

# Overseas Chinese and State Building: A Historical Perspective

**Tai-Chee Wong \***

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## Abstract

The central argument of the paper testifies the sharp contrast between European settlers in the Americas and overseas Chinese in their state building mentality. Heavily influenced by European Enlightenment spirit characterised by freedom, equality and human rights, European settlers fought for independence to create their own states free from their European metropolises. Conversely, overseas Chinese having inherited a strong traditional inclination towards the Confucian unification thought had no sense of independent statehood. Setting up their own sovereign state was seen as a rebellious act liable to severe punishment by the imperial court. After World War Two, having been exposed to rights for independence of Western origin, overseas Chinese began to realise their citizenship rights. With historical conjunctural circumstances given, Singapore with Chinese majority achieved independence through a peaceful transfer of power. The paper provides an in-depth analysis as to why such a contrasted phenomenon of settlers occurred in history between two worlds of European origin on the one hand and that of imperial China on the other.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, independence, Confucian unification thought, modern statehood, Han culture

## Introduction

Ancient ecumenical concepts of the world could have strong influence on the *modus operandi* of a people in their political governance, world outlook or cultural practices. The world outlook associated with a civilisation was often built on a self-centred and hierarchical perspective of dominance. If the ancient Greek and Roman Empires ever did that, it came with no surprise that ancient Chinese civilisation evolved the idea of *Tianxia* or “all under heaven” as a unified concept to justify its dominance and centrality of a more advanced civilisation and state.

Although the state is an abstract concept, its physical manifestations are real. It possesses a fixed territory, a population, a system of economic production, a sovereign government and an administrative organisation and army. The earliest form of state formation was composed of primitive tribes that sustained their collective survival in small social groups through self-defence and sharing of a common language, culture and, among others, close blood ties.

Yet, the state is another institutional entity possessing centralised power by taking control of governance, which includes jurisdiction over its own people within and outside its territory. In ancient times, the lack of scientific knowledge in human societies in understanding the ever-changing phenomena of nature, natural occurrences and disasters had threatened human survival and created fear of the unchallengeable “abstract power of gods”. In ancient China, such a “power” was equated with “the mandate of heaven” which legitimatised the right to govern all domains within the then existing knowledge of the world. The empowerment of the “Son of Heaven” or *Tianzi* to exercise the right to govern the Earth and people with unquestioned authority became a doctrine in the supremacy of the strongly hierarchical system of governance (see Li, 2007).

Understandably, traditional Chinese feudal society had no modern concept and consciousness of citizen’s rights. Under the control of the imperial power of absolute monopoly, the inhabitants who received the protection of the imperial power had an obligation to defend it through labour contributions and military conscription as well as to pay taxes. The functions of the imperial power were to open up more territories, defend against foreign aggressions, and protect the lives and properties of its people. As the sole agent of Heaven, the emperor must pray to heaven for favourable climatic conditions to ensure good harvests and political stability.

Indeed, the political mechanism by which the “Son of Heaven” acted on behalf of Heaven to execute its mandate derived its theoretical origin from the Confucian concept of “grand unification” (*Dayitong*). This concept took concrete forms during the rule of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD). The concept has since evolved progressively into an embodiment of the rights of the state and a model for imperial management for domestic and foreign affairs.

The Confucian style of imperial rule was marked by a cultural divide between the Han and minority nationalities. The Han people living inside or outside the imperial domain considered as “subjects of the Son of Heaven” (Zhang, J., 2016), with an identity subordinated to the imperial power but to which the concept of civil rights was non-existent. This effect persisted for over two millennia, from the early Han Dynasty to the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. For Chinese overseas, the unification thought acted as a serious constraint to their awareness and legitimate justification in building their own independent states. Additionally, adherence of these Chinese imperial practice had also, directly or indirectly, affected their legitimate claims over their own civil rights as an ethnic group in areas where they have settled down.

