

Jianli Huang

Umbilical Ties: The Framing of the Overseas Chinese as the Mother of the Revolution

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Abstract One of the most iconic expressions in the last one hundred years associated with Sun Yat-sen, Nanyang and the 1911 Revolution of China has been “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution.” This paper traces the hazy origin of the slogan in its particular, well-known form as well as through paraphrases by examining its linkages to Sun Yat-sen and a wide body of writings from different periods. It highlights the waxing and waning of its usage, pointing to a period of high currency in the early 1930s, fading out in the 1940s, emergence as a Cold War coinage in Taiwan from the 1950s to the 1980s, and its surfacing as a focus of scholarship in the mainland of China after 1978. The final sections of the essay explore the more recent transformation of the saying in Nanyang popular culture through museum displays, theatre performance, and film. Over time, the saying, in its various configurations, serves to use it as an umbilical cord connecting the Chinese diaspora with its ancestral land.

Keywords Sun Yat-sen, Nanyang, the 1911 Revolution, the Mother of the Revolution, Overseas Chinese, Chinese diaspora, Cold War

Introduction

In encapsulating the dynamic triangular relationship between Sun Yat-sen, Nanyang (roughly present-day Southeast Asia) and the 1911 Revolution, the most frequently-used and iconic phrase has been “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution.” This short expression of praise underlines the premium accorded to Sun Yat-sen’s leadership of Xingzhonghui 兴中会 and Tongmenghui 同盟会 in mobilizing the various Chinese migrant communities

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Jianli Huang (✉)

Department of History, National University of Singapore, Singapore 117570, Singapore

E-mail: hishjl@nus.edu.sg

located outside of China for the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and establishment of a republic.

There is a logic to bestowing such a high honour upon the Overseas Chinese because Sun and many of his republican revolutionaries were exiles with a price on their heads and their conspiratorial organizations were born and operated primarily outside of China. The overseas provision of revolutionary assistance in terms of finance, manpower, propaganda, and safe-havens was critical. Yet, there remains an air of mystery in extant scholarship as to when, how, and by whom the slogan was first uttered, and in what circumstances it was later reiterated. Moreover, the identification of the Overseas Chinese as the key source of the revolution has been undermined by revisionist scholarship, which since the 1970s has tended to question the efficacy of Sun Yat-sen's overseas-based movement. The Wuchang Uprising in October 1911, which took place in central China instead of along the southern periphery, is now acknowledged to be basically unanticipated and only tenuously linked to Sun. The momentous speed of the subsequent imperial abdication and ushering in of the Chinese republic was also primarily made possible only by the defection of the conservative constitutionalist gentry, as well as of Qing civil and military court officials. The Overseas Chinese were not a key part of this eventual power play. The "Mother of the Revolution" had no decisive role in the final delivery of the republican baby despite the slogan which has remained in circulation up to the present day.

This paper is not meant to resolve the argument as to whether the Overseas Chinese truly deserve the praiseworthy reputation encapsulated in this saying. Its main purpose is to pin down the slogan's surprisingly late origin and to examine its astonishing longevity and usage over time. The saying has come in and out of vogue several times: there were periods when it was repeatedly deployed and extended periods when it retreated into the background. Here we will analyze the significance of its evocation and absence. Omissions or silences are not simple subjects for historical writing but they are an integral part of the story here: just how did this slogan come to be a powerful symbol mediating the three-way relationship among Sun, Nanyang and the 1911 Revolution? As we shall see, over time, the saying, in its various configurations, serves as an umbilical cord connecting the Chinese diaspora with its ancestral land.

Founding Father on the Mother of the Revolution

In tracing the hazy origin of the slogan, one is confronted by a mountain of literature that attributes it directly to Sun Yat-sen, who had been named as the

Founding Father of the Republic of China that was inaugurated on January 1, 1912. This tagging the phrase to ‘the horse’s mouth’ is pervasive in historical scholarship. But did Sun actually say or write these exact words?

By examining extant source materials, it becomes apparent that it is unlikely that Sun made this exact pronouncement. One problematic but widely cited piece of evidence refers to the prescribed words which Sun had allegedly penned in an unspecified year onto a horizontally-inscribed board for the office of *Shaonian Zhongguo chenbao* 少年中国晨报 (Morning Newspaper of Young China) in San Francisco. That single claim with no elaboration or contextualization was made by the senior Kuomintang (hereafter abbreviated as KMT) leader Qin Xiaoyi 秦孝仪 when he spoke at an oral history session in August 1980 in the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei.¹ This fragment of information was picked up and re-circulated thrice by a Nanyang reading club.² However, no one else came forth with confirmation and there was no follow-up coverage. If the wooden plaque with Sun’s personally penned words had really existed, it would likely made a strong impact among scholars and the media before 1980, or even after Qin’s late revelation. Such a 7-character inscription on open display for all these years would not have escaped public attention. It seems that Qin’s recollection was either unreliable or he had indulged in an act of momentary sensationalism.

Indeed, although hundreds of pieces of secondary works have attributed the slogan to Sun, it appears that in all likelihood he never used the exact phrase in any of his speeches and writings. It was at best a mere paraphrase of his general comments on the contribution of the Overseas Chinese. As for a paraphrase, it is possible to link Sun to an analogous statement on only five occasions.

First is his September 30, 1916 speech which he delivered in Shanghai to welcome a group of Overseas Chinese soldiers. He commented that “the Overseas Chinese were really one of the most powerful forces in the abolition of imperial rule.”³ The second instance was a 1916 circular which he issued to overseas branch members exhorting them to remember that “the Overseas Chinese from various places had contributed vast amount of money for military expenses to overthrow imperial rule, and they are also a model for our party

¹ Qin Xiaoyi, “Huaqiao wei geming zhimu” [The Overseas Chinese are the mother of the revolution], *Jindai Zhongguo* [Modern China], no. 20 (1980), 31. Reprinted in Haiwai chubanshe ed., *Huaqiao yu Zhongguo guomin geming yundong* [Overseas Chinese and the Chinese national revolutionary movement] (Taipei: Haiwai chubanshe, 1981), 183.

² This refers to Tongde Shubaoshe 同德书报社 of Singapore and its souvenir magazines of 1981, 2000, and 2010. See my later discussion on this reading club.

³ “Zai Hu huanying congjun huaqiao dahui shangde yanshuo” [Speech at the Shanghai Welcoming Convention for Overseas Chinese Troops], in *Sun Zhongshan quanji* [Completed works of Sun Yat-sen] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), vol. 3, 374.

army because they have returned to sacrifice their lives.”⁴

The third appears in a passage from a 1917 preface which Sun wrote for a popular novel about the Tongmenghui: “The launching of the Tongmenghui had relied heavily upon the contribution of the Overseas Chinese.... Only I know deeply that without the Overseas Chinese group in Tongmenghui there would have been neither the overthrow of the Qing dynasty nor the establishment of the Republic.”⁵

The fourth traceable instance of paraphrasing is a speech which he offered to the launching-cum-social gathering of a party branch in Melbourne, Australia, in December 1921: “My overseas comrades had previously suffered together with me by contributing financially towards strengthening our military or bravely killing the traitors. Their revolutionary struggle lasted ten over years and yet seemed compressed into a single day. Hence, there is no absence of the two words ‘Overseas Chinese’ in the history of revolution and this has remained permanent in people’s minds.”⁶

Last but not least, we have Sun’s October 15, 1923 speech given to a KMT social gathering in Guangzhou in which he proclaimed that “Overseas areas are our party’s most developed areas. The KMT is in many Overseas Chinese localities. The mindset of the Overseas Chinese has matured earlier and they are more advance in understanding the ideology of our party. Therefore, they are also ahead in revolution. Each and every of our revolution has drawn sustenance from the overseas comrades.”⁷

In sum, despite many claimed citations constantly tracing back to Sun, the

⁴ Cited from *Huaqiao yu Zhongguo guomin geming yundong*, 23–4. This is probably the 1916 “Zhi haiwai geming tongzhi shu” [Circular to overseas revolutionary comrades] erroneously referred to by many writers and yet could not be located in any major compendium on Sun.

⁵ Preface by Sun dated April 1917 for Zhao Gongbi, *Tongmenghui yanyi* [Romance of the Tongmenghui], cited in *Ibid.*, 24, 165.

⁶ “Meilibin fenbu dangsuo luocheng bing kai kenqin dahui xunci zhiyi” [One of the speeches at the launching-cum-social gathering of the party branch in Melbourne], in Hu Hanmin ed., *Zongli quanji* [Completed works of Sun Yat-sen] (Shanghai: Minzhi shuju, 1930; Mimeograph version by Shanghai shudian as vol. 90 and 91 of *Minguo congshu* 民国丛书 [Books on Republican China] series, Part 1, 1065). Some have suggested that Meilibin is the transliteration for Philippines. For example, see Qin Xiaoyi, “Huaqiao wei geming zhimu,” 31. This is erroneous because the two messages (1065–67) make reference to party organizations in Australia and the South Pacific and Meilibin should be Melbourne, see also Guo Cunxiao, “Guofu Sun Zhongshan xiansheng chuai Aodaliya huaqiao” [Founding Father Sun Yat-sen’s love for the Overseas Chinese in Australia], *Qiaoxie zazhi* [Magazine of the Overseas Chinese Association], no. 79 (2003), 20–5.

⁷ “Zai Guangzhou Zhongguo Guomindang kenqin dahui de yanshuo” [Speech at the KMT social gathering in Guangzhou], in *Sun Zhongshan quanji*, vol. 8, 280.

single occasion when the Founding Father could have personally uttered or penned those exact words has only been recently disclosed and is problematic in nature. All the other five identifiable instances linking the slogan back to the Sun are paraphrases of statement he made between 1916 and 1923. There is thus a need to move the scope of tracing the origin beyond Sun and to identify when and how the slogan first appeared in full printed form and in what context. This process of tracking will provide evidence of usage but it will also unveil instances of “silences” or “omissions” which are essential to exploring the phrase’s “creation myth” and its evolution. A useful starting point is the writings of two party veterans who had played a critical role in crafting the history of the KMT.

Early KMT History of Zou Lu and Feng Ziyou

Zou Lu 邹鲁 (1885–1954) joined Sun’s revolutionary activities from 1905, participated in numerous uprisings, held various key positions within the KMT party-state apparatus, and helmed the Sun Yat-sen University from 1923 to 1940. He was also one of the few witnesses when Sun dictated his last will on his deathbed in Beijing in 1925. He gained a high place in KMT historiography when he published in 1929 a draft history of the party. This 1686-page landmark volume in four parts captures the party’s organizational history, ideological messages, major uprisings, and biographical profiles. The book was, however, silent on passing an overall judgment on the contributions of Overseas Chinese.⁸

The other major figure of early KMT historiography and one with exceptionally close ties to the Overseas Chinese was Feng Ziyou 冯自由 (1882–1958). He was born into an Overseas Chinese family in Japan, joined Sun in 1905 and became one of his key lieutenants in Hong Kong and the United States. With his strong revolutionary background and experience in journalism, Feng turned into one of the most important and productive participant-chroniclers of pre-1911 KMT history. Through a series of books published from 1928 to the 1950s, he wrote extensively about the history of the republican revolutionary movement, including its mobilization of the Overseas Chinese. Going beyond a simple narrative, his inclusion of rare photographs, personal correspondences, membership lists, and funding data has made his books a

⁸ Zou Lu, *Zhongguo Guomindang shigao* [Draft history of the Chinese Nationalist Party] (Shanghai, 1929). This has been republished as part of the long series on *Minguo congshu*, vols. 25–6.

valuable primary source for scholars. Yet the slogan was never once cited by Feng as a direct pronouncement from Sun (or any other leading revolutionaries). Nor did Feng ever use it himself.⁹

Feng came closest to endorsing the slogan in the preface for one of his books in Chongqing in November 1945:

The greatest contribution to the founding of the Republic of China came from the Overseas Chinese. From Sun Yat-sen's launching of the Xingzhonghui in Honolulu in 1894 to the success of the 1911 Revolution, not a single revolutionary attempt had been made without the assistance of the Overseas Chinese. Hence, one can sincerely confirm the recent comment by people that there would have been no revolution without the Overseas Chinese.¹⁰

Double Interrogation by Zhang Yongfu and Hu Hanmin

A large number of secondary writings have traced the phrase to the 1933 publication of Zhang Yongfu (Teo Eng Hock) 张永福 (1872–1957). Zhang was a Chinese merchant in Singapore who started a revolutionary newspaper in 1903 which caught the eye of Sun. Zhang joined the Tongmenghui in 1905 and co-led revolutionary branch activities in Singapore. The full slogan appears in quotation marks in the opening sentence of his book: “Nowadays, there are many people who would admit to what Sun Yat-sen had said about ‘The Overseas Chinese contributed to the Revolution’ and ‘The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the

⁹ Feng Ziyou's four notable collections, with some duplication of materials, are: (a) *Zhonghua minguo kaiguoqian gemingshi* [Revolutionary history before the founding of the Republic of China], vol. 1 (1928), vol. 2 (1930) in Shanghai (Other subsequent volumes were planned but never materialized. Second edition of Vol. 1 in 1944 and Vol. 2 in 1946 in Chongqing; Third edition of both in 1954 in Taipei); (b) *Geming yishi* [Unofficial history of the 1911 Revolution]; Zhou Nanjing, *Fengyu tongzhou: Dongnanya yu huaren wenti* [On the same boat regardless of wind or rain: Southeast Asia and the Chinese problem] (Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe, 1995), 381, informs us that six volumes of this work was completed in China between 1939 and 1948, with the pre-1949 Shangwu yishuguan publishing the first five volumes and the later Zhonghua shuju publishing all six in 1981 (with reprint in 1987); Taiwan has also reissued this series in 1965; (c) *Huaqiao geming kaiguoshi* [History of the Overseas Chinese in revolution and founding of the Republic] (Chongqing, 1946; Second edition in Shanghai, 1947 and third edition in Taipei, 1953); (d) *Huaqiao geming zuzhi shihua* [Historical narratives on Overseas Chinese organizations] (Taipei, Jun 1953). Item (a) is his earliest publication and there is no mention of the epithet. Its volume 2 has an entire chapter (no. 39) devoted specifically to the theme of “Nanyang Overseas Chinese and the Revolutionary Movement” (mentioned in his preface for Zhang Yongfu's 1933 book) and yet there is still no mention of the epithet.

