

Relevance of Teochew Identity for 'Smart Future'

Speech by George Yeo on 9 December 2016 at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Teochew Doctors Association Forum

Story of General Tso's chicken dish

Early this week, BBC carried a curious story about the death of Peng Chang-Kuei (彭长贵), the inventor of a famous Chinese dish in the US called General Tso's chicken.

Peng Chang-Kuei was a chef to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek. He was a Hunanese who moved with the KMT to Taiwan in 1949. Apparently, in 1952, he had to improvise and rustle up some food for a visiting US Naval Admiral. He fried pieces of chicken in a sweet and spicy sauce and served them to Admiral Arthur Redford. The Admiral liked the dish very much and asked what it was called. On the spot, Peng Chang-Kuei named it after the famous Hunanese scholar-general Zuo Zongtang. Hence General Tso's chicken.

In the 19th century, Zuo Zongtang helped Zeng Guofan defeat the Taiping forces. Later, after months of careful logistics preparation, he led Qing forces to defeat a serious Muslim rebellion in Xinjiang. Without him, Xinjiang would have been lost to China for which Zuo Zongtang became a national hero.

The Chinese Communist Party saw the Taiping rebels as their precursor and condemned leaders like Zeng Guofan for suppressing them. But not Zuo Zongtang because of his role in keeping China united. Hunan produced famous Communist leaders like Mao Zedong, Zhu De and Peng Dehuai. Since Peng Chang-Kuei was KMT, he could not have possibly named his dish after them.

Researchers have confirmed that Gen Tso's chicken dish does not originate in Hunan. But it can now be considered American Hunanese, the way fortune cookies are American Chinese.

Being proud of his Hunan origin, Peng Chang-Kuei named his dish after a Hunanese hero. Generally speaking, Chinese people are deeply conscious of the locality they or their ancestors come from.

Chinese civilization made up of strong local identities

China is a great civilization because of these interesting regional identities and affiliations.

In Singapore today, inter-marriage across dialect groups and the growing use of Mandarin in place of dialects have weakened Chinese regional identities. Almost all Singapore Chinese know their dialect groups but many do not know the towns or villages their ancestors came from.

But Singapore is a relatively small city-state. What happens here has little impact on Chinese civilization as a whole. However, the development of Chinese civilization will inevitably have a significant influence on the development of Chinese culture in Singapore. And on the Chinese Mainland, regional identities will never disappear.

Chinese culture has been able to unite significantly more human beings on the planet than any other culture over two thousand years. The culture has survived long periods of disunity on the Chinese mainland. Diaspora communities persist in transmitting history, myths, values and traditions down the generations even during periods when the Mainland was in upheaval. When China is united, this common culture facilitates an incredible division of labour. When China is united, its productivity is awesome. Unfortunately, when it is disunited, the decline is also awesome. This explains the long cycles of Chinese history

In decline, when institutions fail, Chinese society breaks down into chunks. These chunks are resilient. It is the resilience of these chunks which enables culture to be transmitted and which enables China to be reunited again. Strong regional identities are therefore an important reason for the resilience of Chinese civilization. When a new China re-emerges, as when a new dynasty is established, the building blocks are often not noticed because our eyes tend to see only the large structures. However, when an old China breaks up, we see in the rubble the original building blocks. Cults, secret societies, warlord armies and diaspora Chinese communities are what is left and they are chiefly organized by deep networks of trust based on regional identities.

It is the diversity within Chinese civilization that makes it such a great civilization. Thus, in Chinese culture, it is always important to know when a person is from, from which town or village. Those who succeed in imperial examinations are always identified by locality.

The organization of Chinese diaspora communities all over the world are strongly based on the regions in China they come from. In addition to transmitting to the young the specific values of their own regional groups, they also transmit the sense of being Chinese and the ideal of Chinese unity. With China now playing a growing role in the global economy, these diaspora connections help to link their host countries to China. Conscious of the helpful role these diaspora communities play, the Chinese Government takes active steps to cultivate them. However, the Chinese Government is doing this with some sensitivity, knowing that most members of the Chinese diaspora have taken on local citizenships with political loyalties to their adopted countries.

### Chinese diaspora communities

Among the many groups which make up Chinese society, one of the most remarkable is the Wenzhou people. They are sometimes described flatteringly as the Jews of China. In an earlier period of China's financial reform, Chinese economists studied the pro's and con's of the so-called 'Wenzhou model'. The Wenzhouese are an extraordinarily entrepreneurial community. There are not many of them. There are fewer Wenzhouese than Teochews in the world but they are everywhere. There are now thriving Wenzhou communities in a number of European countries like Italy, Spain and the Netherlands. There was a period when, in their impatience to succeed, some of them cut corners. I remember visiting Wenzhou as Singapore's Trade Minister not long after Premier Zhu Rongji criticized them for the poor quality of their shoes. Seeing shoe shops everywhere, I wanted to buy a pair for myself. It was quite funny the way the officials who accompanied me made sure that I was brought to a specific shop which they were certain sold only good quality shoes. Since then, the quality of goods made in Wenzhou have improved considerably. Everywhere they are, the Wenzhou people link up with one another creating a powerful entrepreneurial network internationally including Africa.

Africa is now a new frontier for many Chinese businessmen. The networks they weave are mostly based on tribal links whether these are Wenzhounese, Taiwanese or Hongkonger.

