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2019

Qu, J., & Wong, C. M. (2019). Historical trajectories and lost heritage of early Chinese schools in Singapore – case study of Yeung Ching School in ‘Chinatown’ . *Asian Ethnicity*, 20(4), 399-417. doi:10.1080/14631369.2018.1484279

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/143313>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1484279>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Asian Ethnicity*, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14631369.2018.1484279>

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Historical Trajectories and Lost Heritage of Early Chinese Schools in Singapore – Case Study of Yeung Ching School in ‘Chinatown’

Qu Jingyi^a *, Wong Chee Meng^b

ABSTRACT

The history of modern Chinese schools in Singapore may be traced back to the early 20th century, when efforts to provide vernacular education in the British colony were made by community leaders across Chinese dialect groups, with support of the Qing Empire. Only a handful of these were selected as elite schools for bilingual education under the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) introduced in 1979 in independent Singapore. This paper examines the historical trajectories of these early schools from early association with Chinese nationalism to becoming multi-ethnic schools or simply defunct. It will focus on the case of the former Yeung Ching School in ‘Chinatown’ catering to the Cantonese community, to explore how the legacy of a Chinese school may be impacted by state formation and urban development since the 1950s, and also to point out a gap in current heritagisation pertaining to the role of education in shaping cultural identities.

Keywords: Chinese vernacular schools; dialect groups; Singapore’s state formation; heritagisation

Background

Among plural societies emerging from European colonisation of Southeast Asia, Singapore carries the distinction of being a city-state with ethnic Chinese forming three quarters of its population, far outnumbering other ethnicities. Its model of ‘multiracialism’ was first enshrined in its Constitution through declaration of Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English as official languages under Article 153A, and further developed by intensifying British colonial practice of reducing ethnic categories for administrative convenience,¹ with corporatist strategies introduced around the 1980s to supervise demands among the communities and maintain stability, engineering ethnic consciousness as well as promoting communitarian ideas in the form of core ‘Asian values’.² Yet its premises of economic development and social cohesion have also come at a price of loss in cultural diversity within broad racial categories of the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others). The launch of Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979 in particular led to the shutting down of Chinese dialect programmes on radio and television, based on a persisting assumption that the use of Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese was hampering the goal of making all Chinese students learn Mandarin in school.³

But Mandarin itself has generally been expected to play a secondary role of a heritage marker transmitting Confucian norms of behaviour, while the Singapore government since independence, guided by an ideology of pragmatism with a primary goal in economic growth,⁴

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has emphasised the importance of English for its utilitarian value in access to science and technology for employment.⁵ English has also become the most frequently spoken language at home for Singaporeans by now, as cited by 36.9 per cent of the resident population in 2015, up from 23 per cent in 2000; it overtakes Mandarin which has maintained a share of 35 per cent over the same period, whereas that for Chinese dialects has halved to 12.2 per cent from 23.8 per cent.⁶ From a perspective of *longue durée*, English education as a crucial means of social advancement in the island republic dates back to the 19th century under the British administration. Chinese vernacular schools in contrast flourished only for six decades in Singapore, from the 1900s when early modern schools were established by community leaders among different dialect groups, to the general decline of Chinese schools in 1960s, which somewhat echoed Cold War history in countries like Indonesia and Myanmar, where Chinese schools were closed under assimilationist policies for fear of identification with Communist China.

Cultural memory of *huaxiao* or Chinese schools in Singapore is often overshadowed by the bifurcation and tension between the ‘Chinese-educated’ (*huaxiao sheng*) and the ‘English-educated’ (*yingxiao sheng*), most apparent in the postwar 1950s when graduates from Chinese schools were facing difficulty in finding employment, and the presence of Chinese-educated in leftist politics led to stereotyping of them as pro-China communists.⁷ But while some notable Chinese middle schools like Chinese High and Chung Cheng, despite being associated in the past with student movements, have since been ‘rehabilitated’ through selection in 1979 as elite bilingual schools under the Special Assistance Plan, not all categories of schools have managed to maintain their legacy and community ties. One typology, represented by Yeung Ching School in the case study in this article, incidentally emerged from the spread of *xinshi xuetang* or new-style schools, with modernised curriculum as opposed to traditional Confucian education; these were supported by the Manchu government between 1905 and 1911 along with establishment of economic ties in Singapore and Malaya.⁸ Just as Tao Nan School and the now defunct Tuan Mong School overseen by the Hokkien and Teochew clan associations respectively, Yeung Ching is significant not only for once being associated with the local Cantonese and partly Hakka community, but also for representing prevailing trends of education, Chinese literary and performing arts, and political allegiance subsequent to the 1911 Republican Revolution, echoing multiple identities of Chinese societies at large.

This paper will explore the social significance of Yeung Ching in connection with a multiplicity of transnational and local history, in order to discuss the limitations of current frameworks of heritage protection in dealing with the legacy of such schools, given the current social structure in postcolonial Singapore. In terms of locality, Yeung Ching, before its conversion into a multi-ethnic neighbourhood school in 1987, used to be situated within the ‘Chinatown Conservation Area’ as gazetted in July 1989, where specific guidelines were given by the Urban Redevelopment Authority on restoration of shophouses. The Cantonese-speaking enclave there with a symbiotic relationship with Yeung Ching has however passed into history following urban development in the 1970s and 80s. Although the Singapore ministers have more recently conceded Chinese dialect cultures as part of Singapore heritage,⁹ not to mention taking the steps in ratifying the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention meant to “promote respect for cultural diversity and human creativity”¹⁰, what remains to be addressed is the role of schools versus clan associations or grassroots organisations as cultural spaces or institutions for a more holistic strategy in the safeguarding of Chinese or any ethnic culture. While the policy of

emphasising the Chinese language in a number of culturally segregated elite schools has invited accusations of Chinese exceptionalism,¹¹ the decline of a school like Yeung Ching, as an institution tied to the identity and social capital of a Chinese dialect group and more, should open up more reflection on the complex cultural legacy of *huaxiao*.

