

# The Role and Influence of Chinese Immigrants in Singapore in Diplomacy with China

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**Abstract.** The relationship between Southeast Asian countries and China has always been an academic concern. Some scholars define it as the rational choice and wisdom of small countries to survive in the cracks of the struggle between big powers. As a predominantly Chinese country, the relationship between Singapore and China has always been the focus of discussion and research. This paper focuses on the characteristics of Singapore's Chinese predominance and analyzes the role of Singaporean Chinese in the changing relations between the two countries. This includes the influence of clan organizations and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry on Singapore-China relations. This paper finds that Chinese organizations have played a key role in cultural and political exchanges between the two countries. CSCCs and chambers of commerce have played an active role in the attitude of Chinese Singaporeans towards China. However, the attitudes and perceptions of Chinese Singaporeans are also affected by the social environment and political situation.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asian international relations; immigration; Chinese clan and clan organizations.

## 1. Introduction

With the gradual rise of China, the relationship between China and ASEAN countries has become increasingly important in international relations. At the same time, ASEAN countries must face these challenges when facing an increasingly powerful China. Then, scholars who study the relationship between China and ASEAN countries mainly focus on the impact that the rise of China has on the development space of ASEAN countries. International relations scholar Andrew Tan once wrote that Singapore is an interesting case study of how China treats small countries in the international system [1]. Moreover, Singapore plays a vital role in China's One Belt One Road foreign policy, which is based on geographical factors. Singapore guards the entrance and exit of the Strait of Malacca and is a vital transportation artery of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. In addition, Singapore also has the second largest port in the world, the Port of Singapore [2]. Therefore, in conjunction with China's foreign policy, it is necessary to establish a good cooperative relationship with Singapore in the Asia-Pacific region. However, Singapore does not have a close attitude towards related countries due to the influence of Chinese culture, as China thought. In the game between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, Singapore has shown a characteristic that is more pro-American and anti-communist. Ja Ian Chong pointed out that China has criticized Singapore's handling of relations with the United States and warned that small and medium-sized countries should not allow the United States to manipulate and antagonize each other [3]. It shows that China's strong attitude in the South China Sea is one of the enormous challenges facing relations between ASEAN countries and China. However, what caused Singapore not to give China positive affirmation and a friendly attitude as the Chinese government expected due to the relationship of ethnic origin? This paper analyzes the role and influence of Chinese clan organizations and chambers of commerce in Singapore. Based on this, this paper analyzes the role and function of Chinese Singaporeans in the establishment and development of diplomatic relations between the two countries and discusses the reasons for the dynamic changes in the relations between the two countries.

## **2. Chinese Singaporeans: Complex National Identity and the Role of Clan in Politics**

### **2.1. The National Identity of the Chinese Singaporeans**

According to the statistics website Index Mundi, the Chinese population accounts for 74.3% of Singapore's population [4]. Since Singapore has a large ethnic Chinese population, many Chinese hope that Singaporeans can be politically close to China out of a sense of cultural identity or at least remain neutral on international issues. However, because Singapore's diplomatic image has always been to pursue pragmatic policies, it often goes against China's expectations [5]. Therefore, there is a gap between China's expectations of Singapore's stance and the actual situation. Chinese Singaporeans have complicated views of China. This complexity is not based on ideological contradictions but manifests in a more general form: Which China? This problem arose from something other than the Chinese people born in Singapore, which appeared as early as the first batch of Chinese immigrants to Singapore.

For example, Ashton Ng elaborates on the origins of the confusing and diverse Chinese consciousness among Singaporeans. Since China is a vast country, the early Chinese immigrants from China arrived in Singapore from different areas. Therefore, there are differences between dialects and regional cultures, which lead them to be more inclined to establish social networks with fellow villagers rather than communicate with people from other parts of China. Therefore, in their minds, they only have a sense of regional identity rather than identification with the broader geographical scope of China. They tend to be loyal to their hometown and clan. It was after the Qing Empire established a consulate in Singapore in 1877 that the concept of "overseas Chinese" was clarified. However, after the fall of the Qing Empire in 1912, Chinese Singaporeans' understanding of the word "China" became increasingly complicated [6]. Therefore, Chinese Singaporeans' identification with China is complicated and fragmented, and they often cannot reach a consensus on the China they identify with. Therefore, when China presents "ethnic homology", Chinese Singaporeans are often unable to sympathize with the Chinese mentality.