While the Chinese diaspora had a strong tradition of abiding by the imperial concept of statehood, a different scenario had taken place in the New World in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries where European settlers fought for their own national independence from their metropolitan countries. The historic conjuncture, which could lead to political changes and reconfigurations of a society, may provide an explanation of particular events and ideas and their outcomes of a specific historical period (Koivisto & Lahtinen, 2012). This historic conjuncture from which the independence movements of the New World arose was clearly different from that encountered by the Chinese diaspora.

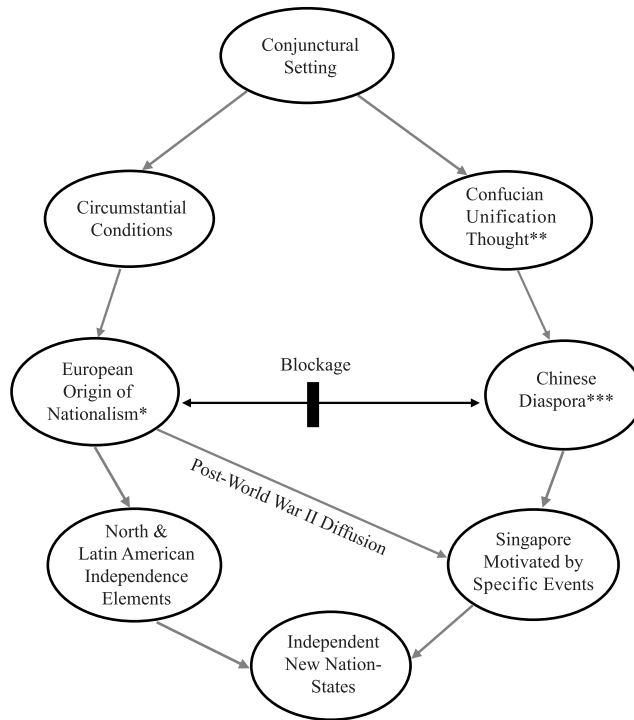
To provide a broader perspective to this study, a more interpretative approach is made by means of comparing the North and Latin American experience and that of the Chinese diaspora. A circumstantial hypothesis is projected for this purpose to demarcate the two markedly different pathways taken by each. The hypothesis is built on the assumption that ideas and motivations could bring about social and political movements such as formation of independent nation states (Figure 1). In the enclosed circuit governed by the strictly hierarchical Confucian unification thought which made no allowance for ideas of nationalism and self-determination, state building and the notion of citizens' rights were non-existent among the Chinese diaspora. There was however a point of breakthrough when Singapore was motivated to achieve national independence by riding on the decolonisation process in the post-World War Two era.

This study will deal with the historic conjuncture from which North and Latin American independence arose and an overview of the theoretical basis of the Confucian concept of "grand unification". This is followed by a re-examination of the substance and nature of the so-called "states" established by overseas Chinese in the recent past. A discussion of the concept of the modern state will enable an explanatory basis towards the better understanding of what constitutes the rights to national independence traditionally ignored by overseas Chinese. The final section will analyse the specific circumstances in which ethnic Chinese-dominated Singapore was founded as a nation state.

### **The North and Latin American Independence Movements**

European settlers to the North and Latin American states were exposed to European political events where the notion of nationalism and self-governance had originated from the seventeenth century onward (Skidmore & Smith, 2001). In sharp contrast, the Chinese Confucian unification thought made the founding of independent states an unthinkable proposition.

Figure 1

*Circumstantial Hypothesis of Historical Events*

Notes:

\* Freedom, self-determination & liberal thought from Enlightenment

\*\* Strictly hierarchical & imperial ownership of subjects

\*\*\* Loyalty spirit directed towards Imperial or Republican China

### The Enlightenment Impact

The independence movements of European settlers in the Americas owed their origins to a combination of circumstances. One of these was the influence of Europe's Age of Enlightenment. Tracing its history from the eighteenth century with the emphasis on reasons, knowledge and freedom, Enlightenment ideas supported the concept of equality and human dignity. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1762 *Social Contract* subscribed the right of the people to change a government that did not protect its own people. Sharing the common notion of basic equality, the people as citizens had the rights to choose their own form of government (Burns, 1980; Skidmore & Smith, 2001). American independence leaders such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin adopted earnestly the rationality of the Enlightenment, accepting Rousseau's claim that "all men are born equal" which was literally incorporated into the American Declaration of Independence in 1776. In Venezuela, the revolutionary leader Simon Bolivar was equally imbued with many ideals of the Enlightenment from his education and reading. He was not only committed to reason, freedom and democracy but also looked



upon the American constitutional systems as his own goals for Latin America (Clayton et al., 2017; Burns, 1980).