Cultural Learning and Heritage Representation among Chinese Identities in Singapore

Formal schooling in Chinese communities around the world has varied greatly in relation to their relative size as well as degree of assimilation into the local society. For small communities often limited to ‘Chinatowns’ in countries like Australia, Canada and the United States, education has tended to be Western, while largely merchant communities in Japan and Thailand have also settled for indigenous national schools over time; where Chinese lived under colonial rule of the Dutch, English or French, there would be a drastic change from an initial choice for colonial schools, to national schools in Filipino, Indonesian, Malay or Vietnamese as enforced with national independence after World War II.¹² While Singapore in this regard may be grouped with Hong Kong and Taiwan as a predominantly Chinese community, its geographical location in Malaya gives it more complexity in cultural and political orientation beyond the dichotomy of Chinese versus Western.¹³ More specifically, it has also resulted in a cross of ethnic identities and cultural practices between Chinese and Malay, with the Peranakan Chinese community falling in the middle – the term ‘Peranakan’ being used by the Malays for local-born Chinese, implying a mixed ethnic origin, but it has since become interchangeable with ‘Straits Chinese’ which referred to a status as British subjects in the Straits Settlements.¹⁴

Peranakan or Baba Chinese identities as such have been multidimensional,¹⁵ not limited to the use of Malay as mother tongue or assimilation into local Malayanised lifestyle and social customs, as the English education system in the Straits Settlements was another crucial factor shaping their local and hybrid identity. The identity was also not purely biological in nature, except that the Baba society remained strongly endogamous, their hybrid cultural practices hence coming into consciousness as marking a distinct identity through a contrast with the non-assimilated *sinkhehs* (new arrival), whose influx was most noticeable in the 1870s after opening of the Suez Canal.¹⁶ The perceived divide in identity was compounded by a tradition of English education through mission schools, made more attractive with employment opportunities in the Colonial Service, leading the Baba Chinese to become anglicized in terms of dressing and leisure pursuits, not to mention being cultivated in Victorian English literature.¹⁷

The role of education in cultural and economic reproduction is an important aspect related to social capital, as discussed by education theorist Apple (1979), which has much implication in the shaping of cultural identity. The historical relevance of institutions in public education for the transmission of cultural heritage and constitution of cultural identity may, however, remain a blind spot in postcolonial Singapore if simplistic racialised lenses are applied in delineating cultural heritage.

Like anywhere, tangible and intangible heritage in Singapore, as categorised and managed with the tools of international conventions and national legal frameworks, are not a passive matter of nostalgia, but an active enterprise driven by political and economic interest, in view of the

potential of cultural tourism, as well as a convenience in streamlining the national narrative.¹⁸ A conscious attempt to represent a mix of heritage in multicultural Singapore has hence guided the primary efforts in urban conservation in the 1980s, targeting historic districts associated with particular ethnic groups, such as 'Peranakan Place' (Emerald Hill), 'Chinatown' (Kreta Ayer or Niu Che Shui), Kampong Glam and 'Little India' (Tekka).¹⁹ Despite a large minority in Singapore being critical of over-commercialisation in heritage preservation, the designation of such conservation areas as 'Chinatown' seems to bear a conditioning effect, as more than half of respondents in a government survey have indicated these areas as being special to them.²⁰ The ethnic representation of heritage at these tourist attractions has since been augmented by the opening of Chinatown Heritage Centre (2002) in Chinatown, Malay Heritage Centre (2005) in Kampong Glam, and Indian Heritage Centre (2015) in Little India, with an additional Peranakan Museum (2008) in Armenian Street, around the corner from National Museum of Singapore (1887).

With Singapore's ratification of the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention in February 2018, coupled with a poll by the National Heritage Board indicating a strong resonance among Singaporeans for local 'hawker food' as heritage,²¹ the question will remain as to how far such heightened awareness of intangible heritage will lead to greater agency among ethnic Chinese and other communities in safeguarding their respective traditional cultures. A recent poll indicated that 78 per cent of Singaporean Chinese consider speaking good English as an important identity marker, whereas only 30 per cent would consider the same for appreciation of Chinese art forms such as Chinese calligraphy, and 24 per cent for familiarity with Chinese opera.²² Incidentally, the Convention includes 'performing arts' and 'oral traditions and expressions' among five domains for safeguarding, but no majority or minority language, be it Mandarin, Hokkien or Baba Malay in the case of Singapore, can be listed per se except as the vehicle of a heritage art form. The importance of language learning in tandem with the sustaining of Chinese or other ethnic cultural heritage hence may easily be overseen, as the Convention is not designed to confront the language policy of any state party.

