

FEATURE

Chinese Experience in Singapore

A Reflection on Han Chuan's Speech at the Quemoy Summit Meeting

By Da Hsuan Feng

Senior Executive Vice President, National Chen Kung University

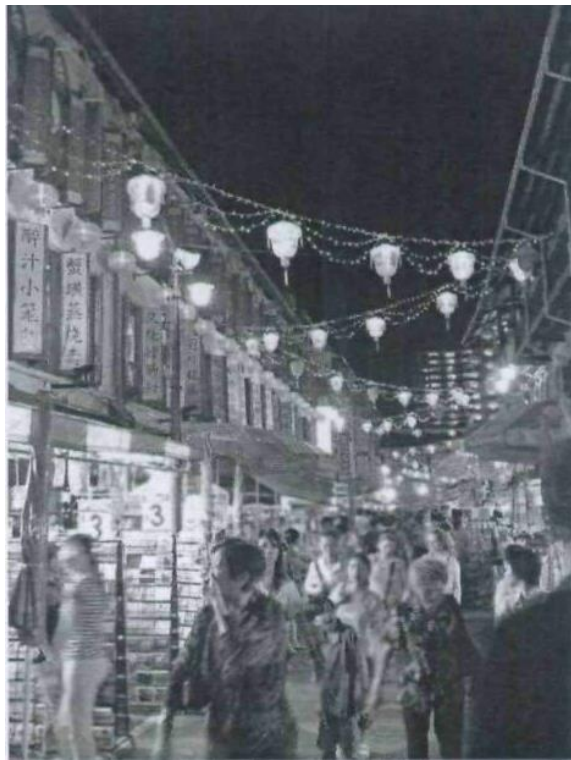
On December 25th 2008, a Summit Conference jointly organized by National Cheng Kung University, Quemoy Institute of Technology, Tunghai University, and Amoy University, was held in Quemoy (or Kinmen) on the future of development of this historical island on the coast of the Mainland China.

I would like to use "Quemoy" in this article as the island's English spelling, instead of Kinmen or Jinmen. This particular (or peculiar) spelling was made world famous by the third presidential debate of Nixon and Kennedy on October 13, 1960. During that memorable debate, "Quemoy" was mentioned 16 times! For those who want to refresh their memory (if there were around then) or just want to read it for the first time, they could do so by going to <http://www.kiva.net/~isagarin/sports/kenix03.htm>

One of the presenters at the Summit was a well known Singapore (my hometown) poet named Han Chuan. His speech outlines the following fascinating historical accident:

Quemoy has nearly a millennium of literary history with Zhu Xi, this heritage is deeply embedded in the nearly 150,000 people in

Singapore who claim Quemoy as their "hometown," whether they came from there themselves, such as Han Chuan, or their parents or ancestors came from there. I thought that this point could be made with authority only by someone who is "so close to the scene" as Han Chuan and he made it with passion.



Han Chuan demonstrated with his deep understanding both as an intellect, and more importantly, as a "Quemoyian" (I am creating a new word here!) that with without directly saying how important Quemoy is, with sheer numbers, for Mainland and Taiwan. He showed that not only the Quemoyians are loyal to Quemoy, they are very united ever since the early pioneers step foot in Singapore. Indeed, they

play an important political, social and economical role in Singapore in particular. South East Asia in general. To this end, it is easy to imagine that they, the Quemoyians, can be and are important to Mainland. However, if the political jurisdiction of Quemoy of today is not with the Republic of China, then they will have little or no relevance to Taiwan in general and National Cheng Kung University in particular.

After reading Han Chuan's speech, I could not help but realize the importance that how

this accident of history has made the phrase "seize the moment" taken on special importance for National Cheng Kung University. I think President Lai in his speech at the Summit summarized this sentiment very palpably indeed!