¹⁰ Feng Ziyou, *Huaqiao geming kaiguoshi*, preface, 1.

Revolution.”¹¹ Zhang’s opening statement and attribution to Sun became the standard reference point for many subsequent writers. Some erroneously offered Zhang’s citation as indisputable proof that Sun had himself used the phrase in the manner of a straightforward endorsement of the significant role played by the Overseas Chinese.

Such critics neglected to examine the larger context of Zhang’s statement and missed an important nuance. Zhang’s intent, as reflected in the full preface, was not to offer praise but warning to his fellow Overseas Chinese not to be egoistic, opportunistic, and complacent. According to him, Sun had used the slogan as a way of encouraging the Overseas Chinese to continue to strive and complete the revolutionary mission. Zhang regretted that many Overseas Chinese had been recklessly flashing their previous revolutionary involvement as a badge of honour to secure positions and to climb the career ladder. While recognizing their past contributions, he urged them to be humble and to ask themselves a long list of questions to determine whether they actually earned the honour of being the Mother of the Revolution:

- A. Do I have a deep understanding of Sun?
- B. Do I believe in the ideology of Sun?
- C. Had I been in cahoots with the Protect Emperor Party?
- D. Had I given up the revolutionary path midway?
- E. How much risk and how much money had I offered for the revolutionary cause?
- F. What is my standing in the Overseas Chinese community? Do I have their support?
- G. Which revolutionary uprisings had I participated in?
- H. Had I ever infringed upon party charter and discipline?
- I. What contributions had I made towards the welfare of the Overseas Chinese and what relief effort had I contributed towards the various disasters in China?
- J. Even if I had participated in the revolutionary enterprise, would I still be classified as a revolutionary Overseas Chinese if I am [now] involved in gambling and opium-smoking?¹²

¹¹ Zhang Yongfu, *Nanyang yu chuangli minguo* [Nanyang and the establishment of the Chinese Republic] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1933), 1. There is a variation of the book title in the copyright page: *Huaqiao yu chuangli minguo* [Overseas Chinese and the establishment of the Chinese Republic]. Zhang’s book is not the first from Nanyang to put on record their participation in the 1911 Revolution. The honour is likely to belong to Chen Xinzheng, *Huaqiao geming shi* [Revolutionary history of the Overseas Chinese], 1921, publication details uncertain, based on the transcript of a lengthy speech delivered to the Penang Philomatic Union in 1921, there is no mention of the epithet here.

¹² Zhang Yongfu, *Nanyang yu chuangli minguo*, 1–2.

Zhang Yongfu concluded his preface by urging the Overseas Chinese to go beyond their past contributions and to fulfill their responsibility of nurturing the young republic so that the revolution could become strong and healthy. Only then, in his view, would the slogan be befitting.¹³

One other fascinating dimension of Zhang's book is that it has "piggy-backed" on the transcript of a separate account offered by Hu Hanmin 胡汉民 (1879–1936) who was among the handful of extremely close revolutionary followers of Sun and who was put in charge of the Tongmenghui Nanyang headquarters in Singapore in 1908. He was also a strong contender to succeed Sun but was outmaneuvered by Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 in the 1930s. Hu offered an undated oral account of "Nanyang and the Chinese Revolution" which was transcribed and published as a long appendix within Zhang's 1933 book.¹⁴ Indeed, Zhang made clear that he was writing his book primarily as a "supplement" to Hu's critique of the Overseas Chinese and their involvement in the revolution. Zhang urged his readers to reflect calmly and ask themselves whether they possessed "ideal qualifications to be the Mother of the Revolution" after being informed by Hu of the limitations of their previous revolutionary work and understanding of the party.¹⁵

Hu Hanmin did not evoke the slogan at all but his opening sentence has also been mythologized as a firm endorsement of it: "Looking at the history of revolution, Nanyang truly occupies an extremely important position; it is our party's source for revolutionary planning and the base for revolutionary activities."¹⁶ In this 26-page report, he provided useful details about the revolutionary activities of Sun and his comrades in Nanyang but the higher value derives from his insight and critique of the Overseas Chinese. Coming from a man who was later often associated with the KMT conservative right-wing, some of his comments were surprising along the Marxist line of class analysis. He critiqued that many Overseas Chinese were superstitious, easily fooled by Kang Youwei 康有为 and Liang Qichao's 梁启超 Protect Emperor Party and had overly rated the importance of imperial scholarly honor and official ranks. He noted that the big capitalists were greedy and tight-fisted about money and were "most non-revolutionary, most afraid of revolution." Hence, the main revolutionary supporters were found only among the small merchants and general workers, thus allowing the party to have a firm and unshakable revolutionary base among the Overseas Chinese in Nanyang. He lamented that in the current post-revolutionary era, Nanyang Chinese had lost their revolutionary

¹³ Ibid., 2–3.

¹⁴ Hu Hanmin's verbal account was transcribed by Zhang Zhen 张振 as "Nanyang and the Chinese Revolution," appendix in Ibid., 1–26.

¹⁵ Zhang Yongfu's preface, in Ibid., 2–3.

¹⁶ Hu's oral transcript, in Ibid., appendix, 1.

spirit, becoming involved only for money and power, and turning disunited, especially coming under the influence of the Reorganization Clique (of the KMT) and the Communist Party of China (hereafter abbreviated as CPC), which to him was particularly successful in mobilizing the Hainanese who had been neglected by the KMT's Whampoa Military Academy). Hu's final words were a positive rallying cry for Nanyang to correct its current disunity and shortcomings and to recover its past honor in being the KMT's base for revolutionary planning. He exhorted that "the contribution of Nanyang towards China's revolutionary history would never be dismissed; it would only continue to grow endlessly."¹⁷

"First Instance" in 1929 and Currency in the Early 1930s

Despite some extant scholarship pointing towards Zhang Yongfu's October 1933 publication as the "first instance" of the slogan being recorded in print, this is erroneous as two accounts predate Zhang. First is another Nanyang publication of the same year, 1933, which hit the market about eight months earlier (February versus October). This volume was compiled by Huang Jingwan 黄警顽 and his editorial team partly in honour of the Perak revolutionary involvement in Malaya. Second is an even earlier source, the minutes of a conference opening speech by a senior KMT leader Dai Jitao 戴季陶 (1891–1949) in November 1929.

Huang Jingwan's volume aims to record the significant contributions of the Overseas Chinese. Apart from his tribute to the Perak revolutionary veteran Zheng Luosheng 郑螺生 (1870–1939) and Zheng's own essay, the editorial team used a large quantity of facsimile of Sun's letters on KMT letterhead, certificates of appreciation, and photographs taken in Nanyang to affirm the role of the Overseas Chinese. It was in his opening short tribute to Zheng Luosheng that he evoked the slogan: "Hence Sun Yat-sen had called the Overseas Chinese the Mother of the Revolution and the Chinese people had praised Nanyang as the source of revolutionary planning."¹⁸

The "first instance" of the slogan in print, however, should be credited to a hitherto neglected source, a set of minutes taken at the November 1929 meeting of the KMT Central Training Department regarding the convening of an "Overseas Chinese Education Conference." The slogan was recorded as part of

¹⁷ Ibid., 18–26.

¹⁸ Huang Jingwan, et al. eds., *Nanyang Pili huaqiao geming shiji* [Revolutionary record of the Overseas Chinese in Nanyang Perak] (Shanghai: Wenhua meishu dushu gongshi, 1933), no pagination. The copyright page indicates a variation of the book title as *Zhonghua geming shiji* [Chinese revolutionary record]. Zheng Luosheng joined the Tongmenghui in 1907, founded the Perak branch, and rising to become a member of the Supervisory Yuan 監察院 of the KMT government in 1931.

the opening remarks made by the head of the Department and chair of the meeting, Dai Jitao. Dai was also one of the early revolutionaries helping Sun and became one of major writers for the revolutionary newspaper *Guanghua ribao* 光华日报 (Guanghua Daily) in Penang. After Sun's death, he was closely aligned with Chiang Kai-shek, assuming top posts within the KMT party-state, including the leadership of the Central Training Department and the Examination Yuan. In this conference, he urged immediate educational assistance for the Overseas Chinese because "The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution, and the education of the Overseas Chinese is closely linked to the survival of the entire Chinese people."¹⁹

The overall picture emerging from this analysis demonstrates that the exact 7-character slogan first appeared in print in the last 1920s and gained currency in the 1930s. The early 1930s was a heightened period of the Overseas Chinese nationalism for various reasons. Firstly, it carried the hope for the beginning of a new era. KMT's Northern Expedition had come to an end in December 1928 and the new Nationalist Government was in place. Sun Yat-sen's body, which had been housed temporarily in Beijing where he died, was transported in an epic journey to be laid in a newly-built mausoleum in Nanjing on June 1, 1929.²⁰ Even though there were still intra-party squabbles and residual warlordism, there was optimism in the air. Secondly, as a corollary, there was a simultaneous mood of external danger. Japanese intrusions into China had begun with the two Jinan Incidents of 1927 and 1928 and even more dramatically with the September 1931 Manchurian Incident. These events had greatly provoked the rise of nationalist sentiment within China and the Overseas Chinese communities. Thirdly, as Zheng's essay in Huang's compendium alerts us, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the newly installed KMT party-state had struck a diplomatic compromise with the British colonial authorities in Singapore and Malaya on April 2, 1930 to shut down the local KMT party branches and offices. Apart from proscribing their activities, Zheng observed that this deal had the effect of causing hurt and awkward feelings among the Overseas Chinese and they had been hoping for

¹⁹ "Minutes of Meeting," November 1929, in Zhongguo dier lishi dang'anguan ed., *Zhonghua minguoshi dang'an ziliao huibian* [Collection of documents from the Chinese Republican archives] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1994), vol. 5, no. 1, section on part 2 of education, 962. The quoted passage is cited from the text as a paraphrase of Dai's speech made on Nov. 1 at the opening session. The following tangential article has alerted me to this vital information: Bao Aiqin, "Nanjing guomin zhengfu de huaqiao jiaoyu zhengce yu cuoshi" [Educational policies and implementation measures of the Nationalist government in Nanjing for the Overseas Chinese], *Huaqiao huaren lishi yanjiu* [Overseas Chinese History Studies], no. 4 (2006), 54–9.

²⁰ The grand ceremony in re-burying Sun in Nanjing had sparked an attempt (appears to be eventually abortive) to set up a special permanent memorial within the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum complex to mark the revolutionary contribution of the Overseas Chinese, see the letter appealing for donation in *Nanyang shangbao*, May 28 and 31, 1929.

further discussion and possible repeal of these British restrictions.²¹

This mixture of aroused Overseas Chinese nationalism ran parallel to a sense of disappointment with Chinese domestic authorities for not doing enough to look after the diasporic Chinese in the 1930s; as Feng Lieshan 冯列山 also hinted in a commentary written in November 1937, soon after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. After finishing his study at Fudan University, Feng had gone on to Britain and Germany for graduate courses in journalism. While stopping over in Singapore and Malaya on his way home, he became highly impressed by the nationalistic fund-raising activities mounted by the Overseas Chinese to help China to resist Japan. He praised them effusively, regarding them as being much more in tune with the modern notions of nation-states, nationalism, and civic responsibility than Chinese who had never travelled abroad. He reminded his readers that “Sun Yat-sen had ever said ‘The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution’ and these words confirmed the status of the Overseas Chinese in the history of modern China.” However, without going into details, he lamented in the same breath that intellectuals within China had in recent years felt that “overseas compatriots never let down their ancestral land; rather, their ancestral land disappointed them.”²²

Fading Away in the 1940s as in Chen Chunan and Chen Jiageng

If the slogan is regarded to have gained wide currency in the early 1930s as discussed, then its absence in the key works of Tongmenghui veterans Chen Chunan (Tan Chor Nam) 陈楚楠 (1884–1971) and Chen Jiageng (Tan Kah Kee) 陈嘉庚 (1874–1961) is indicative of a downward trend in its usage by the early 1940s.

Chen Chunan was a fellow Nanyang revolutionary with Zhang Yongfu in Singapore, apparently at one stage rotating between them the chairmanship of the Singapore branch of the Tongmenghui. In 1940, Chen gave a speech which was later published in newspapers and an academic journal to recapture the history of Sun’s stay in a villa in Singapore.²³ He began with a critique of the many inaccuracies in extant local and overseas writings and asserted his own claim of authenticity and truthfulness despite a simultaneous honest admission of

²¹ Huang Jingwan, et al. eds., *Nanyang Pili huaqiao geming shiji*, no pagination.