When I was in the Singapore Foreign Ministry, I became a good friend of the former Foreign Minister of Gabon, Jean Ping. Jean Ping's father was a Wenzhounese who emigrated to Gabon as a trader in the 30's and married the daughter of a local tribal chief. His name was Cheng Zhiping (程志平), which is how Jean got his surname Ping. Jean Ping looks African but, close up, you see Chinese features on his face. On his first visit to Beijing as Minister, a Wenzhou delegation called on him in Diaoyutai. There was the usual exchange of cards. One day, back in Gabon, a Wenzhou businessman arrived and asked local officials for assistance, showing the Foreign Minister's name card and declaring himself to be a friend or relative. Contacts were established and, today, there is a thriving Wenzhou community in Gabon. During President Hu Jintao's visit to Africa in 2004, he received a rapturous welcome in Gabon. When Jean Ping, as President of the UN General Assembly, visited Singapore as my guest some years ago, I set aside a free evening in his programme for a dinner with members of Singapore's Wenzhou Association.

This year, he contested the Presidential elections but lost to President Ali Bongo Ondimba. President Bongo is currently visiting China. Just two days ago, President Bongo and President Xi Jinping witnessed the signing of four bilateral cooperative agreements which included China's financial support for major infrastructural projects. According to China Daily, apart from Beijing, President Bongo would also visit Shantou. This is interesting because few foreign leaders ask to visit Shantou. I have no further information but suspect that in addition to the Wenzhou connection, there could also be a Teochew connection in Gabon.

#### Teochew culture and network

When I was invited to speak at this forum some months ago, it was the first time that I heard of the International Teochew Doctors Association. It seemed a little strange to me at first that there should be such an association. I can understand Teochew food or Teochew opera but Teochew doctors? Nevertheless, I felt an emotional connection and an obligation to support such a grouping. One cannot be part of a community without being proud of it. One can only be proud of a community that has made achievements. The celebration of achievements gives confidence to members of that community that they are capable of rising to new challenges. A gathering of Teochew doctors is therefore not only an opportunity to network and learn from one another, it is also an affirmation of Teochew intellectual self-confidence and an inspiration to all Teochews.

It is said that the Teochews are clannish. Ka kee nang (家己人) is a common expression among Teochew people, which carries with it the expectation that there should be favoured treatment. This is both a strength and a weakness. There is a strong sense of mutual assistance but sometimes also a propensity to favour ourselves over others.

In the 90's, Shantou became a smuggling centre in China. Inspectors sent from Beijing perished in a fire in the hotel they were staying in under mysterious circumstances. Outraged, Premier Zhu Rongji came down on the Teochew region like a ton of bricks with the result that, for a number of years, there was little economic progress. During that period, Xiamen overtook Shantou in its economic development. It is only in recent years that the Teochew region is recovering.

Outside the Teochew region, however, the Teochew people continued to do well in many sectors. Teochew culture puts emphasis on strong families, education and culture. In China, they tend to have more children and lower divorce rates. On my last visit to my ancestral village in Boon Lee (文理) which is in Anbu Town (庵埠), local leaders were proud to show me a hall they set aside for calligraphy. Free rice paper and ink were provided for anyone wishing to learn and practise their calligraphy. I was impressed and proud that they did that.

There are very roughly twenty million Teochew people in the world, half in China, half outside China. They are generally above-average performers. Lee Kuan Yew, a Hakka, once wrote that the Teochews are the highest-performing Chinese dialect group in Singapore. I don't know how much this is borne out by the actual facts but, in Singapore, we dare not disagree with Lee Kuan Yew. Let us say it is true since we are mostly Teochews here and Teochew people are known to be hao lian (好脸). If we have certain capabilities, they should be used to benefit not harm the society we live in. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Teochews sometimes use their intelligence to do bad things which harm our collective reputation. Racketeering, smuggling, illegal money exchange, trafficking in contraband - these are some of the activities in China which are occasionally associated with the Teochew community.

Take Shenzhen, for example. There are many Teochews living and working in Shenzhen, easily over 10% of the population. They are well-represented in business, real estate and high tech but, unfortunately, also in seedy activities. Perhaps these are but two sides of the same coin. The clannishness and intelligence of the community can be used for good or for ill. This is a moral challenge which we in the Teochew community should confront and overcome. Maybe this is why the Teochews frequently talk about the pedigree of a person, whether he is of good or bad breeding - hor cheng, pai cheng (好种,坏种).

### Making our contribution

The strong internal network of trust in the Teochew community should be primarily used to facilitate beneficial exchange and promote the well-being of society. This of course is the objective of the International Teochew Doctors Association. In high tech, Teochew scientists and entrepreneurs can do much to promote development and high achievement. Shenzhen, where the second International Teochew Doctors Forum was held, is of particular importance. It is becoming a centre of world tech development. Peking University, which already has a graduate school in Shenzhen, is now thinking of establishing an undergraduate campus as well. The reason is obvious. As Shenzhen will be important to China's future, Peking University wants to be part of it. And without the Teochews in Shenzhen, Shenzhen will not be what it is today.

A few days ago, the famous tech venture investor, Dr Lee Kaifu, in a wide-ranging interview, said that "China is poised to be a leader in AI (artificial intelligence) because of its great reserve in AI talent, excellent engineering education and massive market for AI adoption". It is fitting that this year's International Doctors Association Forum should have as its theme our 'smart future' and we look forward to the afternoon's programme. Teochew scientists, IT experts and entrepreneurs in China, Singapore and elsewhere can and should make a significant contribution to harnessing tech in making this a better world for all of us