The aim of the *Social Contract* is to exert a legitimate political authority where people are free and equal in basic rights, and their “general will” must be respected. When a government exceeds the legitimate boundaries set by the people, the people have the right to abolish it and begin anew using the rule of law. It could be interpreted that, between the colonisers and the colonised, if the social contract did not guarantee impartiality, independence could be resorted to as a valid solution (Thoma, 2015).

The premise of the American Revolution was built more on a liberal, individualistic and democratic notion of society and politics as against the Latin American pattern which had retained the medieval and feudal tradition from fifteenth century Spain (Palti, 2018). Typically, North American liberalism had a stronger spirit of resistance against economic exploitation, resulting in the rebellious act of the Boston Tea Party who fought against monetary abuses imposed by British colonisers. Such struggled led to the first outbreak of American War of Independence (Vodrey, 2004).

### **Geopolitics and Nation Building**

Independence in the Americas was also driven by geopolitical factors and rivalry among European powers. If the American War of Independence in 1776 had left an impact on the Spanish colonies in Latin America, it was Napoleon Bonaparte’s occupation of Spain in 1808 that precipitated their pursuit of independence. Napoleon dispatched secret agents to the Americas from 1809 to foment the break from Spain (Blaufarb, 2007; Skidmore & Smith, 2001). Following the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, Ferdinand VII was restored as king of Spain but his option for a policy of repression did not work, despite some initial success.

Napoleon’s defeat intensified Anglo-French rivalry in the Americas. The French fear of Britain’s rise as global hegemon was real, given the British dominance in industrialisation and export economy. France countered this by seeking diplomatic alliance with the United States and Russia and did not object to the U.S. annexation of Spanish lands in Florida, Texas, and New Mexico. The U.S. had much to gain from the collapse of the Spanish empire. It provided moral and material support including the sale of arms as well as sanctuary to the insurgents who fought for independence (Clayton et al., 2017; Blaufarb, 2007; McFarlane, 2014).

The early 1820s witnessed the beginning of the collapse of the Spanish empire as the movement for Latin American independence gathered momentum. Geopolitical and national interests among world powers then had turned the independence movements in Latin America into more than just “civil wars”. To the colonised populations, the independence of new nation states symbolised the formation of a strong common bond, identity, and shared common interests. There was also a “native pride” which was a localised devotion inculcated in the minds of European immigrants to consolidate their nationalistic feelings (Woods, 2014; Burns, 1980).

The independent Latin American states gave rise to a different scenario of the global distribution of power in which the U.S. was emerging as a new rising nation. In the ancient kingdoms of East Asia, a sharply contrasting world outlook prevailed where ideals of liberalism and the sense of independent nation building were absent from traditional thoughts, and “native pride” took a different form among Chinese emigrants.

### **The Confucian Unification Thought and Its Substance**

The concept of “unification” could be traced to early Chinese thinkers and the idea that the Earth was wrapped up by Heaven, and both nourished the people and all living things. The term arises from the character 统 (*Tong*) which means the beginning. Zhou Wenwang (1152–1056 BC), the first ruler of Zhou Dynasty proclaimed his mandate from Heaven and enthroned himself as king. Acting on this mandate, he undertook a reform and proclaimed that “the kingdom should have good governance and the people be educated. From the noble class to the ordinary people, and from mountains and rivers to all vegetation and insects, they must be tied to the beginning of the year which marks the start of political governance and education” (Niu, 2001, p.50). Thus, as mandated by Heaven, all living things had to observe the dominance enshrined in the king as the essence of Unity. This was the significance and origin of the unification thought.