²² *Nanyang Shangbao*, Nov. 7, 1937, Feng’s guest commentary on “National Crisis and Overseas Compatriots.”

²³ The conversion of this Serene Sunset Villa into the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall in 2001 is discussed later in this paper.

incomplete memory and the loss of documents. He emphasized the revolutionary consciousness and activities of himself and Zhang Yongfu prior to coming into direct contact with Sun. Once the contact was made and the Tongmenghui branch in Singapore launched, Chen claimed that the branch played a crucial role in planning various revolutionary uprisings. However, he did not evoke the slogan at all. The closest he came to citing it was in a general comment that the Tongmenghui in Nanyang grew stronger by the day and that Nanyang comrades had taken part in almost all the uprisings in China by contributing money or effort.²⁴

Chen Jiageng was another young man who had joined the republican revolutionary cause and Tongmenghui activities. He was one of those Overseas Chinese who had risen rapidly in wealth to become a tycoon by the late 1910s. His wealth and activist personality propelled him to the forefront of leadership in the Chinese community in Nanyang and he became the flag bearer of Overseas Chinese nationalism. This was despite his bankruptcy by 1934 due to the Great Depression and to his past generous contributions to the local Nanyang society and China. When Japan bombed Pearl Harbour and began its invasion of Southeast Asia in December 1941, Chen Jiageng fled to Indonesia for hiding and it was from there that he penned his memoir.²⁵ He recalled the outbreak of the 1911 Revolution and how his native province of Fujian had overthrown the Qing authorities. A meeting was convened in the Fujian Association in Singapore with himself elected as chairman to oversee the immediate raising of funds to assist and to maintain order in Fujian. Another large sum of money was remitted when Sun Yat-sen stopped over in Singapore on his return journey to China for the presidential inauguration and asked for additional support. There is no mention of the slogan in his 1946 memoir or in published compendiums of his pre-1949 speeches and writings.²⁶ The only traceable instance is a 1940 speech which Chen had made when he referred briefly to the shortened phrase of “the Mother of the Revolution” in exhorting a

²⁴ Chen Chu’nan, “Wangqingyuan yu Zhongguo geming shilüe” [A short history of the relations between the Serene Sunset Villa and the Chinese revolution], first printed in *Xin Zhou ribao* [Sin Chew Jit Poh], Jan. 4–10, 1940, reprinted in *Dongnanya yanjiu xuebao* [Journal of Southeast Asian Studies], no. 1 (1970), 50–4.

²⁵ Chen Jiageng, *Nanqiao huiyilu* [Memoir of a southern sojourner] (New Jersey: Global Publishing, 1993), 2 volumes, 9–10. Memoir was completed in June 1944 and first published in Singapore in 1946.

²⁶ See Chen Jiageng, “Weiju shibai caishi kechi,” *Dongfang zazhi* [Eastern Miscellany], vol. 31, no. 7 (1934) and *Chen Jiageng yanlunji* [Collection of speeches and writings of Chen Jiageng] (Singapore, 1949), Speeches from 1947–49. See also Yang Jinfu (Yong Ching Fatt), *Zhanqian de Chen Jiageng yanlun shiliao yu fenxi* [Chen Jiageng in pre-war Singapore: documents and analysis] (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1980).

Nanyang team of community leaders about to visit wartime China to remain humble and to avoid arrogance.²⁷

In later years, it appears that political correctness had served to exaggerate the tenuous link between Chen Jiageng and this slogan. He was after all regarded as the leading Overseas Chinese of the republican era, thus it was deemed important that he be linked closely to the 7-character phrase. Positioning Chen as the most important Overseas Chinese patriot, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 in 1945 had praised him as the “Banner of the Overseas Chinese, Glory of the People.” In 1950, Chen had become disillusioned with the KMT and the British colonial authorities and decided to leave Singapore and to return permanently to live in the newly founded People’s Republic of China (hereafter abbreviated as PRC). Six years later, at the commemoration of the 90th anniversary of Sun Yat-sen’s birthday, Chen affirmed that Sun had uttered the slogan while on a visit in Singapore.²⁸ This affirmation was in turn played up by Dai Xueji 戴学稷 who was writing in 2008 for the official website of “The Central Committee of the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang,” an organ first set up by Song Qingling 宋庆龄 and the anti-Chiang Kai-shek faction in 1949 and later existed within the PRC. Dai pronounced “the famous patriotic Overseas Chinese Chen Jiageng as ever recalling that Mr. Sun was very touched after witnessing how the Overseas Chinese had supported the revolution and Sun had said that the Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution more than once.”²⁹

²⁷ *Nanyang shangbao*, Mar. 6, 1940.

²⁸ Chen Shuiyang, “Chen Jiageng zai jinian Sun Zhongshan xiansheng danchen de yici jianghua” [Chen Jiageng’s speech in commemorating the birth of Sun Yat-sen], *Xiamen wenshi ziliao* [Literary and Historical Documents of Xiamen], no. 11 (1986), 1–3. Yong Ching Fatt’s authoritative biography on Chen had a reference on him reminiscing about Sun in 1956 but it was not about the slogan. See Yong Ching Fatt, *Tan Kah-Kee: The Making of an Overseas Chinese Legend* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), 176, 224, fn 3. The original source cited by Yong is Chen Bisheng and Yang Guozhen, *Chen Jiageng zhuan* [Biography of Chen Jiageng] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1982; First print by Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1981), 20, and there is no reference to the slogan here.

²⁹ Dai Xueji, “Sun Zhongshan, Xinma huaqiao yu Xinhai geming” [Sun Yat-sen, Overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, and the 1911 Revolution], Oct. 9, 2008, in the website of “The Central Committee of the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang,” <http://www.minge.gov.cn>, accessed Sep. 3, 2010. Chen’s pronouncement was cited as having come from Chen’s article on “Zhuyi Sun Zhongshan” [Retrospection for Sun Yat-sen] in Sang Mingxuan et al. eds., *Sun Zhongshan shengping shiye zhuiyilu* [Record of the memory for the life and career of Sun Yat-sen] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1986), 66. This attribution to Chen Jiageng is repeated in a scholarly article a year later, see Su Quanyou, “Huidang yuansu yu Sun Zhongshan lingdao de wuzhuang qiye” [Secret society factor and armed revolts led by Sun Yat-sen], *Xiamen daxue xuebao* [Journal of Xiamen University], no. 2 (2009), 55, 57.

Wartime Burning of Books and Dimming of Revolutionary Past

Diminishing usage of the slogan during the 1940s was due in part to the outbreak of Pacific War which threw all of Southeast Asia into turmoil. The Japanese invasion and occupation from December 1941 to August 1945 permanently changed institutional and personal memories of the Overseas Chinese involvement in the 1911 Revolution and the early post-1911 struggles. Although their intense involvement in anti-Japanese nationalistic activities from late 1920s to late 1930s in Nanyang had carried their nationalist sentiment and revolutionary memory to a great height, it was a deep fear of discovery of this engagement and of possible severe punishment by the invading Japanese military forces that induced a massive self-burning of documents and records of all sorts in 1941–42, especially among Chinese associations and schools.

Almost all community records and memorabilia were destroyed throughout much of Nanyang, leaving a big and irretrievable gap in the institutional memory of the pre-war era, and hampering scholarship until today. This destruction was one main reason why the Chinese revolutionary past dimmed considerably in the minds of the Overseas Chinese community in the post-war era. Other forces compounded the problem. For instance, the harshness of the Japanese Occupation caused Nanyang collective memory to focus on their wartime sufferings. The post-war era was also one of local struggles for decolonization and independence, as well as post-independence nation-building and modernization.

The gap resulting from the destruction of records is most telling as one tries to reconstruct fragments of the revolutionary past from various post-war souvenir magazines of Chinese associations and schools. Most of them have very little information or simply gloss over their organization's involvement in the Chinese Republican Revolution; almost all explicitly mention the impact of World War II-era destruction of records. The commemorative volume of the 91st anniversary of the Malacca Hainan Association in September 1960 is a pertinent example. Despite having been formed in 1874, it has nothing to say about the 1911 Revolution and its pre-1942 anti-Japanese activities. The only suggestion of its previous association with the KMT government is its acknowledgment that the consul-general from the Republic of China Gao Lingbai 高凌白 had officiated at the opening of its renovated building in 1936. The volume twice explains the lack of clarity regarding in the association's pre-war history is due to the fact that all community associations had to suddenly stop their activities or disband and that almost all their written records were destroyed.³⁰ Similarly, even as it notes

³⁰ *Maliujia Qiongzhou huiguan jiu-shiyi zhounian jinian tekan* [Souvenir magazine of the 91st anniversary of the Malacca Hainan Association] (Malacca, 1960), no pagination.

“the association had a name change most likely in 1911 when the Qing dynasty was overthrown,” the 100th anniversary commemorative volume (1989) of the Malaysia Selangor Hainan Association acknowledges the gap in its institutional history with a profound lament about wartime destruction.³¹ In some cases, records were destroyed due to abuses to institutional property during the Japanese Occupation period or due to damage from tenants to whom institutional properties had been rented.³²

The 1993 re-publication of the 1941 *Du Nan xiansheng aisilu* 杜南先生哀思录 (A record of sad reflections on Mr. Too Nam) is an example of the attempt to recover a rare fragment of Nanyang revolutionary involvement in the 1911 Revolution lost during the burning of books prior to the Japanese invasion.³³ Du Nan (Too Nam) 杜南 (1854–1939) was a Chinese tutor to Sun Yat-sen in Honolulu and a veteran Tongmenghui leader in Nanyang who ran the Kuala Lumpur branch for many years. He died in October 1939 and a grand commemoration of his contributions to the KMT party-state was held on March 29, 1940 (anniversary of the Huanghuagang Uprising). However, even before it could be distributed or put on sale, almost all copies of the 1941 commemorative volume were burnt on the eve of Japan’s invasion due to concerns that anti-Japanese organizations and leaders in Singapore and Malaya could be identified and implicated through the publication. His grandson (from the family of the third son) republished the 1941 volume in 1993 to commemorate his grandfather and to retrieve a part of the community history.

Indicative of Du Nan’s strong ties with the KMT in the 1940s, many pages of the volume are filled with memorial plaques and tributes offered by KMT leaders and institutions. Photographs of the memorial service also show the funeral ceremony with the typical Sun Yat-sen photo at the centre-stage being flanked by the flags of the party and ROC state. Significantly, the stage also bore a huge

³¹ *Malaxiya Xuelaner Qiongzhou huiguan: Qingzhu bainian zhounian ji tianhougong kaimu jinian tekan* [Souvenir magazine of the 100th anniversary of the Malaysia Selangor Hainan Association and the opening of its Tianhou Temple] (Kuala Lumpur, 1989), 7.

³² For example, see *Mapo Guangdong huiguan qishi zhounian jinian tekan* [Souvenir magazine of the 70th anniversary of the Muar Guangdong Association], 1989, 33; *Guandan Hainan huiguan yibainian zhounian jinian tekan* [Souvenir magazine of the 100th anniversary of the Kuantan Hainan Association] (Kuantan, 1995), 31, 62. A non-native place association example of having suffered both the burning of documents and abuse of premises during the Occupation period is that of the Renjing cishan baihua jushe 人镜慈善白话剧社, see *Renjing sanshiernian jiniankan* [Souvenir magazine of the 32nd anniversary of Renjing theatre group] (Kuala Lumpur, 1952), no pagination.

³³ Anonymous, *Du Nan Xiansheng aisilu* [A record of sad reflections on Mr Too Nam] (Kuala Lumpur, 1941), republished by his grandson Too Chee Cheong in 1993. I wish to thank Zhu Yanhui (pen name Chu Luda) for the generous gift of this book which also contains a reprint of his brief biography on Du Nan in *Xin Zhou ribao*, Nov. 29, 1986.

vertical cloth banner and a plaque which affirmed that Du's actions demonstrated that "The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution."³⁴ Another couplet similarly proclaimed: "The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution, Du Nan is a veteran Tongmenghui member."³⁵ The slogan was repeated twice more in the volume, including his grandson's own epilogue piece in the re-publication.³⁶ The dynamics of forgetting and remembering is indeed worthy of attention, and this too can be gleaned from the anniversary souvenir magazines of a KMT-associated reading club.

Last Surviving KMT-Associated Symbol in Singapore

The Tongde shubaoshe 同德书报社 (whose self-preferred translated name is "United Chinese Library") is a reading club founded by Sun Yat-sen and his revolutionary followers in 1910. The characters adorning a wooden panel mounted at the entrance of its premises are said to have been penned by Sun. Some reading clubs were initially set up independently as a kind of public library to promote reading and knowledge of current affairs. However, their potential as a tool for revolution was quickly grasped by Sun at the turn of the twentieth century, and he issued personal instructions that they be dedicated to the revolutionary cause and that new ones be set up. These clubs became front organizations of the Tongmenghui and later the KMT. Some even became formal local party branches. It has been estimated that there were several hundred such clubs once existed in Chinese communities the world over.³⁷ In Singapore, there were possibly as many as eleven, but only Tongde shubaoshe has survived to the present day. It has four extant commemorative magazines marking its 25th, 70th, 90th, and 100th anniversaries that enable us to recapture its history. The 25th anniversary volume of 1935 had been assumed to be lost in the destruction of materials in advance of the Japanese invasion. It was only recently, during 2010 celebrations of the library's centenary, that the club management committee came upon it in their storeroom.