The dominant discourse on intangible heritage items is also at risk of being predetermined by the privileging of main ethnic categories like Chinese, Malay, Indian and Peranakan Chinese as race-based, bounded fields of beliefs and practices, instead of a more dynamic anthropological understanding of culture as 'learning' or capability to be cultivated.²³ Such a static view may also freeze the Chinese Singaporean identity as eternal and unchanging, as opposed to Peranakan Chinese culture being the chief representation of cultural exchange and hybridity. To problematise such a dehistoricised perspective of cultural identities as being in-born, one only needs to consider the case of a 'Peranakan' or Straits Chinese community leader like Lim Boon Keng, a Queen's Scholar, who had resinicised himself through learning Mandarin and championing of Confucianism, even as he was concerned with fellow Babas falling into decadence and losing in competitiveness against the Chinese newcomers.²⁴

History also indicates a later attempt at Chinese-Malayan cultural integration by a new wave of Chinese-educated settlers, in the postwar years after the 1949 proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, posing a challenge to the unique position and outlook of the English-educated Babas in determining the development of Singapore.²⁵ When the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan in 1953 under leadership of Tan Lark Sye proposed to set up the Nanyang University,

to provide tertiary education for Chinese middle school graduates, the declaration made by the preparatory committee would emphasise an importance given to both Chinese language and Malay language apart from English as part of the character of the university. Following this April 1953 declaration, which also proposed to connect civilisations east and west as well as to develop a 'Malayan culture', a Malay elective course was made available in 1958. But Chinese-medium education would gradually lose out to English-medium schools, culminating in the 1979 SAP scheme and the 1980 closure of Nanyang University, while Singapore's first and last Malay-medium secondary school, namely Sang Nila Utama Secondary School, also ceased operation by 1988. The Chinese-educated community was hence left disempowered and contained in any intercultural dialogue with the Malay and Indian communities, to be preoccupied instead with Confucianism as embodiment of Chinese or 'Asian' values in the 1980s.²⁶

History of Modern Chinese Schools tied to Dialect Groups

The trend of modernised Chinese schools in 1900s, departing from early private schools dedicated to the study of Confucian classics, arguably marked an important transition for the Chinese society in Singapore, as secular education institutions henceforth became a new focal point in the consolidation of social capital for the Chinese dialect communities. Previously, social power among dialect communities in 19th-century Singapore was invested in clan associations concerned principally with ancestor worship, management of cemeteries and temples.²⁷ Hokkien Huay Kuan, as the highest body representing interests of the Fujian Chinese, mainly coming from Zhangzhou, Quanzhou and Yongchun in the early days, would trace its origin to Thian Hock Keng temple in 1860 when merchant Tan Kim Ching became its first leader.²⁸ Similarly, social power among the Teochews in Singapore before 1930 was solely in the hand of Ngee Ann Kongsi which managed the Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple as well as several cemeteries, whereas some Cantonese and Hakka clan groups combined to manage Fuk Tak Chi Temple (also located to the south of the Singapore River like the other two temples) and a few cemeteries.

The earliest Chinese school in Singapore responding to the trend of *xinshi xuetang* was Chong Cheng School (originally named Yangzheng in 1903), one of its founders being Goh Siew Tin 吳壽珍, a wealthy merchant, ship-owner and Hokkien community leader who purchased Qing brevet titles and was briefly appointed by the Qing government as Acting Consul-General of the Straits Settlement in 1902. He also served as the first and third president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Singapore. Tao Nan 道南 School was then established 1906 by the Hokkien community in Singapore, following a meeting of clan members at Thian Hock Kheng, approving subsidising of the school by the temple.²⁹ Goh was also one of its strongest advocates. After five principals originating from Fujian province and Xiong Shangfu 熊尚父 from Hunan, Tan would write to the renowned educationist Cai Yuanpei in China to recommend staff who could teach Mandarin, heralding a new trend in Chinese education.

Other early modern Chinese schools among various dialect groups started around the same period like Yeung Ching 養正 (1906), Tuan Mong 端蒙 (1906) and Khee Fatt 啟發 (1907). But the social affiliation was arguably more complicated than can be reduced to division along linguistic lines alone. Yeung Ching School, the case study here, also included Hakka speakers of Huizhou, hence eventually encompassing communities with ancestral homes in prefectures of Guang, Hui and Zhao, just as the case of the Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital set up in 1910 or the Peck

San Theng cemetery organisation dating back to the late 19th century, all forming an interlocked social network through their community leaders. As Yow (2014) has argued, the sense of belonging to one's ancestral homeland is fluid and contingent among the Chinese diaspora, with region-based associations playing social roles that vary depending on the social condition within each historical period.³⁰

Yeung Ching was not the only school associated with the Cantonese community in Singapore during the 20th century. There were also several schools of more modest scale set up independently by various clan associations, such as Ning Yeung School (1906) and Poon Yue School (1948), mostly concentrated around the Kreta Ayer or Niu Che Shui area. This area, known for its annual Chinese new year bazaar among other things, would become actively promoted for tourism as 'Chinatown', starting with a taskforce in 1984 proposing to present Singapore as an 'epitome of oriental mystique' as well as a high-tech entertainment centre, a year after street hawkers there were removed as part of urban renewal.³¹ Yeung Ching was well remembered here not by sheer size of student population or its grandiose school building, but by virtue of reputation, having produced illustrious alumni such as the renowned composer Xian Xinghai 冼星海 or Sinn Sing Hoi (1905-1945) and the popular Cantonese storyteller and broadcast artiste Lee Dai Sor 李大傻 (1913-1989). The cohort graduating from Yeung Ching in 1950 was said to be an early example in Singapore of direct admission into secondary schools, qualifications of Yeung Ching being accepted back then by Chung Cheng and Nanyang Girls', with the Chinese High School doing the same from 1951.³²