The political doctrine of the unification thought encompasses a distinctive relationship between Chinese Han culture and cultures of surrounding minorities. As such, lands of Han or Huaxia are called the Four Seas (*Si Hai*), while those of non-Huaxia are called the Four Minorities (*Si Yi*).

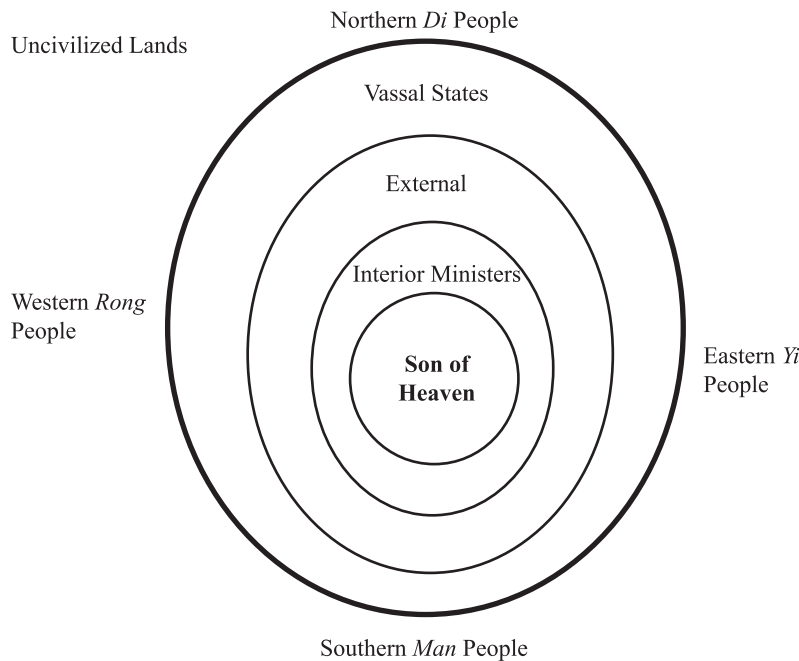
According to another Confucian philosopher, the “Son of Heaven” lives in the centre of the Four Seas, acting like the Xunzi heart to the limbs of the marginal minorities. The heart-and-limb analogy symbolises the relations of the “Son of Heaven” and the minorities to form the Chinese worldview of the “Huayi order” (see Figure 2) (Cheng, 2016). Under this hierarchical “Han-Yi” relationship, armed conflicts between them throughout history had not involved any form of nationalism in the modern sense. To the Han Chinese, such conflicts were seen more as a strategic defence against the horseback-driven and highly mobile nomadic aggressors whose key objective was to plunder the rich harvests of North China to safeguard their very survival against harsh living conditions.

Such Confucian values of the Chinese feudal imperial system had a longstanding influence on the principles of governing the people centred on Han Chinese culture as the core. Following this concept that differentiated “the civilised” and “the non-civilised”, Han culture was regarded as occupying a higher order than that of non-Han cultures. By such tradition, Chinese dynastic policies towards the surrounding minorities were through the Confucian *Xiuwen* approach to educate and to absorb them into their sphere of influence by “enlightenment”. Yet, dynastic rule of Huayi relationship was dictated by the notion of hierarchy. This hierarchical order with the

imperial court at the apex was the recipient of tributes from and the protector of vassal states. Vassal states that failed to send tributes or envoys to pay homage to the emperors would be subjected to imperial corrective action. However, military action was considered as a last resort (Cheng, 2016; Tang, 2012).

Figure 2

*Relationship between the Son of Heaven and Outer States*



High officials of the imperial court interpreted “Heaven” in the religious form to serve as an administrative measure to regulate daily life and behaviour. In the early Han Dynasty, the great Confucianist Dong Zhongshu used his own work, the *Multiple Dews in the Spring and Autumn*, to promote strengthen the “Gongyang Doctrine” whereby he promoted the “unification thought” from the layman’s level to that of an official doctrine of “heavenly unification”. This change from the ordinary to an almost divine status of the concept legitimised the authority of the “Son of Heaven” to rule over “ten thousand states” on behalf of “Heaven” (Niu, 2001). Occupying the spatial centre of the North China Plains, the Middle Kingdom and the “Son of Heaven” acted as the mandated commander-in-chief overseeing the rites of respect and worship from subordinated subjects within and along the margins of the kingdom.