³⁴ Ibid., photographs in page 16–7. The cloth banner is a derivative of a memorial plaque from one of the guests: 华侨固是革命母、国父曾推贰字师 (memorial plaque in page 2). The second part of the couplet makes reference to another of Sun's popular expression, i.e., "Grand Love" 博爱.

³⁵ Ibid., plaque in page 17.

³⁶ See the memorial plaque from a public school for the Overseas Chinese in Haiphong of Vietnam (page 26) and the grandson's epilogue (no pagination).

³⁷ For a sample listing of such clubs the world over, see Yang Hanxiang's list in *Bincheng yueshu baoshe ershisi zhounian jinian tekan* [Souvenir magazine of the 24th anniversary of the Penang Philomatic Union], 1931, 11–4. Feng Ziyou had also provided some names in his various volumes.

Within this rediscovered volume, there is a short essay on “25 Years in Review” that attests to knowledge of the previously discussed writings by Feng Ziyou, Zhang Yongfu, and Hu Hanmin, and contains some direct quotes from them.³⁸ The slogan is not quoted. Nor does it appear in the two calligraphic celebratory tributes offered by party veterans Zou Lu and Zhang Yongfu in this publication.³⁹ A plaque contributed by Huang Yankai 黄延凯, the ROC consul-general based in Penang that praises the reading club as the “Mother of the Revolution” offers the sole citation of the phrase, albeit in abbreviated form.⁴⁰

By the 70th anniversary in of 1980, ties between rapidly changing Singapore as an independent, young nation-state and the past revolutionary record of its Chinese community had been considerably diluted. Yet the commemorative volume demonstrates that the Chinese-speaking community appeared anxious to prevent a complete break with the revolutionary past. Contents of this commemoration magazine reflect the distancing and connecting. Of the possibly eleven reading clubs in early Singapore (some of which were organized on a dialect/native-place basis), Tongde shubaoshe is the only one left standing.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the slogan is not featured in any of the many photos showcasing the building. It has also not been written into any of the commemorative plaques or tributes offered for the 70th anniversary, despite the prominence of the word “revolution.” For instance, a tribute from Bai Chongxi 白崇禧 (KMT general of Guangxi clique) urges the Tongde shubaoshe to “spread the revolutionary spirit”; another calligraphic commemoration hints at the historical role played by the organization as the “Source Spring of the Revolution.”⁴²

One essay in this volume, while not invoking the slogan, captures the awkward tension of maintaining such postwar links with the Chinese revolutionary past. On the one hand, it emphasizes the important role played by the Overseas Chinese in Sun’s revolution and argues that one must not let linkages with the Chinese Revolution be severed. On the other hand, it recognizes that the environment had changed significantly in the previous thirty odd years, with the

³⁸ Fang Huainan ed., *Tongde shubaoshe ershiwunian jinian kan* [The 25th anniversary souvenir magazine of the Tongde shubaoshe] (Singapore, 1935), 31–2, 41–4. I am thankful to Wong Sin Keong for sharing a copy of this “rediscovered” magazine with me.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴¹ Wu Yixiang, Wang Houren and Chen Bietong eds., *Tongde shubaoshe qishi zhounian jinian tekan* [The 70th anniversary special souvenir magazine of the Tongde shubaoshe] (Singapore, 1981), 181.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 46, 56.

Chinese revolution turning inwards, while the independence of many Southeast Asian countries led to a change in the national identity of the Overseas Chinese. It tries to get around the dilemma by defining and supporting Chinese “revolutionary” spirit, ideas and activities rather broadly under the vague generic notions of freedom, equality, harmony, unity, and charity.⁴³

One other essay directly evokes the slogan and reminds its readers that the Tongde shubaoshe was one of the main overseas bases for Sun to promote his revolution and that it had also played a role in many key events from the beginning of the century to the 1980s, including being involved with the anti-Qing struggle for a republic, Northern Expedition, anti-Japanese war, anti-communism, anti-Soviet Union, cultural renaissance, famine relief and charity. In the author’s view, the slogan “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution” “deserves to be treasured and remembered so that we persevere to the end and never to give up.”⁴⁴

The most pertinent item in this 70th anniversary volume is Peng Songtao’s 彭松涛 essay reflecting on Singapore’s contributions to the 1911 Revolution and the historical significance of the reading club:

The words “Overseas Chinese” was highly popular during the revolutionary era and period of war against Japan. Sun Yat-sen had offered the 7-character “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution” for an office panel banner of *Shaonian Zhongguo chenbao* (Morning Newspaper of Young China). This phrase has also been continuously cited by people who discuss the “Overseas Chinese problem.” The contribution of the Overseas Chinese towards the revolution has been etched into the main accounting books by this phrase. As an Overseas Chinese, one should feel proud of it.⁴⁵

Peng’s essay also recycles Hu Hanmin’s words on “Nanyang as the revolutionary planning location, Nanyang as the revolutionary base.”⁴⁶ It concludes by lamenting the neglect of the Serene Sunset Villa and Tongde shubaoshe. He

⁴³ Ibid.; Long Ma, “Zhongguo geming de chuantong tezhi” [Traditional special characteristics of Chinese revolution], 127–8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.; Cai Qirui, “Zenyang wei woshe zuochu gongxian” [How to contribute towards our club], 180.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; Peng Songtao, “Xinjiapo dui Xinhai Geming de gongxian jian Tongde shubaoshe de lishi yiyi” [The contribution of Singapore towards the 1911 Revolution and the historical significance of Tongde shubaoshe], 138. The essay is reprinted in the 100th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine of 2010. As discussed in the opening sections of this paper, Peng’s comment on the signage in San Francisco is probably taken from Qin Xiaoyi’s oral history account and this is not likely to have been true.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

points his finger at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce for negligence regarding the villa's maintenance and at the Singapore government for hesitating to gazette the reading club as a nationally preserved monument. The essay argues that these are the only two remaining historical relics that demonstrate Singapore's exceptional contributions to the Chinese revolution and to greater Chinese history. In a comment that foretells Minister George Yeo's rhetoric of the 1990s, he notes that Singapore has made enormous contribution towards the great enterprise of world progress despite its small size.⁴⁷

Xing Jizhong 邢济众 served as the editor of the 90th anniversary commemorative magazine (2000). Given his scholarly connections, he was able to invite a wide range of writer friends from Taiwan and the mainland of China to contribute to the volume. Singapore in the previous two decades had changed its political rhetoric through a shift towards "Asian values" and calling for a return to ethnic roots. These changes were manifested in the 1997 decision to support an extensive renovation of the Serene Sunset Villa which eventually reopened in November 2001 as the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. As a result, the commemorative volume is replete with the slogan. Zhou Xiaozhong 周孝中 from Ji'nan University affirmed that: "In Sun's leadership of the democratic revolution, regardless of whether it is in terms of manpower, material, or finance, it had close connections with the Overseas Chinese. Hence, Sun Yat-sen had a famous phrase 'The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution,' which highly praised the contributions of the Overseas Chinese."⁴⁸ Another essay reiterates that Sun had proclaimed, "The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution" and argues that "it was only with the active support of the Overseas Chinese that China's modern revolution could have succeeded."⁴⁹ Wang Zhenchun 王振春, probably borrowing from Peng Songtao's piece in the earlier 70th anniversary magazine, also noted that Sun in San Francisco had offered the slogan on an inscribed board for a newspaper office and reaffirmed that the early Tongde shubaoshe and other revolutionary organizations had been playing the role of "Mother of the Revolution."⁵⁰

The 100th anniversary commemorative magazine of 2010 repeats several pieces from the 70th anniversary volume, including the essay by Peng Songtao. It

⁴⁷ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁸ Xing Jizhong ed., *Tongde shubaoshe jiuishi zhounian jinian tekan* [The 90th anniversary special souvenir magazine of the Tongde shubaoshe] (Singapore, 2000), essay by Zhou Xiaozhong, "Sun Zhongshan guanhuai qiaosheng" [Sun Yat-sen's caring concern about the Overseas Chinese], 111.

⁴⁹ Ibid.; essay by Jian Xingqiang, "Sun Zhongshan xiansheng zai Xinjiapo ersanshi" [Two or three matters relating to Sun Yat-sen in Singapore], 137.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; essay by Wang Zhenchun, "Lantian baiyun hua Tongde" [Talking about Tongde shubaoshe under the blue sky and white clouds], 139.

also includes a long biography by later-day KMT leader Zheng Yanfen 郑彦棻 on Sun Yat-sen's overseas activities but without evoking the slogan and offering no overall remarks on the Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution.⁵¹ The slogan is conspicuously absent throughout the volume except for the reprinting of Peng's essay.

The Tongde shubaoshe today survives as the last vestige of an institutional link between Singapore and the KMT, which goes back to pre-1911. Apart from the publication of anniversary magazines, this history has also been maintained through several yearly rituals centering on the birthday and death anniversary of Sun Yat-sen and the Double Ten outbreak of Wuchang Uprising. However, like many Chinese clans and native-place associations in Singapore, the library is facing a serious decline in membership and a leadership vacuum as older generations pass away. Despite the rich historical resonance, the connection over the years has become increasingly more symbolic than substantive. The decline would be much more serious were it not for the efforts of the KMT to cultivate links towards the Overseas Chinese as part of its Cold War battle against the mainland of China after its retreat to Taiwan in 1949.

Major Plank of Cold War Narrative Emanating from Taiwan

With the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the loss of the mainland of China by the KMT to the CPC and the KMT's retreat to Taiwan were no longer just an outcome of a civil war or a domestic struggle for power. Rather, these events had become part of the global Cold War between the "democratic free world" and the "totalitarian socialist states." Taiwan became a bastion of the former, and the KMT was eager to exploit its past links to the Overseas Chinese to mobilize them for its cause to extinguish its communist rivals and recover lost territory. The 7-character slogan thus became a choice instrument for the Taiwanese authorities from the 1950s to the 1980s. Its significance was most visible in messages offered by Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo 蒋经国.

For example, during the 10th Overseas Chinese Festival on October 21, 1962, Chiang Kai-shek pronounced:

If we were to recall the success of the 1911 Revolution, overseas compatriots

⁵¹ Zhan Zunquan ed., *Tongde shubaoshe bainian jinian tekan* [The 100th anniversary special souvenir magazine of the Tongde shubaoshe] (Singapore, 2010); Zheng Yanfen, "Sun dazongtong zai haiwai" [President Sun in Overseas], 113–21, has a section dealing with his time in Nanyang. It makes the poignant observation that Sun spent 30 of his 60 years living out of China and that he left China for Honolulu at age 14, thus Sun had spent only less than 16 years of his adult life within China (most of these after the 1911 Revolution).

made enormous contributions and hence our Founding Father said, “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution.” They have permanently left a brilliant page in revolutionary history. I deeply hope that the new generation of overseas compatriots will emulate the spirit of previous martyrs.⁵²

A year later, one of Chiang’s key military officer Huang Zhenwu 黄珍吾 echoed his top commander’s message in a book dedicated to the topic of the Overseas Chinese and even gave it a new twist by substituting Taiwan’s national sovereign name “Republic of China” into the slogan:

Our Founding Father said that “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution.” I can also say that “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Republic of China.”... Our “Mother of the Chinese Revolution” and “Mother of the Republic of China,” comprising some 16 million Overseas Chinese, should collectively prompt and assist our government towards the early completion of the Great Enterprise of counterattack and re-conquering our country.⁵³

When the Cultural Revolution in the mainland of China was near its height, Chiang in 1968 exhorted:

“The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution,” and the Overseas Chinese Festival is the symbol of unity and patriotism of overseas compatriots.... In these ten plus years, ... our overseas compatriots have maintained their nationalism, distinguished good from evil, persevered amidst danger and difficulties to stay on course, and contributed money and effort to the Great Enterprise.⁵⁴

Almost identical messages with the direct evocation of the slogan were made by Chiang Kai-shek for the 19th, 20th, and 22nd Overseas Chinese Festival in 1971, 1972 and 1974 respectively.⁵⁵ His death in 1975 and the eventual passing of leadership baton over to his son Chiang Ching-kuo after a short interregnum did not change the course of leaning on this slogan as a way of mobilizing Overseas

⁵² Haiwai chubanshe ed., *Huaqiao yu Zhongguo guomin geming yundong*, 63.

⁵³ Huang Zhenwu, *Huaqiao yu Zhongguo geming* [Overseas Chinese and the Chinese revolution] (Taipei: Guofang yanjiuyuan, 1963), 411–2.

⁵⁴ Haiwai chubanshe ed., *Huaqiao yu Zhongguo guomin geming yundong*, 82. Message for the 16th Overseas Chinese Festival, Oct. 21, 1968.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 84–5.

