accounting skills, and maritime seamanship (Ward, Chu, & Salaff 1994, 11-25). He also saw this in the context of adult education for the many who worked for him who had never had the chance for any education. He was among the earliest to see the need for education for girls, especially in China, where most girls were not expected to go to school at all (Ward, Chu, & Salaff 1994, 21 & 39). And he recognized the practical importance of foreign language skills, and encouraged bilingualism among those who had to live and work outside China. But perhaps his farsightedness was best exemplified in his strong support for further education when he planned the first full-fledged Chinese high school in Southeast Asia, still known today as the Chinese High School, in Singapore (*Hauqiao Zhongxue* 1979). In it, as well as in the university he began to build in Xiamen soon afterwards, he stressed the study of the sciences. Very early on, he had plans to encourage the practical sciences that would support the study of modern medicine and engineering.

Tan Kah Kee was aware that older methods of cultural transmission still prevailed in the few old-style schools that had been set up for local-born children among overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and was dissatisfied with them. The limitations of these schools were largely due to the nature and level of education of the early migrant leaders. For such leaders, it was enough for these traditional *sishu* or private tuition groups to teach simple reading, writing, and counting and some awareness of the values that guided Chinese life and behaviour whether at home or abroad (Yen 1992; Cui 1994). These may be compared with the education offered by religious schools for Christians and Muslims. Tan Kah Kee knew that westerners had church schools that included close attention to the sacred texts in order to transmit the Christian faith to younger generations. But he noted that the mission schools in British Malaya and also in China often went further than that by offering modern subjects of practical use that appealed to the Chinese. He was attracted to the idea of schools that taught children to respect their history and culture while freeing them to study new subjects that challenged outdated traditional knowledge.

Tan Kah Kee followed the traditions of giving that lie at the foundation of his lifelong practice of philanthropy. These traditions combined the compassion for the needy with social recognition achieved through prolonged acts of generosity. Such acts would earn the givers considerable status and even the reins of communal leadership if such persons were willing to accept them. The leadership roles, if performed well, were quasi-political from the point of view of local rulers and colonial officials. In time, as modern goals came to be shaped in nationalistic terms, it was but a short step for such men to aspire to more open alternative political roles (Yong 1992).

In Tan Kah Kee's leadership during the height of the Sino-Japanese conflict in the late 1930s, the immigrant Chinese who admired him saw him as a means to achieve what they wanted, which was to participate in local affairs in ways fully commensurate with their contributions to economic development. From the perspective of British Malaya, his success in drawing the Chinese to China's patriotic cause was a serious challenge to the colonial government's ambivalent policies. The British needed the Chinese to remain more or less Chinese in order to support their trading and imperial objectives, but they also wanted to integrate the Chinese as a newly settled population loyal to British authority. In addition, they also had obligations to the Malay rulers whose sovereign rights they claimed to respect. It was therefore not surprising that, in the end, what Tan Kah Kee represented did not suit their agenda (Yong 1987, 180-224). Where he saw his work as freeing his people from outworn tradition, the colonial authorities sensed the danger of too much communal bonding for the plural societies they had created.

This brings me to an issue in modern education that is exemplified by Tan Kah Kee's belief that it contributed to the strength and enrichment of immigrant communities. Two factors in his achievements can serve to give the subject focus. The first was his concern for how the Chinese communities abroad were internally integrated and how they related to Chinese migrant communities elsewhere. In addition, he also believed that each of these communities should be connected to the people back in their homes in China. This is the element of social bonding, the kind that gives social cohesion to communities and nations. Secondly, he was a convert to the power of formal education, as seen in the modern schools and colleges he started in Malaya and his home district in Fujian and, most of all, in the university that he single-handedly founded, Xiamen University (Hong 1990, 1-17, 22-28, 33-36). In this way, he may be described as almost obsessive about the virtues of modern education. He was fully aware of how education could be used to impose conformity and determine the kind of bonding a community wanted, but was even more concerned for the new ideas and methods introduced that could liberate the minds of the young. Thus, there was the potential for social freedom.

These two factors provide the starting point for my reflections on the theme I have chosen for this lecture. Conditions for immigrants have much improved since Tan Kah Kee's time and, in most countries today, once they are admitted, immigrants enjoy the freedom to move about and make choices about their lives. It has not always been so. The transition from slavery and various degrees of bondage, including earlier versions of contract labour, to free and voluntary immigration has taken a long time. How an immigrant society is formed has changed greatly over the past two centuries, especially during the past fifty years since the end of the Second World War. Among the factors responsible for the changes are improved economic conditions in host countries and new laws embodying ideas of freedom and rights for minorities (Wang, G. W. 1997; Zolberg 1997).

Also, education has become more readily available for new immigrants and the quality of education improved. In addition, new immigrants have been more likely than before to receive help and advice about local conditions from members of established immigrant communities of their own kind, whether identified by race, religion, or culture. Of course, the host countries have also changed their



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1336-2>

Asian Migrants and Education

The Tensions of Education in Immigrant Societies and  
Among Migrant Groups

Charney, M.W.; Yeoh, B.; Tong Chee Kiong (Eds.)

2003, XX, 224 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1336-2