The role of clan associations in Chinese education in Singapore declined from the mid-1950s onwards, as such schools diminished in number, and the source of students appeared to be less tied to dialect group origin.³³ Unlike Tao Nan which was long managed by Hokkien Huay Kuan, and Tuan Mong which was managed by Ngee Ann Kongsi after World War II, Yeung Ching did not have formal association with any major clan association as institutional backing. Chinese schools in Singapore was generally on a downward trend after its peak in 1950, when there were 349 Chinese schools all over Singapore, with students in Chinese-medium school constituting 57.9 percent of the entire student population as opposed to 33.7 percent for students in English-medium schools.³⁴ When nine initial schools were selected for the SAP scheme during the 1979 educational reform, not a single of these were affiliated with clan associations, but four were mission schools, namely Anglican, Catholic High, Maris Stella and St Nicholas Girls'; and two, namely Dunman and River Valley, came from four schools established in 1956 as an alternative to Chinese middle schools thought to be infiltrated by communism. The reformed school system including these SAP schools is arguably not entirely new in logic, but as Wong (2002) points out, consistent with earlier strategies of state formation to substitute or anglicise Chinese-medium schools, already undertaken by the British administration in the 1940s and 1950s.³⁵

Heritagisation of Chinese Schools versus 'Chinatown' in Singapore

Cultural heritage consists of objects, places and practices that acquire a status beyond their usual function in a process of musealised display and listing that may be described as 'heritagisation' (Harrison, 2013). Amid a global boom in the inscription of UNESCO World Heritage Sites which had surpassed 1,000 by year 2014, Singapore too successfully inscribed its Botanic Gardens dating back to 1859 onto the list in 2015, coinciding with its 50th anniversary as an independent republic. The site is noted in the citation for demonstrating the landscape design of a tropical

botanic garden dating back to the British colonial history, as well as being significant historically as a centre for ‘exchange of ideas’ through plant research, with rubber seedlings provided here by the Kew Gardens in London before rubber planting spread further throughout Southeast Asia.³⁶ Such successful listing may be attributed to a combination of factors, including the typology of heritage being similar to popular sites already inscribed in Europe on one hand, and on the other hand Singapore’s national interest in tracing its historical narrative of economic progress to the British colonial period, instead of highlighting any site more specific to the Chinese, Malay or Indian community.

Following a typology based on models of multiculturalism, Singapore’s heritage management has been characterised as a postcolonial ‘Core +’ model (Ashworth et al, 2007)³⁷, set in contrast to an assimilation model or melting pot model, considering that it privileges a postcolonial *leitkultur* over add-ons of diversity. The model has been used to explain the privileging of colonial monuments and sites such as Raffles Hotel, and remains useful in explaining the interest in nominating Singapore Botanic Gardens. Beyond an aesthetic or scientific appreciation of this man-made tropical garden however, there are dimensions to the related history of a rubber industry that are not as apparent as the British involvement with their interest in botany: the experience of rubber plantation workers in Singapore and Malaya, or the generous contribution to Chinese schools made by philanthropists known to be ‘rubber kings’ such as Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian.

‘Chinatown’, as a historic district promoted for tourism, features conserved shophouses as well as notable monuments like the Thian Hock Keng temple (1842), alongside a majestic Tang-style Buddhist Tooth Relic Temple built in 2007 through support of the Singapore Tourism Board. If imagined as a microcosm of Chinese society, the remnants of ‘traditional shops’³⁸ are in the fore whereas the relevance of a *huaxiao* heritage in Chinatown may not be apparent even to the local Chinese visitor now as there is little architectural evidence of monumental scale. Not counting a few dozens of small-scale schools in the past,³⁹ Yeung Ching was one of the few *huaxiao* tied to Chinese clan networks in the last century, that would survive beyond their beginnings in the Chinatown historic district. The other two were Chongfu, founded by a supervisor of schools with the Hokkien Huay Kuan in 1915, initially located next to Thian Hock Keng, and Ai Tong, originally a Methodist school, taken over by Hokkien Huay Kuan in 1929 and housed in the association building near the temple after 1956. The Ying Fo Fui Kun building which still stands used to house a Ying Xin school for the Hakka community. Other *huaxiao* associated with various Chinese dialect groups such as Teochew, Hainanese, Henghwa, Foochow and so on were meantime located to the north of the Singapore River.

Not much is left of the oldest purpose-built Chinese writing school in Singapore, namely Chui Eng Free School founded in 1854, older than the Singapore Botanic Gardens by a few years. Having ceased operation in the 1950s, its building became dilapidated by the late 1980s. Though its site is now marked with a plaque, the original building has been incorporated into the commercial premises known as Far East Square. Not even the inscribed board of Chui Eng Free School, dated 1854, was preserved as artefact, but instead became lost to an UK auction except that a Singaporean private collector bought it at the price of S\$3,000 and donated it to the Xiamen Overseas Chinese Museum in China.⁴⁰ Considering how the number of Chinese writing schools in Singapore used to rival that in Penang during the 19th century,⁴¹ the neglect of Singapore’s oldest Chinese is in sharp contrast to current attempts in Georgetown, Penang to restore what is

boasted as an earliest known Chinese school in Malaya, namely Wu Fu Shuyuan 五福書院 or Wu Fu Tang, a Cantonese writing school, with 200,000 Malaysian ringgit allocated by the Chief Minister in July 2017.⁴²

Two former Chinese-medium and now SAP schools do have part of their campuses listed as national monuments, these being situated outside the urban centre. They are namely the Chinese High School Clock Tower Building (1925) and the Chung Cheng High School (Main) Administration Building and Entrance Arch (1965-68) gazetted in 1999 and 2014 respectively. The complex of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus along Victoria Street, gazetted in 1990, used to house the St Nicholas Girls' School, known to be Chinese-medium, between 1950s and 1980s. But there is little in the site, now an entertainment complex, to suggest its history as huaxiao next to other monuments in the area such as the English-medium St Joseph's Institution, a gazetted monument which has served as the Singapore Art Museum since 1996.⁴³