Chinese support for Taiwan's strident Cold War cause. In a political report made to the KMT national party congress in November 1976, Chiang Ching-kuo said:

Our party is without limits in cherishing and having a sense of responsibility towards mainland compatriots. It is similarly so towards our 20 million overseas compatriots! For many years, overseas compatriots have provided the country with hearty support, material strength, and financial resources.... There are an increasing number of overseas compatriots returning to [Taiwan] to serve, invest, and study.... Whenever I see them returning from afar, a sense of excitement and shame builds up in me! 'The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution' and, at every moment of difficulty in the revolution, I have increasingly realized that this sentence is definitely true and entirely accurate.⁵⁶

Towards the end of 1978, a double political whammy hit Taiwan. First, President Jimmy Carter announced on December 15 that the USA would transfer diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the mainland of China. Second, at the Third Plenum of 11th National Party Congress of the CPC which convened in mid- December, Deng Xiaoping maneuvered to implement market reform and an open door policy. Faced with this unprecedented challenge, Chiang Ching-kuo tried to impress on supporters that the PRC's talk of "modernization" was merely a "trick" that could "either be a proof that communism is bankrupt or a lie to bluff the world by fooling the world's politicians in order to strengthen its tyrannical rule."⁵⁷ He urged the Overseas Chinese to uphold their patriotism:

"The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution": we can see this in many historical examples since the founding of the Republic of China. "Overseas Chinese" and "patriotism" appears to be two phrases which are forever linked together. Whenever we mention the Overseas Chinese, there would definitely be a manifestation of patriotism. Whenever we mention patriotism, there would surely be the participation of the Overseas Chinese.⁵⁸

As part of the concerted effort to rally the Overseas Chinese to its side, a major oral history conference of about a dozen party-state veterans and scholars gathered in the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall on August 4, 1980 to give

⁵⁶ Ibid., 101–2; "First Political Report at the 11th National Party Congress of the Kuomintang," on Nov. 13, 1976.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 118–9; Speech at the "Commemoration on Founding of the Republic," on Jan. 1, 1979.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 119–21. Welcome speech at the "Conference for Global Overseas Chinese to Unite against Communism," on Feb. 27, 1979. The conference was attended by more than 600 delegates, 199.

presentations on the theme “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution.” These proceedings were organized by and published in the December 1980 issue of *Jindai Zhongguo* 近代中国 (Modern China), a journal supervised by KMT leader Qin Xiaoyi. It was republished almost immediately as the second part of a March 1981 book on *Huaqiao yu Zhongguo guomin geming yundong* 华侨与中国国民革命运动 (Overseas Chinese and the Chinese national revolutionary movement).⁵⁹ In line with the conference theme and political agenda, speaker after speaker evoked the slogan repeatedly. Their evocations need not be reiterated here. Along with the above statements by top KMT leaders, the slogan regarding the Overseas Chinese had become a component of Cold War strategy. It was into this partisan environment that a team of Nanyang scholars organized by the South Seas Society in Singapore plunged when they held a joint conference with four Taiwanese institutions in 1986 to examine the relationship between the Nanyang Chinese and the 1911 Revolution.

Strenuous Reassertions at the 1986 Taiwan-Nanyang Conference

The impetus for revisiting this topic was provided by 1970s revisionist Nanyang scholarship. In 1972, Ouyang Changda 欧阳昌大 a history graduate of Nanyang University, published a major revisionist article which dealt a body blow to the Singapore dimension of “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution.” Prompted by Zhang Yongfu’s 1933 teaser as to whether the Overseas Chinese truly deserved the status Sun’s alleged slogan gave them, Ouyang examined in detail the response of the Chinese community in Singapore to revolutionary overtures.⁶⁰ The lack of support in various quarters was evident to him. Most of the revolutionary newspapers had a short lifespan due to insufficient readers and funding. Reading clubs were not that closely tuned in to revolutionary activities. Financial contribution was not substantial and most poured in only after the outbreak of the Wuchang Uprising. He also noted the

⁵⁹ See the previously cited *Jindai Zhongguo*, Dec. 1980, 9–58 and Haiwai chubanshe ed., *Huaqiao yu Zhongguo guomin geming yundong*, 165–326.

⁶⁰ Ouyang Changda, “Xingjiapo huaren dui Xinhai geming de fanying” [Reactions of Singapore Chinese to the 1911 Revolution], in Kua Bak Lim and Ng Chin Keong eds., *Xingjiapo huazushi lunji* [An anthology of the history of Singapore Chinese] (Singapore, 1972), 91–118. This book chapter is based on the author’s 1969/70 (11th batch) graduating thesis at the Department of History, Nanyang University. The discussion in this section on the 1986 joint conference is based on Huang Jianli, “Writings on Sun Yat-sen, Tongmenghui and the 1911 Revolution: Surveying the Field and Locating Southeast Asia,” in Leo Suryadinata ed., *Tongmenghui, Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese in Southeast Asia: A Revisit* (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre, 2006), 90–8.

near absence of participants coming from Singapore in all revolutionary attempts, except for the March 29, 1911 Huanghuagang Uprising which had eight. Moreover, although ethnic Chinese concentration in Singapore was then many times more than other urban centres in Southeast Asia and Japan, party membership and participation in revolutionary activities had been disappointingly low.

At about the same time, another Nanyang University history graduate, Yan Qinghuang (Yen Ching Hwang) 颜清滢, ploughed through essentially the same materials during his overseas graduate studies but arrived at a more positive judgement. Based on his 1969 Australian National University doctoral dissertation, Yan's 1976 book makes a strong pitch for the significant role played by the Overseas Chinese in the 1911 Revolution, singling out the contribution of those in Singapore and Malaya as the most important.⁶¹ Notably, there was no cross referencing between these two works even though Yan readily admitted that republican revolutionaries had faced great difficulties in garnering support and that there were a few major obstacles to the mobilization of diasporic communities for the revolutionary cause.⁶² Yan believed that these negative developments did not outweigh the contributions made by the Overseas Chinese in terms of propaganda, sanctuary provision, manpower and finance. He therefore arrived at a positive assessment.

Nonetheless, there is a slight hint of hesitation in Yan's 1976 book because he chose to pronounce his judgment in a rather indirect and roundabout manner. The first line of the introduction states that "With the exception of the revolution in 1911, the Overseas Chinese have played a rather obscure and insignificant role in the revolutions of modern China."⁶³ The last line of the conclusion states that "If the financial contribution of the Overseas Chinese was indispensable to the success of the revolution, and the Overseas Chinese were to be termed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen as 'The Mother of the Revolution,' then the Chinese in Singapore

⁶¹ Yan belongs to the 2nd batch of history graduates (1960–61) at the Nanyang University. Yen Ching Hwang, *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution: With Special Reference to Singapore and Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), is based on his "Chinese Revolutionary Movement in Malaya, 1900–11," PhD diss., Australian National University, Canberra, 1969. His other related publications are (a) *The Role of the Overseas Chinese in the 1911 Revolution* (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1978), Southeast Asia Research Paper Series No. 3 for the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, Nanyang University; (b) *Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore and Malaya, 1877–1912* (1979), Working Paper in Asian Studies Paper No. 6, Centre for Asian Studies, The University of Adelaide; and (c) "Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution" in *Papers on Far Eastern History*, no. 19 (1979), 55–89.

⁶² Yen Ching Hwang, *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution*, xviii, 145–211.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

and Malaya deserve to be honoured first and foremost.”⁶⁴ This barely noticeable hesitation vaporized with the passage of time as evident at the 1986 Taiwan-Nanyang conference.

A decade later, at the conference organized jointly by the South Seas Society of Singapore (comprising primarily but not solely of scholars associated with the Nanyang University) and four other research institutions from Chinese Taiwan (Chinese History Society, Academia Historica, Institute of Modern History of the Academia Sinica, and International Relations Research Centre of the National Cheng Chi University), Yan was much more direct and blunt.⁶⁵

Yan had been visibly upset by the trend since the 1970s in both Western and Chinese scholarship to question the achievements of Sun Yat-sen, the republican revolutionary movement, and the 1911 Revolution. He launched into a strong response: “Revisionist historians belittle the role of the Tongmenghui by rejecting its status as the mainstream of the revolution, and they also deny the contribution of the Overseas Chinese by claiming that the revolution was not made outside China. But this has contradicted historical facts.” He declared his intention to “reaffirm some of my conclusions which I believe are still valid” and argued that “when the 1911 Revolution is viewed in its totality, the Overseas Chinese did play an important role in the movement leading up to the overthrow of the Manchus.”⁶⁶

The joint conference became a platform for an unusual display of ideological Cold War sentiment and a major reassertion of KMT orthodox interpretations of Sun Yat-sen, the Tongmenhui, and the 1911 Revolution. The opening speeches by the KMT leaders were peppered with remarks that Taiwan “has spectacular achievements, especially in attaining outstanding economic growth which is regarded as a miracle by the Free World.”⁶⁷ The CPC was accused of using “historiography as a weapon of united front battle,” “history in the service of politics,” and guilty of “thoroughly overthrowing the Chinese traditional interpretation of history and converting to the viewpoints of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought to manage historical problems.”⁶⁸ In particular, the CPC was charged with having “distorted the history of the 1911 Revolution as a

⁶⁴ Ibid., 318.

⁶⁵ Xinhai geming yu Nanyang huaren yantaohui lunwen bianji weiyuanhui ed., *Xinhai geming yu Nanyang huaren yantaohui lunwenji* [An anthology of conference papers on the 1911 Revolution and Nanyang Chinese] (Taipei, 1986); Lee Lai To ed., *The 1911 Revolution: The Chinese in British and Dutch Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1987).

⁶⁶ Yen Ching Hwang, “Nanyang Chinese and the 1911 Revolution,” in *The 1911 Revolution: The Chinese in British and Dutch Southeast Asia*, ed. Lee Lai To, 20, 26, 31.

⁶⁷ Xinhai geming yu Nanyang huaren yantaohui lunwen bianji weiyuanhui ed., 1986, 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 14.

Bourgeois Revolution” and “deliberately diluted the great achievements of the revolutionary pioneers and Overseas Chinese as led by Sun Yat-sen.” This was regarded as nothing less than “a malicious attempt to falsely borrow the name of scholarship in order to conduct evil battles of the united front.”⁶⁹

In such a politically-charged atmosphere, non-Taiwanese scholar Yan Qinghuang’s categorical stand against revisionist scholarship and the reiteration of his earlier research findings in stronger terms made him the star of the Taiwan conference. His paper prompted a conference commentator to warn that American revisionist scholars such as Joseph Esherick, Edward Rhoads, and Philip Huang should be clearly labeled as “New Left” and that their influence ought not to be underestimated as they were then training future batches of young historians located in various important American universities.⁷⁰ Another concurred that the community of American historians had since the 1960s come under the influence of the New Left, which emphasized the achievement of the Chinese Communists and deliberately diminished the importance of the 1911 Revolution and Sun Yat-sen.⁷¹ A third person cautioned that “the Chinese Communists recently have been paying very close attention to the study of Overseas Chinese history and its main purpose is nothing but to diminish the standing of Sun Yat-sen in leading the revolution and to drive a wedge between the Overseas Chinese and the Republic of China.”⁷²

As part of the effort to forge closer relations between Taiwan and its Overseas Chinese constituency, Qin Xiaoyi personally hosted a cocktail dinner for the Singapore participants and firmly endorsed Yan’s theme on the centrality of the Overseas Chinese: “Everybody knows that our Founding Father clearly affirmed that ‘The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution’ and, based on the historical truth of the revolutionary founding of the Republic of China, we can say that ‘The Nanyang Chinese were undoubtedly the Mother of the 1911 Revolution.’”⁷³

This rhetoric from Taipei in 1986 reflects the tense political atmosphere in Taiwan in the mid-1980s, when the winds of the anti-communist Cold War were blowing fiercely as the island was smiting from the rupture in diplomatic relations with the United States, Deng Xiaoping’s policy of reopening China and reforming its socialist economy, and Sino-British agreement of 1984 on the imminent hand-over of Hong Kong. When sporadic social unrests among workers and students broke out within the mainland of China from the mid-1980s

⁶⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 428.

⁷¹ Ibid., 432.

⁷² Ibid., 434.

⁷³ Ibid., 8.

as a result of the dramatic socio-economic transformation, the KMT Taiwan seized upon it as a possible opening to retaliate. One Taiwanese agency in the forefront of mobilizing the Overseas Chinese for its campaigns was the Overseas Chinese Association which had been churning out a series of Overseas Chinese youth publications. One of its publications in 1988 concluded with the following rally call that evoked Sun's slogan:

The Founding Father had claimed that "The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution." The reason is that whenever the ancestral land encountered difficulties and crises, the Overseas Chinese would always stay close with the ancestral land and unite together to resolve the difficulties. Nowadays, faced with the very difficult prospect of countering the communists and recovering the nation, all our overseas compatriots should follow the fearless example set by their forefathers' participation in the revolution.⁷⁴

Awakening Dragon and Explorations of PRC Scholarship

Despite constant taunting from Taiwan from the 1950s to 1980s, the mainland of China had not resorted to such a parallel mobilization of the Overseas Chinese and repeated usage of the slogan. It was restrained by the Overseas Chinese policy of self-determination which Zhou Enlai 周恩来 had announced at the 1955 Bandung Conference. There were also the internal disruptions caused by the Cultural Revolution. It was not until its policy reversal towards embracing open door and market reform that wooing the Overseas Chinese became important again.

Nevertheless, there was an early need to provide an official interpretation of Sun Yat-sen and the Overseas Chinese involvement in the 1911 Revolution. On this, the foundation was laid by Wu Yuzhang's 吴玉章 *The Revolution of 1911: A Great Democratic Revolution of China*, which was a book, issued to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1911 Revolution in 1961 so as to help people "to comprehend why this revolution took place at that time in China, what it achieved, and why it failed."⁷⁵ There was no mention of the slogan but the book laid down the basic Marxist framework of viewing the Overseas Chinese as being "a part of the Chinese bourgeoisie resided in foreign countries. Many of them had originally been small merchants, some had begun as workers. They had few connections with the feudal ruling class in the home country. Having come

⁷⁴ Li Weilin, *Huaqiao gemingshi* [Revolutionary history of the Overseas Chinese] (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 2nd edition 1990), 104.