Dong Zhongshu used Confucius’ argument in the *Spring and Autumn Classics* that “the great unification” is a natural phenomenon underlying the operations of Heaven and Earth. It was on this phenomenon that he established his doctrine of unchanging permanence. By interpreting that “the great unification” is a persistent law of Heaven and Earth, Dong helped

the Han emperor, Wudi, to consolidate his rule by pre-empting internal division and to pacify the Huns in the north. Dong's interpretation of the "great unification" concept had an enormous influence on subsequent imperial administration and rule. Throughout Chinese history, the "mandate of Heaven" was deployed to legitimatise imperial rule and to eliminate internal regional rivalry. Corresponding to the unification of imperial rule was that of territorial integrity of the imperial domain. This has become an imperial imperative that has been enacted repeatedly in history in accordance with the logic that "prolonged unification begets division and prolonged division begets unification" (Niu, 2001).

The hierarchical relationship between Han and non-Han cultures is also a manifestation of the spatial structure of the Chinese imperial domain. Situated at the North China Plains, Han culture was the product of an agricultural economy that supported a large population enjoying a relatively high productivity in economic activities. The Middle Kingdom was surrounded by states of various minorities in the cold and arid north of the Great Wall, in the impoverished north-western region, and in the mountainous areas in the southwest.

Through the "pacification" policy, exchanges between the imperial court and vassal states took the form of generous gifts and titles in return for tributes and acknowledgement. The primary objective of the court was the loyalty of the minorities. This was to secure the peaceful co-existence between the agriculture-based empire and the nomadic peoples living along the precarious livestock grazing border areas (Cheng, 2016). At the peak of its power, the Qing Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong applied the "pacification" strategy with wisdom to appease the nomadic peoples and to keep border conflicts to a manageable level (Duan, 2012).

The concept of state unification is not based on spatial but cultural attributes founded on Confucian virtues and benevolence. It was in fact an abstract cultural map by which people of Han identity living at home or abroad were treated equally as subjects of the "Son of Heaven" (Zhang, J., 2016; Fröhlich, 2017). Despite the fact that the Han subjects living in foreign territories did not enjoy imperial protection, they were theoretically subjects of the "Son of Heaven". Soon after the colonisation of the Philippines by Spain in the early sixteenth century, and fearful of the business competition and possible uprising by the Chinese community, Spanish colonialists carried out two pre-emptive massacres in 1603 and 1639 in which an estimated 15,000–25,000 and 17,000–22,000 Chinese were killed respectively (Revolvy.com, n.d.). The reaction of the Ming court was that these overseas Chinese had left without permission and betrayed their motherland.

The legacy of the "unification thought" had been deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the Chinese. Its influence was to disengage Chinese overseas from the idea of statehood or founding their own independent states. Any attempt in founding separate states would be a betrayal of their loyalty to the Emperor and treated as a serious crime punishable by death. Attention is now turned to examine the nature of those so-called "states" that the overseas Chinese had built during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

## Early “State” Building among Overseas Chinese

Documented materials pertaining to “states” built by overseas Chinese are sorely lacking. An article published by Tiexue. Net (2015), and understandably consisting of opinions of often anonymous bloggers with little knowledge of local history or conditions, may serve the purpose of discussion and verification. The article’s asserted that the Chinese established six states overseas in the past in Southeast Asia. In reality, the form, political organisation and sovereignty of these “states” fell short of modern standards. A regime led by a leader having the form of organisational control of certain executive and military power might not necessarily qualify as a state (Burdeau, 1970).