### **2.2. Cultural Exchange among Chinese Singaporeans--An Example of Religion**

Therefore, before identifying with a specific China, Singaporean Chinese's identification with China can be interpreted using a regional approach, which is the clan organization mentioned above. Moreover, clan organizations have a strong influence in awakening Singaporeans' national identity and their diplomatic exchanges with China. Lee Meiyu described the post-millennium clan organizations Contemporary Chinese clan organizations use various activities to help Chinese immigrants enhance their cultural identity and help them improve their knowledge and understanding of Han culture [7]. In addition to promoting Chinese culture with regional characteristics within the Chinese community in Singapore, clan organizations have also given great help to new Chinese immigrants from the same area. Furthermore, because the Singaporean government's welcoming attitude towards immigrants has triggered a new wave of immigration, clan organizations have also realized that attracting new Chinese immigrants is a significant thing [7]. This shows the importance of clan organizations between China and Singapore. It has made outstanding contributions to cultural exchanges and inheritance and has also enhanced ties and mutual understanding between the two countries. Nevertheless, Russell Hsiao raised objections to this. He believed that the clan organization in Singapore was not just a Chinese immigrant mutual aid association with a strong regional flavor. He states that the Chinese clan organizations in Singapore have highly penetrating political overtones. The Chinese government uses Chinese chambers of commerce and clan organizations as media to promote the Greater China narrative in Singapore, reflecting its attitude that all ethnic Chinese should be loyal to the People's Republic of China [8]. Therefore, if the Chinese government has financial exchanges with Chinese clan organizations and chambers of commerce in Singapore, these organizations can achieve some effective political propaganda in Singapore and even lobby political groups. Therefore, if the Singapore government holds the same view, it will alienate itself from clan organizations regarding policy support or form a separate and cold attitude. So, it is foreseeable that

once the Singapore government feels insecure about the existence of clan organizations, they will also be able to export the opposite view to Singaporeans, correcting that their roots are in Singapore, not a specific region in China. Therefore, clan organizations could be more comfortable in the relationship between China and Singapore. It has the effect of bringing the two countries closer. However, because it is based in Singapore, it is bound to cooperate and obey the arrangements of the Singapore government to continue to exist.

### **3. Treating Chinese Culture and China's Diplomatic Relations under Rational Choice**

#### **3.1. Changes in Political Identity Based on the Social Environment**

Clan organizations and business associations can give Singaporeans a greater sense of Chinese identity. However, Singapore's China policy is still based on the general rational choice theory. First, the capricious de-Sinicization and re-Sinicization of Singaporean Chinese are based on obvious political purposes. For example, when Singapore was founded, due to the Chinese government's blockade on foreigners, it was difficult for Chinese immigrants to contact China. Furthermore, they urgently realize that an independent sovereign country must have a strong sense of national identity, but China is a distant and unfamiliar existence to them. Therefore, de-Sinicizing and promoting English is a rational decision the Lee Kuan Yew government made in this context. Chinese Singaporeans are looking for a new identity and to identify what they need to be loyal to [9]. Therefore, when establishing the concept of "Singaporeans" as the country's foundation, the consciousness of "Chinese" must be downplayed.