⁷⁵ Wu Yuzhang, *The Revolution of 1911: A Great Democratic Revolution of China* (Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 1962), publisher's note in frontispiece.

into contact with Western bourgeois culture and at the same time discriminated against by the foreigners, they were highly dissatisfied with the corrupt and impotent Qing government. It was natural for them to entertain revolutionary sentiments. It was among the Overseas Chinese bourgeoisie that Dr. Sun Yat-sen's activities began.⁷⁶

A more direct comment offered at the same anniversary commemoration was that of Dong Biwu 董必武. He avoided the stock slogan closely associated with the KMT historiography and instead framed the Overseas Chinese as follows:

The Overseas Chinese were strong supporters of the 1911 Revolution. These revolutionary Overseas Chinese were commercial and industrial capitalists, while workers and small commerce-industrialists were more numerous. Being overseas, they had suffered greatly under the oppression of counter-revolutionary imperialism and were very much hoping that there would be a prosperous and strong ancestral land. They not only contributed financially to the revolutionary activities of Sun Yat-sen, they participated in them actively. About one third of the 72 martyrs who died at the Huanghuagang Uprising were Overseas Chinese. They were the outstanding children of the Chinese people and pride of the entire community of patriotic Overseas Chinese.⁷⁷

The turbulent decade of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 derailed any celebration of the 60th anniversary (1971) or any serious academic interest on the subject of Overseas Chinese. Those returned Overseas Chinese and citizens with foreign connections were blacklisted and they suffered greatly during the chaotic decade. The return to power of Deng Xiaoping and his use of Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress in December 1978 to launch the market reform and open door policy signaled the changing of the tide. Liao Chengzhi 廖承志 who was the son of the assassinated veteran revolutionary Liao Zhongkai 廖仲恺 and who was taking charge of Overseas Chinese affairs had even proceeded slightly ahead to initiate CPC policy review on the Overseas Chinese during at least two major party conferences in December 1977 and January 1978.⁷⁸ The policy reversal may have its biggest impact on economics but the reverberations were also visible in the scholarly world.

The first major stride which China took towards new scholarship in the realm of 1911 Revolution occurred during the 70th anniversary commemoration in 1981. The Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academic of Social Sciences in

⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁷ *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], Oct. 10, 1961.

⁷⁸ Haiwai chubanshe ed., *Huaqiao yu Zhongguo guomin geming yundong*, 201–2.

Beijing issued a special volume of collected documents on *Huaqiao yu Xinhai geming* 华侨与辛亥革命 (Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution).⁷⁹ There is no new research in this collection because it is essentially a reprint (mostly excerpts) of previous important publications about the Overseas Chinese involvement. The team of editors acknowledges that “the Overseas Chinese had made enormous contribution towards the 1911 Revolution but yet there had been very little and very scattered documentary records about this facet.” After citing Sun Yat-sen for having proclaimed that “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution,” it brings in Dong Biwu’s pronouncement twenty years ago as a way of justifying the special publication for commemoration.⁸⁰

The climax of this 70th anniversary was a major conference held in Wuhan in October 1981 for more than a hundred PRC and foreign scholars, with 107 papers being presented. These were eventually published as a three-volume conference proceeding in mid-1983. In the realm of Overseas Chinese, the arguably most important essay in this collection is the piece written by a team of researchers from the Xiamen University.⁸¹ Even more significant is that the team members drawn mainly from the Nanyang Research Institute of the university was able to secure state funding in 1987 as part of the Seventh Five-Year Research Grant to expand their research project for a more complete charting of “the contributions of the Overseas Chinese towards the revolution and reconstruction of their ancestral land.” Their final publication came out in December 1993, with as many as 767 pages and packed full of data on many facets of linkages between China and its diaspora.⁸² This has become an

⁷⁹ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo [Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academic of Social Sciences] ed., *Huaqiao yu Xinhai geming* [Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1981). As pointed out in our earlier discussion on Feng Ziyou, his works also underwent a major reprint effort in 1981 in celebration of the 70th anniversary. Zhonghua shuju reprinted the entire 6 volumes of his pre-1949 *Geming yishi*.

⁸⁰ Ibid., Editor’s Words, 1–2.

⁸¹ Kong Li, Chen Zaizheng, Lin Jinzhi and Guo Liang, “Huaqiao yu Xinhai geming” [Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution] in *Jinian Xinhai Geming qishi zhounian xueshu taolunhui wenji* [Proceedings of the conference commemorating the 70th anniversary of the 1911 Revolution] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), vol. 1, 397–421.

⁸² Li Guoliang, Lin Jinzhi and Cai Renlong, *Huaqiao huaren yu Zhongguo geming he jianshe* [Overseas Chinese-Chinese Overseas and the Chinese revolution and construction] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1993), 767 pp. Li Guoliang was apparently introduced as Guo Liang in the preface, 6. Possibly as a spin-off from this research project, another parallel volume on the general history of Overseas Chinese was produced by the researchers at Xiamen University: Wu Fengbin, Zhuang Guotu, Lin Jinzhi, Guo Liang and Cai Renlong, *Dongnanya huaqiao tongshi* [General history of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1994), 945 pp, Chapter 13 on “The 1911 Revolution and the Southeast Asian Chinese” is written by Zhuang Guotu.

important reference text and sourcebook for Overseas Chinese studies. Its contents and lines of inquiry have turned into a model template for many subsequent writings, especially those from within the PRC and sometimes it had been relied upon without adequate citation.

In this 1993 Xiamen University research work, direct reference to the slogan was made twice. The slogan was firmly attributed to Sun Yat-sen: “Sun Yat-sen had on numerous occasions highly praised the great contributions of compatriot Chinese towards the 1911 Revolution. Almost everyone knows that he proclaimed, ‘The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution.’ If we were to examine the position and function of the Overseas Chinese within the entire revolution, we would easily understand the deep meaning embedded in this phrase.” It states that “these words formally appeared in written words” for the first time in Zhang Yongfu’s account (which is erroneous as discussed earlier).⁸³

In the judgment of these researchers, “among all the comments which Sun Yat-sen made about the Overseas Chinese, the most weighty, most substantive, and also most widely circulated is ‘The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution.’” They cited numerous passages from Sun’s own speeches, letters and writings which emphasized the critical importance of the Overseas Chinese in his revolutionary activities, including his speech which was delivered to a gathering at the KMT party branch in Melbourne and the preface he wrote for *Tongmenghui yanyi* (both of which have been discussed earlier in this paper).⁸⁴ They then posed the question, “How then should we interpret and handle these famous words?” They suggested that we should regard them as a “substantive affirmation and encouragement” of the role played by the Overseas Chinese. They went on to provide a detailed Marxist-derived analysis of the Overseas Chinese society which discussed “the medium or small bourgeoisie” and “the laboring class,” as well as their relationship with the Qing court, “feudal forces of China,” and the colonial authorities. A list of names was provided to highlight those contributors of 1911 Revolution who had made the extreme sacrifice of “foregoing their family and entire fortune.”⁸⁵

Their most important insight is that they contested the slogan’s privileging of outside forces in understanding the dynamics of the 1911 Revolution. The “Outside versus Inside” analysis came to be borrowed or plagiarized by many other subsequent writings. Without providing names or citations, they argued that some people had misunderstood the “true meaning” of this slogan and had “overly emphasized” the role played by the Overseas Chinese, to the point when

⁸³ Li Guoliang, Lin Jinzhi and Cai Renlong, 77, 98.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 101–4.

they even proposed the notion that “there would have been no revolution without the Overseas Chinese.” To them, this was a distortion of the relationship between “China Within” and “China Without.” Firstly, this was because the elemental nurturing forces for this revolution came from the nationalist contradictions and class conflicts within modern China. Ever since the Opium War, the Chinese society had been in great turbulence and the “root of revolution was still located within China.” Secondly, the Overseas Chinese themselves were pushed towards the revolutionary path only by forces unleashed by “internal revolutionary storms.” Thirdly, the Overseas Chinese were awakened by China’s own bourgeois revolutionary leaders such as Sun Yat-sen and Zou Rong 邹容 who wrote the virulent anti-Manchu tract *Gemingjun* 革命军 (Revolutionary Army).⁸⁶

While the Xiamen University researchers were working on their projects, another group centered in Beijing had been stimulated by the 70th anniversary and launched a new organization called the “Zhongguo huaqiao lishi xuehui” 中国华侨历史学会 (China’s History Society on the Overseas Chinese) in 1981. The society quickly proceeded to organize three major conferences at the national level and participated in numerous local seminars. In 1988–1989, it selected 68 essays and published them in a two-volume collection which has become a landmark publication of the Beijing association.⁸⁷ Hong Sisi 洪丝丝 who wrote its preface and contributed an essay advocated the need to probe deeper into issues despite political sensitivities and difficulties with terminology over the term “Overseas Chinese.” He mentioned Sun’s slogan as being “most widely circulated” and cited Zhang Yongfu as the source. He cautioned that this slogan should be taken only “as a metaphor” with Sun using “figurative speech to express how his revolution began from amongst the Overseas Chinese” and thus one “should not measure its accuracy in a mechanical fashion.”⁸⁸ His advice on the metaphorical dimension and need to avoid a mechanical approach was

⁸⁶ Ibid., 99–100.

⁸⁷ Zheng Min and Liang Chuming, *Huaqiao huaren shi yanjiuji* [An anthology on the history of the Overseas Chinese and Chinese Overseas] (Beijing: Xinhua shudian, 1989), vol. 1 (Apr. 1989), vol. 2 (Aug. 1988).

⁸⁸ Hong Sisi, “Huaqiao lishi yanjiu de jige wenti” [Several problems in the study of Overseas Chinese history] and “Huaqiao dui Xinhai geming de juda gongxian” [Enormous contribution of the Overseas Chinese towards the 1911 Revolution], in Ibid., 1, 9, 147. His comments on political sensitivity and terminology can be taken as a critique of Wang Gungwu’s works without naming him. For Wang’s own struggle over these two issues, see Huang Jianli, “Conceptualizing Chinese Migration and Chinese Overseas: The Contribution of Wang Gungwu,” in Zheng Yongnian ed., *China and International Relations: The Chinese View and the Contribution of Wang Gungwu*, (London: Routledge, 2010), 139–57. Same article is available in *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2010), 1–21.

quickly taken up by other PRC writers.⁸⁹

Zhou Nanjing 周南京 of Peking University who eventually rose to leadership position within this History Society and his university colleague Li Anshan 李安山 were the two Beijing-based scholars most eager to frame the slogan at a higher level approaching that of a theoretical construct. By attaching the adjective “lun” 论 to the slogan, Zhou posited a “Theory of the Overseas Chinese as the Mother of the Revolution” as sitting among other theories which he regarded as having been used to understand the history of Overseas Chinese—including the “Overseas Chinese colonialism theory” associated with Liang Qichao 梁启超, “Theory of Plural Society” of J. S. Furnivall, “Class Theory of the Overseas Chinese Society” of Marxism, “National Melting Pot Theory” of William Skinner as well as “Theory of External China” and “Theory of Multiple Identities” of Wang Gungwu.⁹⁰ However, it appears that Zhou’s approach has its limits because the simplistic addition of an adjective “lun”/theory to Sun’s slogan without any further layering of sophisticated logic and content is unlikely to make this proposition to view the slogan as a theoretical construct an attractive one.

Zhou’s colleague Li Anshan also made a parallel thrust by arguing that the Overseas Chinese studies in the 1930s had shifted away from “direct observatory narratives” to “theoretical explorations.” One aspect was the “Overseas Chinese as the Mother of the Revolution Theory” which to him was a manifestation of the influential “Overseas Chinese Nationalism Theory.”⁹¹ Li also went on to express his concern that privileging the role of the Overseas Chinese was problematic because it introduced a debate on insider-outsider prioritization:

The basic elements of all Chinese revolutions (inclusive of 1911) could only

⁸⁹ For example, see Zhou Rundong, “Ruhe lijie ‘huaqiao shi geming zhimu’” [How to Interpret “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of Revolution”], *Shengli luntan* [Victory Forum], no. 4 (1996), 71. No citation is offered here.

⁹⁰ Zhou Nanjing, *Fengyu tongzhou: Dongnanya huaren wenti*, 633 pp. See part four, chapter on “Haiwai huaren lishi lilun chutan” [Preliminary study into the theories on history of Chinese Overseas], 372–82. This chapter also appeared as an essay dated as Aug. 27, 2001 on “Zhongguo qiaowang” [Website of Chinese Sojourners], <http://www.chinaqw.com>, accessed Sep. 3, 2010.

⁹¹ Li Anshan, “Zhonghua minguo shiqi huaqiao yanjiu shuping” [Overseas Chinese studies and critique during the Chinese Republican Era], *Jindaishi yanjiu* [Modern Historical Research], no. 4 (2002), 307–10, 312. An expanded version of this article has appeared as Li Anshan, “Zhongguo huaqiao huaren yanjiu de lishi yu xianzhuang gaishu” [A Survey of the history and current status of PRC studies on the Overseas Chinese-Chinese Overseas], essay dated Jan. 7, 2006 posted on “Xueshu jiaoliuwang” [Website for the exchange of scholarship], <http://www.annian.net>, accessed Sep. 3, 2010.

form on Chinese soil; Revolutionary thinking could only ferment and matured on Chinese land; Revolutionary organization could only be effectively used among the Chinese people; the main revolutionary strength could only have come from the masses from within China. As a social reality, revolution itself is a natural product from the intensification of various contradictions from within China. Because the major leaders of 1911 Revolution all had overseas experience and adding on to this was the great assistance extended by the Overseas Chinese, this had led them to often neglect the social basis from within China which were in support of the revolution. Because too much emphasis have been given to the contributions and culture of the Overseas Chinese as well as the relative neglect of internal revolutionary strength, this theory has found to be lacking in terms of analyzing the main reason and driving force for the Chinese Revolution.⁹²

Coincidentally, while PRC scholarship was addressing the perceived imbalance of “an over-dominating outside perspective” as embedded in the logic of the slogan of “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution,” there was a competitive stirring in Singapore and Penang to accentuate their respective roles in the 1911 Revolution. This Nanyang counter-current was manifested through the popular culture dynamics of museum display, theatre performance, and movie making.