Meantime the Old Tao Nan School constructed in 1910, located also to the north of Singapore River like the National Museum, some major churches and mission schools, is now the oldest Chinese school building to be preserved as a national monument in Singapore. The primary school itself has however shifted to a new campus in 1982. It now serves as Peranakan Museum, representing a hybridised Chinese identity. Material culture in the form of jewellery, porcelain and furniture, reminiscent of a rich lifestyle among the Baba or Straits Chinese community, have been highlighted as representative of 'hybrid culture' in Singapore.⁴⁴ The tendency to racialise and conflate the Peranakan Chinese and Straits Chinese communities has only occasionally been challenged, for instance with regards to an exhibition entitled 'Great Peranakans – Fifty Remarkable Lives' that featured the statesmen Goh Keng Swee and Lee Kuan Yew among a wide range of noteworthy figures.⁴⁵

Chinese Nationalism and Transnational Network: Yeung Ching from 1900s to 1950s

The early history of Yeung Ching from its founding 1900s until its critical attempt in 1950s in expansion, corresponds to a time when Chinese identity among overseas Chinese in Singapore was still tied to nationalist sentiments especially of Republican China before World War II, and transnational social networks were manifested in links with educational institutions in Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Some of the notable figures and achievements recalled in archival material of the school will be mentioned in the following account.

Initiative for the school came with a group of Cantonese business leaders including Wong Ah Fook 黃亞福, the prominent building contractor and philanthropist in Johor.⁴⁶ In 1906, after a primary school first initiated at the Siu Heng Wui Kun 肇慶會館, a few shophouses at Park Road were bought to be adapted into a school.⁴⁷ By 1907, Wui Chiu Fui Koon 惠州會館 had requested to be part of the school, hence it was known as Kwong Wai Siu Yeung Ching School 廣惠肇養正學堂. As an early modern Chinese school, its early choice of principals reflected a period of political transition between reformists like Kang Youwei favouring a constitutional monarchy under Manchurian rule in China, and revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen favouring the overthrow of Manchurians. Whereas the founding principal of Yeung Ching, named Lu Dunkui 陸敦騷, was a former student of Kang Youwei, the second principal Song Mulin 宋木林 who served from 1907 to 1915 was a Chinese patriot later involved in anti-Japanese protests and deported while serving as a school principal in Kuala Lumpur.

The school anthem of Yeung Ching incidentally would incorporate until the 1950s a phrase extolling Sun Yat-Sen's Three Principles of the People, and even in the 1940s, its graduation certificates would feature the flag of the Republic of China. A most notable principal of Yeung Ching, Lin Yaoxiang 林耀翔, was sourced through Lingnan School in Guangzhou; he had graduated from Queen's College in Hong Kong and Teachers College, Columbia University and had served in a high school of Lingnan University before becoming the fourth principal of Yeung Ching from 1917 to 1921, when he brought the young Xian Xinghai to Guangzhou for further studies. Xian, who would eventually be best known as a composer for the Yellow River Cantata, apparently had his early venture into music tracing back to days in the Yeung Ching School military band.

Yeung Ching briefly admitted girls as pupils in 1915; though this was soon taken over by Nanhua Girls' founded thereafter, it would admit girls again intermittently in the course of its history. Under principal He Jianwu, formerly principal of a Guangzhou high school, Yeung Ching started in 1923 to venture into a high school for teachers' training as well as a night school; by 1926, students reached a peak of 800, but some directors then organised a separate girls' school known as Jing Fang. In the 1930s, economic depression posed a challenge to Yeung Ching, forcing it to close down its high school. Literary writing by its high school students otherwise used to be featured in the local Chinese press. Apart from its brass band, Yeung Ching was also known for a drama group of its alumni.

The fondly remembered school building Cui Lan Ting ('Pavilion of Emerald Orchid'), a hybrid of Chinese and Western architecture acquired as an old villa atop Ann Siang Hill, was in use from 1918 to 1957. One well-known feature was the Ba Jiao Ting or 'octagonal pavilion' where the brass band used to be housed, and a highest point from which one could enjoy a city view. A library in elaborate Chinese style was located on the East side. In December 1941, when Singapore was bombed during the Pacific War, a bunker was built in Yeung Ching at a walkway of the spot known as the Half Moon while the auditorium was used by teachers for lodgings. Important books in school were packed into cartons for a warehouse, whereas instruments of the famous brass band were sent for safekeeping at Kwong Wai Siu Hospital.⁴⁸ Ironically, it would be the 1980s instead of World War II that would be remembered for the loss of the school's artefacts and archival records.

Colonial and Postcolonial Crises: Yeung Ching from 1950s to 1980s

The main challenge for Yeung Ching School after World War II was to cater to a huge population of students who needed to catch up on Chinese education after the lost years. Priority of the British government being on English education, the burden of catering to Chinese education for the masses sites had to be taken up by independent community efforts.

Soon after Yeung Ching resumed classes in October 1945, the student population exceeded 900. Girls were also admitted as Jingfang Girls' School catering to Cantonese community in the same area was not resumed after the war. Pupils of Yeung Ching came largely from working-class families, as principal Lin Yaoxiang would note.⁴⁹ By 1954, the day-school provided education for more than 2000 pupils with morning and afternoon sessions, making the total population 3,000 when including the evening schools.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the school in the 1950s would be known for championship or first runners-up in calligraphy competition, speech competition and essay competition.

