

## **SPEECH BY MINISTER MENTOR LEE KUAN YEW AT THE CENTRE'S 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY FUNDRAISING DINNER**

A decade ago the Federation of Clan Associations decided to set up the Chinese Heritage Centre to let people of Chinese descent in Singapore and Nanyang (South Seas) know their history, how their ancestors braved the ocean in small junks to sail to Singapore and the South Seas and laboured to make a living, a few made fortunes, and the ways they supported each other in clan associations. This story of early migrations and settlements will remind the generation who has lived in comfortable circumstances, how their ancestors endured hardships in search of a better life. By recapturing and recording the past, the Clan Associations hope that future generations will learn to treasure their heritage.



The Chinese in Nanyang share very similar experiences. Those in North America and Australasia where large numbers of Chinese moved to during the last 150 years encountered different problems. Living in the midst of a host society that did not embrace them they coped, often using similar mutual support systems. Each Chinese group overseas was curious to know how other groups were doing in other parts of the world. The founders of the Chinese Heritage Centre recognised that this was part of the story of all Chinese overseas. It is invaluable education to know the role of networks in the past, and even in today's world. Singapore is well situated to tell the story of the Chinese diaspora.

There was also the traditional kind of links that overseas Chinese still retain with their ancestral homes in China. Most Chinese feel that their ancient civilisation has distinctive attributes and value systems that have served them well overseas. This cultural heritage has been romanticised and treasured. Some aspects of traditional culture and custom have been criticised as being no longer relevant, that they have become obstacles to progress. Traditional Chinese custom as practised by the early emigrants need to be understood so that their descendants can judge and decide what is still valid today. Knowledge of the past will enable Chinese descendants overseas to observe how the Chinese in China are changing, adjusting and adapting their own tradition and custom. The present leaders of China have to decide what should be retained or discarded of their heritage, their value system, customs and practices. Chinese overseas can study how traditional Chinese values and practices are evolving and adjusting to stay relevant in the China of the future.

Singaporean Chinese do not have a single heritage. Other cultures, values and practices from Europe, US, China, Japan and India have affected their lives. Similarly different value systems have influenced the Chinese who have settled in the US, Europe and Australasia. As the world shrinks with globalisation, cultures and value systems are interacting, intermingling and synthesising.

We need to know how traditional Chinese custom and values stand in this globalised village. Chinese everywhere have to cope with powerful influences that affect their sense of being Chinese. Chinese overseas especially have learnt that their identities cannot remain

unchanged. They have to know how they relate to Chinese people in today's China. To help these groups to be more conscious of what is happening to other groups in the world is one of the central purposes of the Chinese Heritage Centre.

It will help the widely dispersed Chinese overseas to identify and define themselves relative to their host communities and to the Chinese in China.

The Centre would need to collaborate with institutions elsewhere that are similarly interested in this evolving saga.

After new nations emerged from decolonisation of Dutch, French and British empires in Southeast Asia after World War II, overseas Chinese no longer traveled easily across national frontiers as they did during colonial times. They are now more segmented and separate, more confined to their national boundaries. They have acculturated, sharing more of the characteristics of their host culture. As a result Singaporean Chinese have become different from Indonesian Chinese, Thai Chinese, Filipino Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Malaysian Chinese.

As communications and transportation become so easy and convenient, migrations so huge, mixed marriages of Chinese and non-Chinese are more frequent the world over. The trend is stronger where the Chinese are a minority.

Does a person one of whose parents is Chinese consider himself Chinese? If the mother is Chinese, they may bear the father's foreign surname, but his Chinese mother will impart Chinese values. But he may not consider himself Chinese. If the spouse is Muslim, the identity will be Muslim. Where the spouse is non-Muslim, it depends on the father. If the father is Chinese, the child will carry a Chinese surname. Then the chances are the child will be absorbed into the Chinese community of that country. This is an interesting subject for study and analysis.

Located at the Nanyang Technological University in the past ten years, the Chinese Heritage Centre has worked hard to meet the goals of the clan federation and other generous donors. Its first exhibition showed photographs and artefacts that told the story of the Chinese overseas in various parts of the world. The exhibition attracted thousands of Singaporeans, notably school children, and has also been seen by numerous visitors and tourists to Singapore.

In anticipation of the 10th anniversary, the Centre has prepared a second exhibition on the theme of being "Chinese More or Less". This is a fresh look at the outcome of the integrating or synthesis of multiple identities that the Chinese in the diaspora have adopted. What is particularly interesting is the many ways these Chinese overseas have affirmed their Chineseness. Although this exhibition starts from a Singapore perspective, the emphasis is on the adaptability of the Chinese diaspora. Many new facets of Chineseness have been highlighted. They have become part of the "more or less Chinese" heritage that Chinese overseas are projecting to the world.

One of the attributes of being a Chinese is the ability to speak Chinese.

When Chinese overseas maintain their Chinese language, they will better preserve and treasure their heritage – their culture and language. Culture and language are hyper-linked. With the economic recovery of China, these Chinese overseas want their children to learn the Chinese language. In America ABC and emigrant Chinese are learning Chinese in weekend schools and studying it in college. So too are Chinese overseas in Britain and Europe. Chinese in Southeast Asia have always been keen to retain their language and many are able to do so now that the governments of Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines have reversed their policies and now allow Chinese newspapers and television stations and Mandarin to be taught in schools.

Equally successful is the Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas, edited by its first Director, Ms Lynn Pan. It was published in 1998 in both Chinese and English, here and at Harvard. It has been well received and has inspired efforts to produce similar encyclopaedias of other diasporas. The work has been translated into French and, more recently, a Japanese edition is being prepared. The Centre, in cooperation with the original publishers in Singapore, is now planning to update the work and produce a paperback edition that will reach a wider audience. In addition, the Centre has launched a new journal on the Chinese Overseas.

The Centre has also built up a small collection of rare historical documents about Chinese immigrants and settlers. It has also encouraged families and organisations to preserve similar records, either with the Centre's library or with major libraries elsewhere in Singapore. This is most important. Much has already been lost, so we need to make every effort to place everything that remains in safe custody. In addition, the Centre has published scholarly editions that preserve some rare surviving materials, including records of various institutions like temples and clan associations.

Heritage is not something static, lying hidden to be discovered, admired and conserved. It is a part of the lives of a people, and it shapes the ways a people meet new challenges and helps them adapt to survive. The cultural heritage in China itself has been through many transformations during the past century, and especially during the last five decades since the PRC was established in 1949. But despite two revolutions, in 1911 and 1949, the core elements of Chinese culture continue to guide the way people in China have re-formulated their political ideals and sought to advance themselves.

In the past, Chinese overseas have often easily related to the transformations in China because they had brought much of traditional Chinese culture with them to their homes abroad and the China they left did not change much. They knew what China needed and they could help by working or investing in China. So Chinese who were born or had lived abroad, some for many generations, were able to bring their knowledge and skills to China and contribute to its development.

Today, China is learning directly from the outside world and changing fast. Soon Chinese overseas may not have much that is new to contribute when visiting or working in China. The Chinese Heritage Centre should record and comment on the changes ethnic Chinese are undergoing in China and in the diaspora. It can both record and enlighten. I encourage those who are guiding the future of the centre to engage with scholars everywhere in this important research and introduce their findings to all those who visit Singapore. And I hope they will link the young people of Singapore and in Nanyang (the South Seas) up with the Chinese diaspora elsewhere and with the Chinese in China.