First, the Lan Fang *kongsi* in West Borneo (present-day West Kalimantan of Indonesia) of the late eighteenth century was one of the autonomous districts of Chinese gold-miners. Its leader Luo Fangbo, a Hakka (Kejia) from Meizhou district of Guangdong Province arrived in 1772. With organisational and leadership skills, he led his team several years later to assist the local sultan to put down a rebellion. He was granted a land concession where he formed the Lan Fang *kongsi* to mine gold. He brought in thousands of Chinese immigrants and local inhabitants to work for him.

Although the Lan Fang *kongsi* was called a “republic” and used a “royal” calendar with an administrative, legislative and judicial structure, it was not to be regarded as having the attributes of an independent state, nor did it have any diplomatic ties with other sovereign states. It was reported that Luo had wanted to surrender his lands to the Qing Empire but this was reportedly rejected by Emperor Qianlong (Zhou & Zhu, 2014). However, he remained dedicated and loyal to the emperor until his last days. After his death, the concession was divided by among seven headmen and in 1886, the Dutch attacked and annexed the land.

In reality, Luo had no inclination to set up an independent “state”. Anxious to escape being accused of betraying the Qing court, he merely hoped to be accepted as court official serving in a foreign land. Although the Lan Fang *kongsi* did not possess sovereignty as an independent entity to establish the legal basis of a state, the very fact that the settlers had left China without court sanction was sufficient to disqualify them from the Emperor’s recognition (W. A. Zhang & Zhang, 2011). In the context of imperial rule, the existence of the *kongsi* could be likened to the band of “bandits” occupying a fortified mountain stronghold similar to the stronghold that was portrayed in the Chinese classic *Water Margins* in celebration of the brotherhood in eleventh century Song Dynasty. The Lan Fang band was possibly looked upon as a temporary base in an occupied territory outside the empire.

A few more similar Chinese settlements also appeared sporadically in Southeast Asia but were transient in nature. One of these was the Tayau Kingdom established during the late eighteenth century by Wu Yuansheng, a Hakka who hailed from the Mei County of Guangdong. Wu was Luo Fang Bo’s general who was despatched to head a station north of the Pontianak River in West Kalimantan. Wu replaced the local chief as leader and his settlement



lasted over 70 years until it was destroyed by the Dutch colonial army in the mid-nineteenth century (W. A. Zhang & Zhang, 2011; Tiexue.Net, 2015).

Natuna island, located in the South China Sea, was the refuge of several hundred anti-Manchu soldiers and fishermen towards the end of the Ming Dynasty. By the end of the nineteenth century, the island's population was some 15,000 of whom 80% were of Chinese descent. During the nineteenth century, Zhang Jiexu of Chaozhou County of Guangdong province led a group of people to settle down on the island and he soon made himself the chief. After his death, internal disputes broke out and the Dutch took over the island. Another "state" was founded by Zhang Lian in the sixteenth century during the Jiajing reign of Ming Dynasty. Zhang had rebelled against corruption and social injustice and started an uprising but had to flee with his men to southern Sumatra. He occupied a territory near present-day Palembang and he turned to fishing. Declaring himself a "sea-borne" chief, he soon gained control of the local sea trade. The rule was short-lived and collapsed soon after it was founded (Zhou & Zhu, 2014; Tiexue.Net, 2015).

It is evident that the overseas Chinese territories or occupations discussed above were not established as independent formal states. They could only be claimed as self-reliant, autonomous, and predominantly self-sufficient entities in basic means with certain defensive forces. With heavy burden of "unification thought" at the back of their mind, none of these autonomous entities had the will to establish their own state. Coupled with extremely rudimentary administrative systems and organisations, their defence system was particularly weak and fragile.

Thus, we may attribute the fragility of the "states" founded by Chinese settlers outside China to many factors. Apart from the absence of any desire to establish sovereign states, there are other crippling elements to contend with. The first was the hidden fear that any such act would be seen by the settlers as a form of disloyalty to the imperial court which was subjected to severe punishment. The next was that the settlers were peasants and largely illiterate. They lived and worked with little interaction with indigenous inhabitants and were exposed to hostility from local or colonial sources. Lastly and most importantly, the settlers considered themselves as sojourners and had no intention to settle down permanently. From the perspective of the imperial court, these settlements were regarded as having no real economic benefits to the empire. Indeed, they were taken as clusters of fortified "bandit" villages that had occasionally emerged in certain remote parts of feudal China.