One inadvertent result of the sharp increase in enrolment would be the demolition of the landmark building for the sake of expansion, there being no official help in allocation of an alternative site near the urban centre. Ironically, demand for such a Chinese school in the Kreta Ayer or 'Chinatown' area, proved short-lived. In less than a decade after sacrificing the iconic architecture for a bigger student population, urban change and growing importance in English education after Singapore's independence in 1965 would render the school less sought after. Many residents would have shifted out of the city centre by the 1970s, and the school came under the mainstream education system in 1987.

As the school building was abandoned, numerous artefacts were said to be removed and discarded without the Yeung Ching Alumni being informed by the school management. The alumni took it upon themselves to salvage precious artefacts of historical significance from peddlers of old goods in the streets of Kreta Ayer.⁵¹ An attempt to find the inscribed board bearing the name of the school proved futile. But there were interesting discoveries among private collections of Yeung Ching Alumni, for example a photograph of the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau visiting Yeung Ching in 1920, as well as articles on a visit to Yeung Ching by Chinese violinist and composer Ma Sicong on his way to Paris.⁵²

Heritage Representation of Yeung Ching and Issue of Social Capital

In 2010, four stone steps at the former gate of Yeung Ching School along Club Street were granted heritage marking, through efforts of the Yangzheng (Yeung Ching) Alumni under president Phua Kok Khoo. The unveiling ceremony, at a corner outside the condominium which has replaced the former school site, was held on Sunday 25th July 2010 with Parliamentary Secretary Sam Tan Chin Siong, of the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, as guest-of-honour. According to a Chinese press report, vice-chairman Ho Nai Kiong had insisted in his negotiation with the National Heritage Board, for bilingual explanatory notes to be displayed on the plaque. The Chinese text was written by him.⁵³

That same year marked the 60th anniversary of graduation by Yeung Ching Alumni of the 1950 cohort. The reunion magazine represented its alumni as coming from a variety of cultural background, including Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hockchew, Hainanese as well as Hokkien and Shandong etc. Reality was a changing status of the school from a noteworthy primary school in the city during 1950s to being a 'neighbourhood school'. The principal, Mrs Jacinta Lim, wrote in her message on future prospects that one could make Yangzheng Primary 'the Choice School in the Serangoon estate'.⁵⁴ The Yangzheng Primary website places its main source of pride on 'rich history and successes' as 'one of Singapore's oldest primary schools', but somewhat describing it inaccurately as being originally a 'private school for Cantonese children'.⁵⁵ While highlighting that the school celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2005 with a Xian Xing Hai Centenary Concert at the Singapore Conference Hall, in collaboration with the Yangzheng Alumni, the household name of Lee Dai Sor as Cantonese storyteller seems ignored in contrast.

The history of Yeung Ching meantime gets a mention in a heritage gallery at Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng located in Bishan, an alliance of 16 clan associations based on the historical management of the estate the Peck San Theng cemetery since the late 19th century. While including the Hakka clan of Huizhou, it may claim to be the closest in Singapore to an umbrella body for Cantonese speakers despite not including all Cantonese clan associations. Its loss in the role of promoting modern education today, however, reduces the Cantonese clan

network to an early function of temple and cemetery management, which may further limit their appeal to a younger Chinese generation undergoing significant demographic change in religious belief. In this perspective, schools with a Chinese tradition, with or without an elite SAP status, are arguably a missing link in sustaining the heritage and identity of the Chinese community in Singapore. While the Singapore government has been encouraging clan associations to turn to communication technology to enhance outreach to the younger generations, limitations in social and cultural function of clan associations should be one aspect of the barrier to be taken into account.⁵⁶

Such issues of social capital would however go beyond the scope of *huaxiao* heritage in existing frameworks of heritage protection and promotion. An understanding of heritage based on the approach of the World Heritage Convention is likely to place premium on preserving authenticity of buildings and sites for their historical and artistic value, such as monumental buildings with distinctive aesthetic characteristics to represent a culture or a historical period. Past schools of a *huaxiao* tradition that do not have distinctively ‘Chinese-style’ architectural features or monumental buildings like Chung Cheng High, former Nanyang University, Chinese High and so on would face a challenge even in protecting their physical heritage. A comprehensive study of school building typology over the last 200 years may be useful, but this would not be limited to *huaxiao*.

There is hence a need to consider ways of remembering *huaxiao* traditions in broader perspectives beyond material fabric of schools. A combination of physical features present or lost, together with memories of events and personalities, as demonstrated in the case study of Yeung Ching, need to be considered. Collective memories of schools after all are not simply about nostalgia of places where students used to study or play, but about contributions or achievements of personalities connected with the places. The role of *huaxiao* and other school types in promoting various forms of intangible heritage, including success stories of best practices, is another aspect to be studied.

Conclusion

No country claiming a multicultural policy may ever be considered entirely neutral, in its allocation or removal of resources to support cultural and linguistic diversity in various aspects of social life, from public education and the mass media, to activities related to artistic pursuits and heritage protection. But where the constitution of the Chinese ethnic identity is concerned, two tendencies are to be discerned in Singapore’s cultural policy since independence. The first is the Speak Mandarin Campaign launched in 1979 against the use of Chinese dialects, based on an assumption that these are antithetical to the learning of Mandarin Chinese; English as a first language was nevertheless implemented in all schools meantime, whereas Chinese as a first language became restricted to a small number of elite schools, which suggests other priorities despite the potential in China’s economic reform and opening-up policy. The second aspect, which awaits more comprehensive study, is the active promotion of Peranakan Chinese heritage, most visibly in 2008 with the opening of the Peranakan Museum and the broadcasting of *The Little Nyonya*, a Mandarin drama series. Cultural hybridity like what the Peranakan community demonstrate may likely be emphasised as part of Singapore’s intangible cultural heritage, as a political move to consolidate a national identity among its diverse citizens, in the face of rising Chinese influence in the region; the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has already asserted a cultural identity of Singaporean Chinese, distinct from Chineseness in China or elsewhere, with the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre in 2017.