Images in the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall of Singapore

The Serene Sunset Villa in Singapore was built in the 1880s by a local wealthy merchant reportedly as a love-nest for his mistress. Its quantum leap to revolutionary fame began when Zhang Yongfu bought the villa in 1905 for his aged mother to spend her sunset years but later offered it as a base for Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary activities. Sun visited Singapore eight times from 1900 to the January 1912 inauguration of the Republic of China and stayed at the villa on three occasions. Other prominent republican revolutionary leaders who had also stayed there included Huang Xing 黄兴, Wang Jingwei 汪精卫 and Hu Hanmin. It was under this roof that several of the anti-Qing uprisings were planned. During his third visit in 1906, Sun used the villa to launch the Singapore branch of the Tongmenghui. In July 1908, this branch was upgraded to be the Nanyang headquarters. However, the Singapore office quickly plunged into decline and a

⁹² Li Anshan, “Zhonghua minguo shiqi huaqiao yanjiu shuping,” 312.

disappointed Sun decided to relocate the Nanyang headquarters northwards to Penang in 1909–10. After the 1911 Revolution, the villa went through several cycles of change which need not be discussed in detail here.⁹³ In 1994, the Singapore government decided to gazette it as a national monument and, under the leadership of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, it underwent a major renovation from 1997 to be transformed into a memorial hall.

George Yeo, then Minister for Information and the Arts, was the prime mover in having the dilapidated villa changed into what he regarded as “a cultural shrine for all ethnic Chinese Singaporeans.”⁹⁴ The grand old statesman Lee Kuan Yew gave his endorsement by opening the restored villa as the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall on November 12, 2001 in celebration of the 135th anniversary of Sun’s birth. He also agreed to have a partial quote from his interview with *Time* magazine engraved onto a 3-metre tall granite stele erected in the front garden: “One man changed China, Dr. Sun Yat-sen.”⁹⁵

The focus of the exhibits is on Sun’s ties with the Southeast Asian Chinese communities, including his visits to Singapore, Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Pilah of Negri Sembilan, Kuala Lumpur as well as outlying rubber plantations and tin mines. The centre piece is a 6m-by-3m oil painting entitled “Overseas Chinese—Mother of the Revolution” by a China-born artist depicting Sun in 1907 addressing more than a hundred tin miners and rubber-plantation workers and their families at Kampar in the Kinta Valley of Perak, Malaysia. It lays claim to being the largest piece of oil painting ever done in Singapore.

Apart from bringing back the slogan in such an impactful manner, the Memorial Hall also draws attention to a new gender dimension by highlighting the hitherto little discussed female character of Chen Cuifen 陈粹芬. One key display in the Singapore Gallery is a set of 10 life-sized wax figures made to order by craftsmen. It depicts a secret meeting in the villa attended by Sun Yat-sen and his close revolutionary associates. Included in this display was Chen who was portrayed as a wax figurine serving tea to the men gathered around a table but visitors were told in the narrative that she was both Sun’s second wife and comrade. Known among the revolutionaries as the “Nanyang woman” for having accompanied Sun for many of his activities in this part of the world, Chen had helped to raise funds and carried out revolutionary missions such as

⁹³ Discussion in this section and the next is based upon Huang Jianli and Hong Lysa, “History and the Imaginaries of ‘Big Singapore’: Positioning the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2004), 65–89. Revised version is available in Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and its Pasts* (Singapore: NUS Press in conjunction with Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 181–204.

⁹⁴ Speech by George Yeo on Nov. 12, 1996, Press Release 33 Nov/03B-1/96/11/12; *Straits Times*, Nov. 13 and 15, 1996; *Lianhe zaobao*, Nov. 15, 1996.

⁹⁵ Lee Kuan Yew’s interview on “Handling China” with *Time*, vol. 149, no. 14 (Apr. 7, 1997), 57.

smuggling firearms and conveying secret messages. This new Nanyang gender angle to the “Mother of the Revolution” was magnified in the theatre performance staged to celebrate the grand opening of the Memorial Hall, almost to the point of displacing the big man Sun Yat-sen.

Centrality of Women in Theatre Performance on “A Hundred Years in Waiting”

The 2001 performance was commissioned by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Feng Zhonghan (Foong Choon Hon) 冯仲汉, as the director of the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. They had approached Guo Baokun (Kuo Pao Kun) 郭宝昆, doyen of the local Chinese theatre and who was most associated with employing multicultural strategies, to stage a play on “The Life and Times of Sun Yat-sen.”⁹⁶ Feng must have counted on Guo’s play to edify the life and times of Sun Yat-sen along the lines of the mammoth oil painting in the Memorial Hall, as could be expected of one who valued Chinese history and culture. However, Guo’s production “A Hundred Years in Waiting” was far from being a replica of that.

Guo’s starting point was that the play should appeal to a younger audience and have a Southeast Asian perspective, rather than “entrench the Chinese-speaking elders’ impression of an aged, reverent ‘Father of China’ story.” To this end he drew in other local theatre practitioners and the play ended up as a joint venture between two theatre companies, three playwrights and two directors. The slogan was indirectly interrogated when his team of young playwrights and directors raised questions publicly on “Why does the Chinese Revolution matter to us?” and subverted the state’s desired narrative by portraying Sun in the play as a distant and ghostly presence at best, and by centring the story on three women: Lu Muzhen 卢慕贞, Sun’s dutiful and model wife; Chen Cuifen, Sun’s secondary wife and revolutionary partner; as well as Ah He 阿和, their innocent and simple maid.⁹⁷ Much stage time was devoted to the enigmatic Chen Cuifen who was portrayed as “one of his closest comrades... messenger, bomb maker, confidante, caretaker of revolutionaries and activist for Dr. Sun’s cause” and as one harbouring an “incomprehensible love” for Sun.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Feng’s role was reflected in the message and acknowledgment in the 2001 Singapore Arts Festival Special Programme booklet. Original title of the project was revealed by Guo during the post-performance public seminar on the night of Jun. 8, 2001. Feng’s initiative is also briefly noted in *Straits Times*, Jan. 24, 2002.

⁹⁷ *Straits Times*, Jun. 11, 2001.

⁹⁸ 2001 Singapore Arts Festival Special Programme Booklet, 2.

The entire play was packed full of multilingual dialogue, operatic and modern dance movements, as well as a constant stream of multimedia images and voices. Reviewers were fairly unanimous in expressing dissatisfaction, especially on the superficial treatment of Sun and his unresolved relationship with Chen. One commentator wrote:

Through this play, one has been hoping to see the various personal facets of this great man. Yet, what I saw was disconnected and superficial. At best it is just an experimental art performance. What is most disappointing to me was that it has failed to let the audience have a deeper understanding of Sun's personal life and character. We cannot hope that this play will help the younger audience to have a better knowledge of Sun's life and his career.⁹⁹

Another reviewer pointed out that this performance should be interpreted as a critique of the orthodoxy on Chinese nationalism which had in the last century had been so tightly woven around Sun that there was little room for alternative understandings. To him, the deliberate decentring of the larger-than-life historical actor by focusing on three women gestures at the possibilities of alternative histories from the margin.¹⁰⁰

A Place under the Sun for Penang as the Key Overseas Revolutionary Base

In the late 1990s, while Singapore renovated the villa and launched the Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall so as to position Singapore as the hub of Nanyang revolutionary activities at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Chinese community in Penang was also desiring to reclaim the island's rightful place in the sun. Penang was eventually the preferred headquarters of Sun's Nanyang activities when Singapore proved to be a disappointment barely after a year of operation. The transfer was finalized by August 1910. Most of Sun's key associates had congregated in Penang at various points in time and the significant but abortive Huanghuagang Uprising (also termed as Second Guangzhou Uprising), which erupted just a few months before the October 1911 Revolution was also planned there. The one notable regret is that there is currently no known photograph depicting Sun in Penang.

⁹⁹ *Lianhe zaobao*, Jun. 22, 2001. The commentator is Lau Wai Har, a retired long-serving head of the National Institute of Education and a flag bearer of mainstream Chinese culture and language.

¹⁰⁰ *Lianhe zaobao*, Jun. 11, 2001. The reviewer is Ke Siren (Quah Sy Ren) who is both a practitioner and scholar on theatre studies.

Zhang Shaokuang (Teoh Shiaw Khuan) 张少宽, with an intense interest in the local history of Chinese community in Penang, was one of those at the forefront of a campaign to regain Penang's pole position. In 2004, he wove together numerous pieces he had previously written into a new book *Penang Conference and the 1911 Chinese Revolution: How Dr. Sun Yat-sen Plotted to Change Chinese History*. One of the endorsers in his preface had no qualms in claiming Penang as the "Mecca of the Mother of the Revolution." Although Zhang himself admitted that "the phrase 'The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution' is not suitable in this twenty-first century," he felt that it is a fact that the Overseas Chinese in colonial Malaya was indeed the main force of the Chinese revolution.¹⁰¹ He made clear his anger at extant writings which had not accurately depicted the role played by Penang. He was particularly harsh towards Feng Ziyou who wrote several of the early KMT history pieces, accusing him of having a superiority complex, of abuses in the selection of materials and scripting of narrative, and of being disrespectful to Penang Chinese. Zhang confessed that he was driven by a strong desire to "return justice to history, rebuild the role of the small island of Penang on the international historical stage, and to struggle for honor on behalf of Malaysia!"¹⁰²

That enthusiasm to reconnect Penang with its revolutionary past was shared by several other Penang residents and the island's governing authorities. Two historical sites were set up in rapid succession in 2001 to mark Sun's orchestration of revolutionary activities in Penang: A shop house in 120 Armenian Street (renamed as the Sun Yat-sen Penang Base and doubled up as the premise of the Penang Sun Yat-sen Society) and a bungalow at 65 Mac Alister Road (Sun Yat-sen Memorial Center).¹⁰³ At various points in time, they had served as the Tongmenghui Penang branch and later Nanyang headquarters as well as the premise of the reading club Penang Philomatic Union which was launched at Sun's urging. The former also rolled out the first issue of the Penang revolutionary newspaper *Guanghua ribao* and hosted a follow-up meeting for the

¹⁰¹ Zhang Shaokuang, *Sun Zhongshan yu Bineng huiyi: Cedong Guangzhou sanerjiu zhiyi* [Penang Conference and the 1911 Chinese Revolution: How did Dr. Sun Yat-sen Plott to Change Chinese History] (Penang: Nanyang tianye yanjiushi, 2004), xii-xiii, xv.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 11, 76-8.

¹⁰³ Both projects were launched in 2001 but the former with a strong adaptation of the Sun Yat-sen narrative into the Penang local context is regarded as being much better received than the latter with its Sino-centricity. A substantial discussion of the two, in addition to the memorial halls of Sun in Singapore and Hong Kong, can be found in Daniel P. S. Goh, "The Postcoloniality of Sun Yat-sen Memorials in Hong Kong, Penang and Singapore," paper presented at "Sun Yat-sen and Huanghuagang Uprising: Penang Conference and Chinese Overseas," Mar. 27-28, 2010.

