Dialect groups, clan associations and huiguan

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland and Germany),
Solicitor (England & Wales and Hong Kong)
Of Counsel, KGP Legal LLC
alexander.ressos@kgplegal.com.sg
www.ressos.com.sg

The dialect map

The Chinese population of Singapore was divided by dialect, by district of origin and to a considerable extent by occupation. The Hokkien from southern Fujian dominated trade and commerce, with merchants who controlled much of the import and export business. The Teochew from the Chaozhou area of eastern Guangdong were strongly represented in gambier and pepper planting and in the produce trade along the river. Cantonese and Hakka migrants predominated in various crafts and trades, while the Hainanese were known as seamen, domestic servants and later as coffee-shop keepers.[1]

These divisions mattered commercially. A merchant could communicate most easily with people who spoke his dialect, knew his home district and shared his temple and associations. He could find out more about their reputation and could call on the leaders of their common association if a dispute arose. Dialect communities therefore formed the primary circles of trust within which credit flowed most freely. Trade between dialect groups existed, but it required intermediaries and carried higher risks.

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The earliest associations

The Chinese of Singapore organised themselves in associations from the first years of the settlement. The earliest association based on kinship, the Cho Kah Koon, dates from 1819. Associations based on locality followed in 1822, when Cantonese migrants founded the Ning Yeung Wui Kuan and Hakka migrants the Ying Fo Fui Kun.[2] Two kinds of association can be distinguished. Bloodline associations brought together people sharing the same or related surnames, while locality associations united people from the same province, prefecture, county, town or village.[3]

The associations multiplied as immigration grew. Between the nineteenth century and 1965, more than two hundred bloodline associations and 133 locality associations were founded. In 2022 the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations reported 244 member organisations, including 229 clan associations.[4] The number shows how central these organisations were to the social life of the Chinese community. Most of them combined social, religious, charitable and economic functions.

Thian Hock Keng and the Hokkien Huay Kuan

The most important institution of the Hokkien community was the temple of Thian Hock Keng on Telok Ayer Street, which faced the sea before land reclamation moved the shoreline. A small joss house stood on the site by around 1821 or 1822. Between 1839 and 1842 it was rebuilt as a major temple at a cost of 30,000 Spanish dollars, with Tan Tock Seng, whose career Chapter IV described, as the largest donor.[5] Seafarers and immigrants gave thanks there to the sea goddess Mazu for a safe passage. The temple was gazetted as a national monument on 6 July 1973.[6]

In 1840 the Hokkien Huay Kuan, the association of the Hokkien community, was formed within the temple grounds.[7] The combination of temple and association was typical. The temple provided a sacred space in which oaths could be sworn, disputes heard and agreements solemnised before the gods. The association provided

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leadership, administration and funds. Through them the leading merchants of the community exercised authority over its members, arbitrated their disputes and represented them in their dealings with the colonial government.

The functions of the associations

The associations performed functions that the colonial state either did not perform or performed poorly. They received new arrivals from the home district, found them lodging and work and lent them money. They maintained burial grounds and arranged funerals, which mattered greatly to men who might die far from home and wanted their remains or their memory to return to their ancestors. They built temples, organised festivals and later founded schools. They settled disputes between members by arbitration, which was cheaper, faster and more familiar than the colonial courts.[8]

The economic functions deserve emphasis. By bringing together people who shared a dialect, a district and often an occupation, the associations reduced the cost of information about their members. A merchant who wanted to know whether a newcomer was reliable could ask the leaders of the association, who knew his family at home and his conduct in Singapore. A member who defaulted on a debt or cheated a partner risked expulsion, the loss of his burial rights and the shame of his family in the home village. The association thus served as a credit bureau, a court and an enforcement agency at once.

The leaders of the associations were the wealthiest merchants of the community. Their leadership reflected their commercial standing and at the same time enhanced it. A merchant who presided over an association, financed a temple or endowed a school gained prestige, which translated into creditworthiness. The overlap between commercial wealth and community leadership, noted in the career of Tan Tock Seng, was built into the structure of Chinese society in Singapore.

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Notes

1. On the occupational specialisation of Chinese dialect groups in nineteenth-century Singapore, see Yen Ching-hwang, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800–1911*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1986, and Kwa Chong Guan and Kua Bak Lim (eds), *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, Singapore, World Scientific, 2019. The pattern is a generalisation with many exceptions. ↩

2. Kua Bak Lim, "Of blood and geography: Clan associations in Singapore", *Culturepaedia* (Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre), 19 March 2024: the earliest bloodline-based association, Cho Kah Koon, was established in 1819; Ning Yeung Wui Kuan (Cantonese) and Ying Fo Fui Kun (Hakka) followed in 1822. ↩

3. Kua Bak Lim, "Of blood and geography", *Culturepaedia*, 19 March 2024, on the distinction between bloodline-based and locality-based associations. ↩

4. Kua Bak Lim, "Of blood and geography", *Culturepaedia*, 19 March 2024: over 200 bloodline associations and 133 locality-based associations established between the nineteenth century and 1965; in 2022 the Federation reported "244 member organisations, including 229 clan associations and 15 associate members". ↩

5. Wikipedia, "Thian Hock Keng" (accessed September 2026): originally a joss house around 1821–1822; rebuilt from 1839 and completed in 1842 "at a cost of 30,000 Spanish dollars", with Tan Tock Seng making the largest donation. ↩

6. Wikipedia, "Thian Hock Keng" (accessed September 2026): arrivals gave thanks to Mazu for a safe sea passage; gazetted as a national monument on 6 July 1973. ↩

7. Wikipedia, "Thian Hock Keng" (accessed September 2026): the Hokkien Huay Kuan was "formed within the temple ground of Thian Hock Keng" in 1840. ↩

8. On the functions of clan and locality associations in nineteenth-century Singapore, including reception of migrants, burial grounds, temples,

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arbitration and later schools, see Kua Bak Lim, "Of blood and geography", *Culturepaedia*, 19 March 2024, and Yen Ching-hwang, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya 1800–1911*, chapter 2. ↩

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Author contact: Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP · contact@ressos.com