The case study of Yeung Ching, in relation to the Chinese heritage in Singapore, may be summarised with very different implications, depending on the point of interest and the community associated with it. For a start, one may observe that its conversion into a government school since moving out of the ‘Chinatown’ area, not only marked a break from the predominantly Cantonese community it used to be associated with, but also a break from a *huaxiao* tradition. That the alumni or a Chinese clan network may be disconnected with the new incarnation of the school is only one problem. There may be multiple identities associated with the school. The greater challenge for Yeung Ching as an example of a former *huaxiao* lies in the relevance of its past history for Singaporeans at large. The experiencing of its ‘cultural heritage’ through remnants of a physical site, or through display of photographs or artefacts, will only make sense to a younger generation that has not studied in such schools, if they are able to reconstruct the cultural milieu of the former *huaxiao* with a range of significance beyond social clichés of chaos and backwardness that ‘Chinatown’ may tend to be associated with.

How would a *huaxiao* tradition in Singapore be remembered or maintained with the help of current heritage frameworks in global polity otherwise? An illustrious name like the composer Xian Xinghai may continue to be tied to the school and be a source of pride by association, but that is mere nostalgia when one does not ask if the school today is equipped to promote Chinese music, Chinese drama or other forms of Chinese arts. Even if one were to consider supporting such a school as cultural space for transmission of ‘intangible heritage’, one must confront the reality of Xian Xinghai working within an idiom of Western classical music adapted for Chinese nationalism. Would any similar Chinese music practised in *huaxiao* of the 1950s or so fit into the imagination of ‘intangible heritage’ based on its common understanding as ethnic culture?

This comes back to the earlier argument that an understanding of culture as learning or cultivation would be more meaningful than the reduction of cultural heritage to identity markers of ethnic categories. For better or worse, the remembering of *huaxiao* as a tradition of the Chinese community is one challenge that may be grappled with or ignored as part of larger concerns in cultural policy, now as Singapore finds itself in an awkward position at a time of One Belt One Road, just as the Straits Chinese a century ago found themselves negotiating with more than a single cultural allegiance.

Notes

1. Purushotam, *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: disciplining difference in Singapore*, cited in Chua, “Taking Group Rights Seriously: Multiculturalism in Singapore,” 4.
2. See Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*. 67, where corporatism is defined as “attempts by an avowedly autonomous state elite to organize the diverse interest associations in society so that their interests can be accommodated within the interdependent and organic national community”. Also see Lian, “Multiculturalism in Singapore: Concept and Practice”. The ‘Asian values’ discourse in Singapore, along with a communitarian view of everybody knowing his or her place in a social hierarchy, has its source mainly in Confucianism in terms of the relationship between rulers and subjects likened to that between fathers and sons, with emphasis on education, personal virtue, and obedience to authority. See Barr, “Lee Kuan Yew and the “Asian Values” Debate,” 311.
3. See speech by Lee, dated 17th March 2009. In reaction to a Straits Times article by Jaleelah Abu Baker on 8th March 2009, discussing how Singaporeans used to be more multilingual 40 years before, citing a two-day Language and Diversity Symposium at the Nanyang Technological University, Chee Hong Tat wrote an article as Principal Private Secretary to the Minister Mentor saying it would be ‘stupid’ for any Singapore agency to advocate the learning of dialects. A research by Dr Leher Singh at the Infant and Child Language Centre, National University of Singapore has since been reported as suggesting that bilingual infants are able to learn a third language more easily), but there was no discussion of Chinese dialects in the newspaper report. See Boh, “Bilingual kids can pick up third language ‘more easily’: Study.”