Huanghuagang Uprising.¹⁰⁴

The gender angle on “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution” came through in the Penang story of the 1911 Revolution even more strongly than Singapore in terms of the lives of two lady revolutionaries. First was Chen Bijun 陈璧君 who was the daughter of a conservative merchant in Penang but who became mesmerized by the republican cause and the handsome leading revolutionary Wang Jingwei. Against her father’s wishes, she became deeply involved in the revolution, becoming an accomplice in Wang’s attempt to assassinate a Manchu Prince Regent in Beijing in 1910, which she funded by selling her mother’s jewellery. When the attempt failed and Wang was imprisoned, she went around raising money for his rescue. Wang was released soon after the Qing dynasty fell and the two got married.¹⁰⁵ The profiling of this Penang daughter’s revolutionary patriotism was not without its sensitivity and problems because Wang was later to become one of the key KMT leaders, almost next in importance to Chiang Kai-shek, and only to fall into disgrace when he opted for collaboration with Japan during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Even more important was Sun’s secondary wife Chen Cuifen whom, as discussed, has surfaced in the Singapore memorial hall and celebratory theatre performance. She emerged prominently in the Penang story because she and the rest of Sun’s direct family (brother Sun Mei 孙眉, first wife Lu Muzhen and two daughters Sun Yan 孙琰 and Sun Wan 孙婉; son Sun Ke 孙科 was away in the United States for his study) had joined Sun and lived in Penang from late 1910 to early 1912. Through the fuller narrative provided in Penang, we learnt that Chen had apparently met Sun when she was less than 20 years old and became his constant companion during his years in exile. She not only attended to his daily routine of life but also participated in propaganda printing, fund-raising and even risky revolutionary activities. Although she was of Fujian ancestry and born in Hong Kong, she was regarded by her contemporary revolutionaries as a “Nanyang woman” given the time she had spent there. She parted from Sun only after the 1911 Revolution and stayed in Macao for a brief period before returning

¹⁰⁴ Khoo Salma Nasution, *Sun Yat-sen in Penang* (Penang: Areca Books, 2008), *passim*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 6, 27. One of the best and early primary source on Chen Bijun is Chen Xinzhen, *Huaqiao gemingshi* [Revolutionary history of the Overseas Chinese] (Penang, 1921), transcript of Tongmenghui veteran leader Chen’s speech to the Philomatic Union in 1921, 17–8. See also *Bincheng yueshu baoshe ershisi zhounian jinian tekan* [Souvenir magazine of the 24th Anniversary of the Penang Philomatic Union] (Penang, 1931), 6, on Chen Bijun being one of those who attended the preparatory meeting for the setting up this reading club. In the early days of the 1911 Revolution commemoration in Penang, the gender role was not highlighted; see news report in *Nanyang Shangbao*, Oct. 16, 1923.

to live in various parts of Malaya(sia). She passed away in Hong Kong in 1962 and was later re-buried in the Sun family graveyard in Guangdong.¹⁰⁶

The Penang story of these two “mothers” of the revolution was writ large onto the celluloid screen when a movie “Road to Dawn” was made depicting the brief period when Sun was staying in Penang from July to December 1910 as a prelude or road leading to the final successful 1911 Revolution and dawn of a new era (one of the many other working titles of the movie had been “Penang Huanghua”). The idea was to craft a history story combining romance and revolution against the backdrop of Penang’s scenery, heritage buildings, and its multi-ethnic and multi-religious society (including the showcasing of its proud *peranakan* culture). It was floated as early as 2001 but the joint China-Malaysia film took much longer to prepare than expected and was finally premiered only in June 2007. Apart from the technical issues such as fund raising and film setting, the Penang coordinator Wu Meirun (Goh Mei Loon) 吴美润 revealed that one big hurdle was pertaining to the historical identity of Chen Cuifen: “The identity of Chen Cuifen as the woman behind Sun was more sensitive as we want to let her to walk from behind to the forefront of the stage. Due to the fact that Song Qingling is the Mother of Modern China, very few people know about Chen and there are only limited source materials while China demands a high standard of historical accuracy.”¹⁰⁷

Eventually strong political support at the highest level was forthcoming, including the then Vice-President of the PRC Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 (who had visited the Penang Revolutionary Base in April 2002), Chairman of the PRC’s Standing

¹⁰⁶ Khoo Salma Nasution, *Sun Yat-sen in Penang*, 82–7, 92–3. There is no footnoting of sources in this booklet. The best sources confirming the existence of and providing detailed information on Chen Cuifen is an oral history account on Chen’s later half of her life in *Lianhe zaobao*, Dec. 17, 2002 and Liu Yusheng, *Shizaitang zaiyi* [Miscellaneous memory of Shizaitang] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2nd edition, 1997), 160–3. Liu also alerted us that Feng Ziyou too had a small reference on Chen Cuifen (also known as Ruifen 瑞芬 and Xiangling 香菱) diligently looking after Sun and his revolutionaries, see Feng Ziyou, *Geming yishi*, vol. 3, 1–2, fn 6. Chen Xinzheng, *Huaqiao gemingshi*, 11, too, has a fleeting indication of Chen Cuifen’s presence in Penang. Yang Hanxiang’s essay in *Bincheng yueshu baoshe ershi zhou nian jinian tekan*, 12, identifies those family members who were staying with Sun in Penang as being his brother Sun Mei, two daughters, his first wife Lu and a so-called “Fourth Aunty,” who was “the secondary wife or concubine of Sun Yat-sen.” In contrast to this, a recent study of Song Qingling’s personal letters revealed that Song was extremely upset about the mid-1910s public rumors about her living together with Sun even before he divorced the first wife Lu Muzhen but there was no mention of Chen Cuifen at all. See Zhang Jieming, “Song Qingling dui Sun Zhongshan de teshu huainian” [Song Qingling’s special remembrance of Sun Yat-sen], *Shiji* [Century], no. 4 (2010), 4–9.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Wu Meirun, in *Malaixiya Bincheng Hainan huiguan jinian tekan* [Souvenir magazine of the Penang Hainan Association of Malaysia, 1993–2007] (Penang, 2007), 312–3.

Committee of the National People's Congress Wu Bangguo 吴邦国, Prime Minister of Malaysia Abdullah Badawi and Chief Minister of Penang Xu Zigen (Koh Tsu Koon) 许子根.¹⁰⁸ The eventual movie locks on to the brief period when Sun was spending time together with Chen Cuifen in Penang. Chen Bijun and Wang Jingwei were not formally included because of the controversial wartime collaboration. But shadows of Penang's Chen Bijun can be seen in the fictional character Xu Danrong 徐丹蓉 as the impressionable Peranakan daughter of a wealthy conservative Penang merchant. The plot thus revolves around two romantic couples (Sun and Chen Cuifen as well as Xu and her lover) and has several iconic assassination attempts thrown in, with the two ladies bravely rescuing Sun from grave danger.¹⁰⁹ From the movie organizer's point of view, "although it has fictional elements, the movie is based on historical events" and the satisfaction is that "many Malaysians have become more aware and interested in the story of Dr. Sun Yat-sen in Penang and the part played by Malaysians in the China Revolution of 1911."¹¹⁰

Three years after the premier screening of the joint China-Malaysia movie, Taiwan also weighed in on the importance of Penang Overseas Chinese on the 1911 Revolution by sending a large delegation from its various government and scholarly institutions to Penang for an international conference on "Sun Yat-sen and Huanghuagang Uprising—Penang Conference and Chinese Overseas," March 27–28, 2010. *Guanghua ribao* which is the sole surviving Penang newspaper started by Sun's revolutionary group was drafted to host some of the activities and it gave high media publicity to the event. Citing a pronouncement by the president of one of Taiwan's universities, a newspaper headline loudly proclaimed that "The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution."¹¹¹ Taiwanese scholar Shao Zonghai 邵宗海 from the Chinese Cultural University in a post-conference commentary urged that the KMT governing authorities today "must necessarily increase research and empirical studies on Sun Yat-sen's overseas revolutionary activities, especially those in Southeast Asia."¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ *Road to Dawn: Filming in Penang* (Penang: Areca Books, 2007), passim.

¹⁰⁹ Assassination is a major template in the popular culture exposition of Sun's revolutionary life. The 2009 Hong Kong movie "Bodyguards and Assassins" 十月围城 which devoted the entire film to this theme is a classic example. For the Penang movie "Road to Dawn," a local history enthusiast Zheng Yongmei who had written about Hakka dialect group's assistance to Sun Yat-sen objected strongly to the suggestion that the Qing consuls in Penang had ever initiated any assassination plot against Sun. *Guanghua ribao* (Kwong Wah Yit Poh), Mar. 28, 2010, supplement.

¹¹⁰ *Road to Dawn: Filming in Penang*, 12.

¹¹¹ *Guanghua ribao*, Mar. 28, 2010.

¹¹² Shao Zonghai, "Xinma 'Sun Zhongshan yanjiu' dui Taiwan de qishi" [Singapore-Malaysia's "Sun Yat-sen studies" as an inspiration for Taiwan], *Lianhe zaobao*, Apr. 9, 2010.

Conclusion

The slogan “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution” has emerged as the most widely-quoted, shorthand phrase to encapsulate the tripartite relations among Sun Yat-sen, the Chinese abroad, and the 1911 Republican Revolution. Its popularity does not rest merely on its attractive ring tone of being a pleasant-sounding jingle with seven Chinese characters. Its attraction is instead grounded upon both historicity and mythologization. Historically speaking, Sun and his revolutionary associates operated primarily from outside of China—among the Overseas Chinese communities. This was especially so in Nanyang as the communities there provided the revolutionaries with safe haven and with critical propaganda, finance, and manpower. Yet, the exalted position of the Overseas Chinese was also entwined with KMT-led mythologization and the placement of Sun Yat-sen and his organizations onto a saintly pedestal. The spinning of the KMT orthodoxy was especially vigorous after the death of Sun in March 1925 and even more so after the KMT’s consolidation of power in Nanjing from about 1928–29. With the kernel of truth being increasingly sugar-coated with additional layers, it was inevitable that there would be debate about whether the Overseas Chinese on balance had contributed sufficiently to qualify for the exalted motherhood status. This paper is not meant to resolve the doubts on whether the Overseas Chinese deserve the slogan. Its main purpose is to trace its origin and cycles of usage through the ages and to appreciate the changing context of evocations and silences.

Except for the most unlikely claim of an inscribed wooden panel installed in a San Francisco newspaper office, it is almost certain that Sun never spoke or uttered the exact seven Chinese character slogan attributed to him. On five occasions, he had words which at best amounted to a paraphrase of the slogan. None of these occasions were in the midst of the 1911 Revolution and all were between 1916 and 1923. The slogan’s first traceable appearance in full form and in print was after the death of Sun and in a set of minutes of meeting for a November 1929 conference in Nanjing on Overseas Chinese education. It appeared twice again in 1933, within the publications of two Tongmenghui veterans living in Nanyang.

The slogan was thus not formulated before, during or in the immediate months after the 1911 Revolution, but years later. Its eventual formulation was not in the context of a detached, scholarly assessment benefiting from the hindsight of having the dust of revolution settled. Instead, the contextual environment for its formulation was one of ‘incomplete revolution’ in which the young Chinese republic lurched endlessly from one crisis to another, beginning with the rule of Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 and the post-Yuan republican warlords. The slogan in full or

paraphrase form was thus less of an honest evaluation of the past record and more of an exhortation in a desperate appeal to the Overseas Chinese for further assistance to overcome the prevailing quagmire of crises. Another impetus for its formulation had been the need to raise public wariness about a group of Nanyang opportunists who had been flaunting their Overseas Chinese credential and past revolutionary record in order to claim high official posts and financial reward from the newly established republican regimes.

For all the haziness and uncertainties surrounding its initial conception, the slogan has become a powerful symbolic marker which is tied to the notion of motherhood for a watershed event which put an end to more than 2000 years of centralized imperial rule and ushered in a modern nation-state. It is one which is closely linked to the ebb and flow of Chinese nationalism from the turn of the twentieth century. This Sino-centric nationalism challenged and undermined the trans-nationality of the Chinese diasporic movement of goods, people and ideas. The broad, trans-national diasporic flow could never quite escape the powerful grasp of nation-state in the sense that the tracing of “flight paths” (of human migrants in particular) would inevitably lead to “re-territorialization” and a reassertion of China as the original source or epicenter of diasporic components. Nation-state territorial markers could not be easily erased, despite the intensifying winds of globalization and trans-nationalism.

The slogan had the necessary magnetism and resonance to assist in re-territorializing and linking the far-flung Chinese diasporic communities back to China. That explains its continuous currency and efficacy up to the present, even though there were two major challenges to overcome in the process of maintaining connections. First was the ever-changing socio-political environment at both the local and international levels which one must necessarily adjust to. Second, there was the vexing post-1949 dilemma on which particular Chinese national entity should the Chinese abroad be re-attaching themselves to.

The popularity and influence of the slogan was never constant; there were periods when it was frequently evoked in public discourse and times when it retreated from the forefront. Its high circulation in the early 1930s stood in contrast to the fading out from the 1940s. In the post-war era, each of the different regions of Nanyang, the mainland and Taiwan of China had their own rhythm of evocations. Nanyang’s general distancing from the slogan amidst occasional remembering was very much affected by several new factors, such as the self-destruction of documents on the eve of Japanese Occupation, the painful process of post-war decolonization and nationalist struggle in Southeast Asia, as well as the post-independent Southeast Asian emphasis on nation-building and developmental economics. KMT Taiwan’s frequent and frantic evocations of the slogan from 1950s to 1980s was primarily driven by its expulsion from the mainland of China, aspiration to recover its lost land, and the Cold War rubric of

a titanic struggle against a master communist conspiracy orchestrated by the Soviet Union.

The mainland of China generally avoided depicting the Overseas Chinese as the Mother of the Revolution. There was the post-1978 desire and action to mobilize the financial resources and entrepreneurial acumen of Chinese abroad but the slogan was simply too closely associated with the KMT, its history and its ideology. Their preferred functional slogan was either the more generic word of “patriotism” or “hometown sentimentalism.” Resurgence of interest in the slogan in post-1978 PRC was essentially confined to the scholarly world, most noticeably in its writings about the history of pre-1949 Republican China.

At the level of popular culture, it was the Nanyang communities in Singapore and Penang that had crafted a new dimension for the slogan during the cross-over to the twenty-first century and the new millennium. They had “engendered” the three-way relationship between Sun, Nanyang and the 1911 Revolution by deliberately surfacing and strategically placing two women associated with Nanyang (Chen Cuifen and Chen Bijun) as centrepieces of their narrative. The Nanyang brew from the late 1990s to 2000s was thus a special concoction with an exciting new flavor.

The slogan of “The Overseas Chinese are the Mother of the Revolution” may cursorily appear to some as being formulaic and propagandistic. However, instead of being homogenous, dull, and determinate, it has proven to be pluralistic and vibrant and has been evolving along an uncertain path of trajectory. The year 2011 is the 100th anniversary of the 1911 Revolution and intense competition for the privilege and format of commemorations has already erupted not only between the mainland of China and Taiwan, but also among the various cities within China. It is an exciting time to watch how the slogan will further evolve and to ascertain whether there will yet be another twist in the umbilical cord tying the diasporic Chinese to their ancestral land in this centenary year.

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