#### **3.2. Dynamics of Cultural Exchange under Political Influence**

Changes in culture, including the use of language, reflect the orientation of political change. In other words, political initiatives will affect cultural exchanges between the two countries to a certain extent. In 1979, the Lee Kuan Yew government launched the Speak Mandarin Movement. Its primary purpose is to simplify the way of communication among Chinese people in Singapore. The Speak Mandarin Campaign seems to be just a manifestation of the Singapore Chinese government's change in attitude towards de-Sinicization and its support for bilingual policies. However, according to the previous analysis, Singapore has strong clan organization ties. Therefore, the popularization of Mandarin is now a manifestation of de-depalletization. For example, the Speak Mandarin Campaign launched in the 1970s and 1980s standardized the official definition of Chinese as "Mandarin." This norm gives the Singaporean government reason to ban dialects in mass media. As a result, many Chinese Singaporeans can communicate in Mandarin, but they lose the soil to learn their dialects [7]. This shows that the Speak Mandarin Campaign has weakened the influence of clan organizations among young Chinese and increased the authority of the Singaporean government. The Singaporean government jointly led the second re-Sinicization movement to let the younger Chinese Singaporeans understand China's initiatives [6]. At the same time, many unique elements of Singapore have been added to Singapore's re-sinicization to avoid the risk of being signified. For example, when the Singaporean government promotes Chinese culture, it always emphasizes "Singaporean." Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated at an event to celebrate the 95th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese newspaper "Lianhe Zaobao" on September 6, 2018, that Singapore's Chinese culture is unique and is not formed by appropriating and plagiarizing the cultural heritage of other countries [6]. Lee Hsien Loong's attitude shows that the Singapore government's recognition of Chinese culture is not based on China but on the evolution of Chinese immigrants after their Singularization. Then, the self-identity is based on the premise that Singaporeans are greater than Chinese. When dealing with diplomatic relations with China, Singapore has never placed itself in the position of the Chinese, but as "Southeast Asian" as Lee Kuan Yew often emphasized. Therefore, from the perspective of Southeast Asian countries, they choose to maintain a delicate and distant relationship with China, their kin country.

### 3.3. The Impact of National and Social Development on the Relationship between the Two Countries

However, although the Singaporean government is strengthening "Singaporeization" and weakening "de-Sinicization" in culture, the influence of clan organizations is gradually decreasing. However, the relationship between Singapore and China also has great potential because of Singapore's diplomatic principle based on rational choice. Especially since 2017, Singapore stated in its "Future Economic Report" that Singapore will take some new measures to develop its economy with "internationalization" as its core. This has promoted trade and talent exchanges between the two countries. The purpose of reflecting the international appeal of the "Future Economic Report" is that Singapore has a strong demand for talent in artificial intelligence and big data, so they are willing to accept technical talents from overseas [10]. This provides opportunities for Chinese high-tech industry practitioners to integrate into Singapore. At the same time, Singapore's pursuit of internationalization also coincides with the purpose of China's "Belt and Road Initiative." When the demands of the two countries are the same, it will help improve relations between them and promote healthy economic exchanges. Therefore, the Chinese government can be relaxed about the rational diplomatic attitude of the Singaporean government. Just like the role of Chinese clan organizations, the rationalist approach to diplomacy is also a double-edged sword. Even though the Singaporean government reflects a geopolitical dependence on the United States, economic cooperation is inclined toward China [3]. Under the influence of economic factors, new Chinese immigrants also formed new Chinese organizations in Singapore. For example, between 2011 and 2016, at least three Chinese associations were approved by the Singaporean government [10]. Chinese organizations are also constantly innovating their ideas as the times change, thereby eliminating the Singaporean government's distrust of their existence. At the same time, these associations also use economic exchange as the theme to deepen and maintain ties with China. Therefore, the Chinese government should seize the desire for internationalization reflected by the Singaporean government and the increasingly diversified trend of Singaporean society, reflect the credibility of the Chinese government based on economic cooperation, and further deepen the "Belt and Road Initiative" to allow Singapore to see the attractiveness of China amid the tense South China Sea situation, thereby maintaining the stability of trade cooperation between the two countries.

## 4. Conclusions

Therefore, although Singapore has a kinship relationship with China, Singaporean Chinese definition of China is complex, mixed with identification with a specific period or region. Therefore, based on such a fragmented sense of identity, Singapore's China policy will be based on a pragmatic, rational choice rather than a relationship of national origin. The homologous relationship between China and Singapore is a good window for mutual understanding regarding economic and cultural exchanges between China and Singapore, but politically, it cannot influence Chinese Singaporeans to make choices. Therefore, in further research, Singapore can be used as an excellent example and anchor point to analyze what role the Han Chinese in other ASEAN countries play in diplomacy. Because Singapore is the most special among them, it is the only sovereign country among Southeast Asian countries dominated by the Chinese. At the same time, China and Singapore should also make full use of international and social development forms to promote cooperation and exchanges.

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