4. The state ideology of pragmatism, with constant economic growth as the singular criterion for government initiatives, has influenced the bilingualism policy in Singapore. See Wee, "Language Politics and Global City," 27; also see Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 68-69.
5. Singapore as an independent republic had long emphasised the importance of learning English for its utilitarian value in employment and access to science and technology of the West, while associating the significance of Mandarin with a purely cultural domain, though the late 1980s brought about a new argument that Mandarin could have economic value as well. See Gopinathan, *Education and the Nation State*, 72. Also see Borthwick, "Chinese Education and Identity in Singapore," 36-37.
6. Department of Statistics, 2013 and 2015.
7. Kwok and Chia, "Memories at the Margins: Chinese-Educated Intellectuals in Singapore", 231-234.
8. Lee, *Chinese Schools in Peninsular Malaysia*, 9.
9. Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, Lawrence Wong, said in answer to a parliamentary enquiry in January 2014 that Chinese dialects continued to be used in informal communications, in traditional arts and cultural forms such as getai performances (popular music shows during Chinese religious festivals) and Chinese opera, while clan associations also organized dialect classes for children and Singaporeans of all ages. See Johnson, "In Singapore, Chinese Dialects Revive After Decades of Restrictions," on the significance of dialect use revived in television and film, after decades of restriction making it difficult for grandchildren to connect with their grandparents.
10. Article 2 of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.
11. An article by a Yale-NUS student Tee Zhuo, "The Special Assistance Plan: Singapore's own bumiputera policy," has argued that SAP schools are a form of segregation and elitism. Subsequently, the continuing relevance of SAP schools in Singapore was debated in a three-part exchange of letters between reporter Yuen Sin from The Straits Times and reporter Ng Wai Mun from Lianhe Zaobao. Yuen, "Being Chinese in multiracial Singapore," raised concern over a possible tendency among some Singaporeans in dismissing past sacrifices made by the Chinese-educated in accepting English as the working language in Singapore. Referring to the term 'Chinese privilege' as coined and popularised by an independent writer-activist Sangeetha Thanapal in the last three or four years, she argued that such a perspective in reference to the experience in Chinese education would be too sweeping, missing out on the sense of trauma experienced by an older generation of the Chinese-educated with closure of vernacular schools and the Chinese-medium Nanyang University.
12. Wang, *China and the Chinese Overseas*, 274-275.
13. Ibid., 277.
14. Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore*, 42-44.
15. Ibid., 65.
16. Clammer, *Straits Chinese Society: Studies in the Sociology of the Baba Communities of Malaysia and Singapore*, 84, 126.
17. Chia, *The Babas*, 73.
18. Graham and Howard, "Introduction: Heritage and Identity," 6-7.
19. Kong and Yeoh, "Urban Conservation in Singapore: A Survey of State Policies and Popular Attitudes."
20. Yeoh and Kong, "Singapore's Chinatown: Nation Building and Heritage Tourism in a Multiracial City," 147.
21. Zaccheus, "Singapore seeks to select intangible heritage item for Unesco list."
22. Matthews et al, *CNA-IPS Survey on Identity Identity in Singapore*, 66-67.
23. Kuper, *Anthropologists and Anthropology: The British School, 1922-1927*, 14.

24. Clammer, *Straits Chinese Society: Studies in the Sociology of the Baba Communities of Malaysia and Singapore*, 9-10. Lim Boon Keng was incidentally a co-founder of Singapore Chinese Girls' School catering to Straits Chinese girls as established in 1899, providing lessons in English, Chinese and Malay, which preceded by half a decade the modern Chinese schools for boys of various Chinese dialect communities in Singapore; later he would also serve as president of Amoy University in China between 1921 and 1937.
25. Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore* 174.-176.
26. Barr and Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*, 5.
27. Yen, *Haiwai Huaren de Chuantong yu Xiandaihua*, 98-99.
28. Ibid., 93.
29. Tao Nan, *Tao Nan School 60th Anniversary Souvenir 1906-1966*, 25.
30. Yow, *Yimin Guiji he Lisan Lunshu*, 81
31. Business Times, 24th November 1984.
32. Ho, *Yangzheng Xuexiao Xiaoyou Lixiao ji Biye 60 nian Lianhuan Juhui*, 17.
33. Liu, *Zhanhou Xinjiapo Huaren Shehui de Shanbian*, 128-130.
34. Pan, *Xiaoshi de Huaxiao*, 14.
35. Wong, T.H., *Hegemonies Compared: State Formation and Chinese School Politics in Postwar Singapore and Hong Kong*, 129ff.
36. UNESCO, "Singapore Botanic Gardens."
37. Ashworth et al, *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*, 155.
38. STB, "Chinatown: A Story of Chinese Heritage."
39. Pan, *Xiaoshi de Huaxiao*, 9.
40. People's Daily Overseas Version, 12th June 2007.
41. A Straits Settlement Annual Education Report in 1884 indicated that Singapore had 51 private Chinese writing schools, whereas Penang had 52 and Melaka 12. See Tay, *Malayxiya Huawen Jiaoyu Fazhanshi*, 30.
42. The site of Wu Fu Shu Yuan in Lebu Chulia, located in the buffer zone of George Town world heritage site, dates back to 1898 (the building has a 1901 stone tablet documenting a renovation back then) but it still boasts of overall integrity of the building structure, with intricate roof decoration as well as calligraphic inscriptions in the facade and the main hall intact. In July 2017, Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng announced the allocation of 200,000 Malaysian ringgit to help restore the building which was plagued by leaking, termites and other structural issues. See Kwong Wah Jit Poh, *Lin Guanying Bo 20 Wan Weixiu Wufu Shuyuan*.
43. Tan, "Former St Joseph's Institution (Singapore Art Museum)."
44. The Hindu, "Glimpses into Peranakan Chinese Culture."
45. Lim, *Tusheng Huaren he Haixia Huaren de Wenhua yu Shenfen Rentong*.
46. Other names included He Leru, Zhao Peitang Zhu Zipei and Lu Yinjie. See Yeung Ching, *Yangzheng Xuexiao Jinxi Jinian Kan*.
47. Yeung Ching, *Xinjiapo Yangzheng Xuexiao Gaikuang*.
48. Yeung Ching, *Yangzheng Xuexiao Jinxi Jinian Kan*, 30.
49. Yeung Ching, *Xinjiapo Yangzheng Xuexiao Yexuebu Di Si Jie Biye Tekan*, 1.
50. Ibid.
51. Ho, *Qian Yangzheng Jishi 1905-1987*, 254.
52. Ibid.
53. Pan, *Yangzheng jiujzhi bainian shijie huo baoliu*,
54. Ho, *Yangzheng Xuexiao Xiaoyou Lixiao ji Biye 60 nian Lianhuan Juhui*, 5.

55. Yangzheng Primary website.

56. Wong, C.M., *Wenhua Yichan Baohu de Duihua Pingtai*.

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