From the late nineteenth century, however, the overseas Chinese mindset began to evolve gradually under the influence of Western colonisation of Southeast Asia to provide an alternative to the Confucian unification thought.

### **Mindset Evolution of Overseas Chinese: From Feudalistic to Modern State**

The Confucian doctrine of unification thought had established the theoretical basis of the divine origin of imperial authority. The "Son of Heaven" was, at least nominally, the custodian

of his people and lands under “Heaven”. Loyalty to the emperor decreed that the people were to serve the interests of state and emperor at the expense of their basic rights (see Li, 2007). However, this “divine” mandate lost its legitimacy with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the influence of Western ideological principles of democracy. Elements of the traditional and modern elements of government have been absorbed into the evolving principles of governance. Nevertheless, the concept of unification that China should be a unitary unit has remained intact (Ma, 2005).

Among the colonised Southeast Asian states particularly in post-World War Two era, the notion of independence or self-government had been diffused via Western education of the local elites. Consequently, the breakthrough with the idea of modern state with political sovereignty took shape in the colonies. Modern state power is subjected to the rule of law, that citizens are protected by law, and they also have the right to seek justice and are equal before the law, including between colonisers and colonised (Lee, 2000; Crawford, 1977). This justice of equality had led to demands for independence by local elites. A good case is that of Singapore, a small island in which ethnic Chinese form the majority of the population.

### **The Founding of Singapore**

The first sovereign nation with a majority of ethnic Chinese outside China is Singapore. Situated at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, it became an independent state in 1965 when the Chinese made 75% of its population of 1.8 million. Three factors had combined to foment the historic conjuncture from which the independence of Singapore arose. These factors were the anti-colonial movement after World War Two; the separation from Malaysia with which Singapore had merged in 1963; and the pro-Western leadership among the local political elite.

### ***Post-World War Two Independence Movements***

The anti-colonial struggle for independence in Southeast Asia intensified during and after World War Two after the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945. The Japanese invasion was conducted on the pretext of freeing Asia from colonial rule and by proposing the formation of a “Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere”. This appeal aroused nationalistic sentiments in the Southeast Asian region and served as the spiritual support for national independence. In Malaya, the anti-Japanese Communist Party, whose membership was largely ethnic Chinese, spearheaded the struggle for independence from British rule. Their armed struggle that lasted 12 years from 1948 was fiercely resisted by the British and ended in defeat in 1960.

The British post-war strategy was to pave the way for the peaceful transfer of power to local pro-British elite, as they did in India and elsewhere. Malaya gained its independence in 1957 as the Federation of Malaya from the joint efforts of the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities. It adopted Constitution that made allowance for special rights to the Malays, in exchange for citizenship status for ethnic Chinese and Indians. Almost at the same period,



Singapore set up a pro-Western regime led by Lee Kuan Yew who gained control of the self-governing colony in 1959 under the People's Action Party (PAP) (Lee, 1993).

### ***Separation from Malaysia***

Soon after independence, the new Federation proposed the formation of Malaysia by merging with Singapore, North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak. With the support of the British, the Federation of Malaysia was established in 1963 to effectively free the three component partners from colonial rule. The new federation was soon confronted with problems of which a major one was associated with ethnic issues. The demographically Chinese-dominated Singapore was faced with dealing with a Malay-dominated central government. A core issue concerned the special status of the Malay population as a means to protect Malay economic interests from the domination of other communities. The Singapore ruling party's advocacy for equality among all ethnic groups was fiercely opposed by the Malay nationalists. Political haggling and rivalry led to rising tension and unease and the fear of instability. In 1965, Singapore's relationship with the central government deteriorated and was forced to leave Malaysia and become an independent state (Lee, 2000).