Han Chuan's speech is written with the full body of emotions and history. It must be read in its entirety. Any suggestion to add anything is akin to what the Chinese would say, "when drawing a dragon, add feet to it!" (However, I would be remiss if I did not, as a fellow Singaporean (even as a former Singaporean) to add some small history to try to complement the discussion of Han Chuan.

After all, to paraphrase an old American saying, "you can take me out of Singapore, you cannot take Singapore out of me!"

Enclosed is Han Chuan's speech at the Summit. Unfortunately (or fortunately,) it is entirely in Chinese. Also, in the tradition of Singapore Chinese, it is written in simplified Chinese.

Something about Han Chuan Since I do not know this gentleman personally, I decided to find out more about him by, how else, google him! There is not a lot of information about his personal life, but according to the website, Han-Chuan's real name is either LÚ ji-pao or LÚ ji-bao. Mr. Lu was born in 1950 in Quemoy's Bang-Lin village. At the age of 5, he left Quemoy with his mother



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and moved to Singapore to be with his father. Eventually he graduated from Nanyang University, Chinese Department. In the past three decades, he became one of the most notable and respected poets in Southeast Asia as well as Mainland and Taiwan, and as an overseas Chinese, he is very active in the development of relations with his birthplace.

It is worth noting that Nanyang University Han Chuan attended is not the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) of today, even though they share the same geographical location. Indeed, even some of the original buildings of Nanyang University is still being used today in NTU. Nanyang University was founded by the legendary Chinese rubber tycoon Tan Lak Sai. There are two aspects of Mr. Tan worth underscoring here, because in many ways they reflect the profound psyche of Chinese in Singapore of his generation.

First, he came from Fujian Province, near but not Quemoy, as a youngster with essentially not a penny to his name. He toiled, and toiled he did, as a rubber plantation worker. With inherent intelligence and over abundance of business sense, he eventually became one of the richest man in Singapore. Tan's success story can be found in

Second, while he himself obviously received little or no formal education (indeed his most famous phrase of referring to himself was "Nim-Bei," a Hokkian dialect form of referring to oneself which is clearly lacking in social decorum,) Mr. Tan's love and his profound understanding of the importance of education as a way out of poverty were palpable. More amazing was that he understood the importance of university education!

I have wondered whether this meant that although he was able to lift himself out of poverty with little or no education, for the general population, this cannot and should not be the case. Hence despite of financial and political difficulties, and there were numerous, he founded Nan'ang University. This at made him "immortal" in the hearts of many Chinese in Southeast Asia, even today.

Memory lane and Singapore Chinatown geography

In reading the speech where he described the venues of various Quemoy Associations, I immediately drifted into a geographical memory lane of Singapore, a memory lane which also transported me back in time to my young days. "His names of roads which was mentioned where Quemoy Association and its predecessor Wu-Jian-Fu-Ji-Miao (or Wu-Jian-Fu-Ji Temple) are/were housed are all roads which I know for sure I roamed as a youngster.

I should mention that all of them are more or less in a region which the British colonialists refer to as Chinatown. You may find it interesting that with some 75% of the population being Chinese in Singapore, why there would still be a Chinatown in Singapore, as in Toronto, New York or London. Shouldn't 75% of the island of 225 square miles be one mega Chinatown?

As in all roads and regions names, the naming has more to do with history than Singapore's current state of affairs. Not surprisingly, Chinatown in Singapore was where many of the early Chinese immigrants, mostly

from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, and mostly dirt poor then, congregated. In those days, Chinatown's infrastructure, such as water supply, was non-existent. According to the website <http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/chinatown%20singapore%20-%20etymology/id/4920187>

In Chinese, Chinatown is known as Niu che shui(pinyin: Niúcheshuǐ), literally, "ox-cart water," as a result of the fact that, because of its location, Chinatown's water supply was principally transported by animal-driven carts in the 19th century. "So people living in the region needed to "fetch" water in this manner You can already sensed how difficult life for the Chinese then in Singapore. Hence the name.