### ***Pro-Western Ideology***

The early elite of the Singapore PAP were mostly ethnic Chinese who studied in English medium schools established by the colonial government or the church. Their school textbooks were in line with those of the United Kingdom, and all subjects were taught in English. Many of the students were illiterate in Chinese. They probably knew more about the West and had little knowledge of Chinese culture nor any clue about the Confucian concept of grand unification.

Most in this elite group were graduates from British universities or other British dominions of the Commonwealth where they were exposed to Western social life. Coming from colonial territories, many had experienced some kind of racial discrimination during their student days. Exposure to a Western education and increased political awareness led some to dream of gaining independence from Britain. They were nevertheless pro-capitalist and far from being communist sympathisers (Lee, 1993).

As protégés and trusted elite of the British colonial regime, they became the right choice for a peaceful transfer of power when Singapore faced an independence movement after World War Two led by left-wing and pro-communist grassroots leaders. The right time came in the late 1950s when a legislative election was held to set up a self-government in which the PAP won an overwhelming victory. After leaving Malaysia in 1963, what followed in Singapore for the next 60 years was the consolidation of a sovereign Singapore state seeking a pro-Western independent diplomacy to distance itself from being perceived as a "Third China". This image of Singapore came about in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a result of the strong presence of left-wing Singaporeans who supported China. The new Prime Minister then, Lee Kuan Yew,

fought hard to overcome their influence with tough measures in the 1960s in order to attract investments from developed nations (Lee, 1993).

The PAP transformed Singapore from a Third World country dependent on its port to become a rich First World city-state with a dynamic link with the developed world as well as with China. Starting with an export-oriented industrialisation strategy in the mid-1960s, it has now moved on to higher value knowledge-intensive sectors as a driving force to sustain its high growth rates to create an impact in the Asia Pacific region that is far greater than its physical size (Li, 2009; Dy.163, 2017).

## Conclusion

For over two thousand years, every Chinese dynasty had relied on the Confucian unification thought to coordinate its foreign policy. This policy set out a hierarchical order of cultural superiority at the centre to dominate the “culturally inferior” peripheral states with their vassal status. The principal objective was to reinforce security built on imperial prestige and border peace. These inter-state relations were not intended for economic exploitation to imperial economic system supported by its self-reliant agricultural production in which trade played a minor role.

Culturally, the unification thought was built into the Chinese feudal political system with the Confucian values as its core doctrine to arbitrate relations with minorities along the state borders. Under this doctrine set a strong taboo on the formation of separate states by the Han people living at home or abroad and considered it an act of rebellion against the court. In sharp contrast, the European Enlightenment ideas from the eighteenth century inspired political consciousness among European settlers in the Americas to establish their own independent states.

To a large extent, Chinese communities overseas were restricted mentally by the Confucian unification ideology, and consequently did not harbour thoughts of creating independent states of their own and were ignorant of self-governing nation states. In general, they lack a strong sense of political awareness of nationhood but were instead sharply conscious of affiliation with clan-based loyalties in separate dialect communities (Guo, 1996).

The creation of Singapore with a majority ethnic Chinese population as an independent nation state in the mid-1960s could be seen as a historical incident arising from a combination of circumstances: diffusion of independence rights from the West, the colonial master’s peaceful transfer of power to local elites, and ethnic tensions between Malay and Chinese communities that led to the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. The act of establishing a state outside China in a territory with a Chinese majority among the inhabitants was unprecedented among overseas Chinese. This process of self-renewal and self-governance of an overseas Chinese community was a unique experiment in the creation of an independent identity free from the constraints of ancestral ties. By evolving their own distinctiveness the Singapore Chinese have

through their hard work and foresight crafted one of the most advanced democratic states that has amazed the world with its spirit of creativity and vitality.

\* Dr. Tai-Chee Wong (黄大志) was an Associate Professor in Urban Geography at the School of Education of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, a Visiting Professor at Guizhou University of Finance, Guiyang, and Professor at Southern University College, Malaysia. Email: taicheewong@gmail.com

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