As I said, all the roads named in Han Chuan's speech are essentially in Chinatown. Roads such as Smith Road, (how English!) Telok Ayer Road (which in Malay means "water bay"), Indian Street (which is pronounced as Kit-Leng Road and I am not sure why Kit-Leng means Indians, even though all Singaporeans know what it means) and Cecil Road (another very English name) are all names deeply embedded in my psyche. Until 12 years old, I lived on Um-Teck-Kim Road, a street of no longer than a 100 yards which despite of the upside-down transformation of the city renovation in the past three decades, is still there today and which is adjacent to all the above named roads. The proximity of these roads from my home was surely the reason why I roamed them often.

I should also mention that my elementary school, known as Yang-Cheng Primary School is also in the heart of Chinatown. Founded well before the founding of the Chinese Republic in 1911, I suspect that the fingerprints of the Kuomintang can be palpably felt in this school in the early part of the 20th century, even when I was there as a student in the late 50's.

There is one aspect of Yang-Cheng which is worth mentioning here. In Singapore, the Chinese predominantly come from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, and people from these provinces are fiercely loyal to their hometowns.

So it is not surprising that schools, elementary and secondary are set up according to Fujian Associations and those by Guangdong Associations. Since I am a Cantonese, and Yang-Cheng was affiliated to the Guangdong Association, naturally I went there. No questions asked!

I no longer remember what was the road Yang-Cheng was located. It has since moved to another part of Singapore, quite far away from Chinatown. I do remember that it was near Tanjong Pagar Road, which was a few cents bus ride (yes, in those days, no one would give it a second thought to have a young child to take the public transportation by him/herself) from my home. After the bus ride, I needed to walk up a steep hill to school. I remembered the school yard, which also was the basketball courts, and the venue where every morning session for the students was held so they hear the Principal's day directives, had a breathtaking and panoramic view of Singapore.

The Principal was an interesting fellow. His name was Lum Yew-Shung, who if my memory served me right, received his education at Columbia University's School of Education and was the Principal of LingNan Elementary School in Guangzhou before 1949. At Yang-Cheng at that time. Sun Yat-sen was still referred to as the father of the Nation, which was another manifestation of the influence of Kuomintang.

In hindsight, I think we should in the 21st century view all of this as the following: on the one hand, Kuomintang, who was clearly very insecure in the 50's because it just lost the control of the Mainland and therefore wanted to hold on to its political influence in Southeast Asia in general and Singapore in particular and on the other hand, some Chinese in Singapore, who were not loyal to the new regime in Beijing, profoundly wanted to belong to the motherland in some perverse yet understandable manner. I am not sure one can easily separate what was political from cultural affinity then.

It was interesting to me that I still vaguely remember we had to sing the National Anthem of the Republic of China, either frequently or sporadically. Curiously, this came in handy for me today that living in Taiwan now, this is still the National Anthem and I can hum a few bars! I guess what you were taught as a youngster stays with you forever!

Epilogue

I am so pleased that Han Chuan delivered his most memorable speech in the Summit. It was a speech I thought only a Singapore Quemoyian who was born in Quemoy could deliver, with emotions, gusto and deep knowledge.

After reading Han Chuan's speech, I cannot think of anything I conclude that can best the conclusion of his. So please allow me to translate the conclusion of Han Chuan's speech for those who cannot read Chinese.

“Yes, “we need to turn the memory of Quemoy's conflict into a manifestation of peace.” (Quotation from President Ma Ying-Jeou.) Since the Ma Administration came on board, it released a number of policies which could benefit Quemoy: such as transportation of water between Amoy and Quemoy, evaluate the construction of Amoy Quemoy bridge, and expansion of Quemoy's airport and so on. We hope that these constructions can soon become reality. We want to “let both shores know about Quemoy, and let Quemoy enter the world” (Quotation from Li Zhu-Feng who is Quemoy's County Commissioner.) This will be the rebirth of Quemoy, it will for sure give rise to a new landscape; it will be a beautiful heavenly island; it will be a happy and peaceful garden!”