THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERANAKAN CHINESE POLITICS IN PRE-WAR MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE

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The Peranakan Chinese, otherwise known as Baba or Straits Chinese, were local born Chinese who formed a sub-ethnic group of Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore. Culturally they can be distinguish quite clearly form the rest of the Chinese population in both nation states. Their culture is a blend of Chinese, local or Malay and European elements. Peranakan spoke their own language, a kind of Malay dialect. Cultural aspects and identity of a Peranakan Chinese society have been widely studied and written about. Comparatively, however, little is known of their political attitudes and aspirations. The essay is an attempt to fill the gap and to examine the development of Peranakan Chinese political consciousness and activity in Malaysia and Singapore during the pre-World War Two.

At the end of the nineteenth century, a group of English educated Peranakan Chinese emerged from local and overseas institutions. Among them were Dr. Lim Boon Keng, Song Ong Siang and Dr. Wu Lian Teh. They were educated in British universities and when they returned to Malaya, they published various newspapers and magazines and formed various social and

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cultural organizations which reflected their intention of spreading reformist ideas in educational, social and cultural fields. Their activities reflected the growth of social and political consciousness among the Peranakan Chinese.2

It was apparent that the political thinking of the Peranakan Chinese was divided into two main strands during this period. The first strand of thinking was to strengthen the community by reorientation towards China and the introduction of pure Chinese cultural elements into this society. But at the same time these people maintained the status of the Peranakan Chinese as British subjects and continued to show loyalty to the colonial government. In other words, they advocated a dual role and the maintaining of dual loyalties and therefore developed an identity full of ambiguity.

The second strand of thinking which the majority of the Peranakan Chinese society held, was the promotion of Peranakan Chinese status and identity as British subjects through English education and westernization. They did not have any interest in participating in activities which linked them to China. They still considered that they belonged to the Chinese race but as a distinct group which was separated from other Overseas Chinese. However, this difference in thinking among the Peranakan Chinese did not cause very much friction among the leaders and they cooperated and collaborated in the interests of the whole Peranakan Chinese community in Malaya.

Divisions in ways of thinking about the Peranakan Chinese society began to appear during a debate about the position of the community at the end of the nineteenth century. In March 1895, the Chinese Christian Debating Society organized a debate among the Peranakan Chinese.3 One of the speakers, Dr. Lim Coon Keng, was worried and disliked the Peranakan Chinese manner of adopting and maintaining western and local cultures which, according to him, had become the source of a decaying weakness within the Peranakan Chinese society. He remarked:

Daripada pemandangan Baba-Baba, orang-orang China yang telah diberanakkan di Singapura, adalah terlebih lagi tinggi daripada taulannya yang telah diberanakkan di negeri China, sebab dia orang chepat pungot kalakuan orang puteh serta dengan hadat bahsanya dan fikirannya. Baba-Baba itu ada banyak megah

3 Ibid., p. 189.
dirinya, sebab orang dapat pekerjaan dalam Gudang-Gudang, yang ada pangku pekerjaan besar, sungguh gajinya tiada beberapa besar.4

[From the Peranakan Chinese point of view, the Chinese who were born in Singapore are better off than their compatriots who were born in China, because they were faster in adopting the whiteman’s behaviour, language and way of thinking. Those Peranakan Chinese were proud of themselves because they could get jobs in firms, and held some important posts, although the salaries were not so high.]

Dr. Lim also criticized the Peranakan Chinese who believed in Keramat (local traits which had entered Peranakan Chinese religious practices) and who were weak in their mother tongue.5 On the other hand, he praised the China-born Chinese who he said were better off than the Peranakan Chinese in every aspect. The Straits Chinese Herald, which reported this debate, did not publish or quote the point of view of the group who opposed Dr. Lim Boon Keng’s view. To represent this group, this newspaper quoted the views of an English guest speaker at the debate who praised the Peranakan Chinese. Later one of the readers wrote to the Straits Chinese Herald to oppose the view of Dr. Lim Boon Keng, which he said, had degraded Dr. Lim Boon Keng himself.6

In order to understand Dr. Lim Boon Keng’s attitude towards Western culture, one needs to look at his background.7 He was born in October 1869. His father, Lim Thean Biew, was a second generation Peranakan Chinese. His grandfather managed a distillery and worked as an assistant in an opium firm. At first, he learned about religion and classical Confucianism in a Hokkien temple; later he was sent to the Raffles Institution before he went to Britain. In Britain, he was enrolled as a medical student in a medical school in Ediburgh. While in Britain, he was adopted by Professor Mott who persuaded him to convert to Christianity. While in Scotland, Lim Boon Keng faced a personality conflict. Although he had adopted the western way of life, he was still considered a Chinese by others. One of the lecturers criti-

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 190.
6 Ibid.
cized him because he was unable to speak Chinese or Mandarin. Other Chinese students also looked down on him. According to Khor Eng Hee, these two types of humiliation influenced the political thinking of Dr. Lim Boon Keng.8

When he returned to Malaya, he began to learn the Chinese language and learn about Chinese culture. He married Huang Tuan Ching, the daughter of a Chinese scholar. Thus, he changed from a devout Christian to an anti-Christian way of life. He felt uneasy about missionary activities attempting to convert the Peranakan Chinese to Christianity. He launched a campaign against the Methodist or Anglo-Chinese school which, in his opinion forced students to become Christians. Using a pen-name, "Isaiah", he wrote to the Straits Times and other newspaper to expose these activities to the public.9

Lim Boon Keng's action caused the Peranakan Chinese to disassociate from the school and send their children to Raffles School. The Peranakan Chinese leaders, such as Tan Jiak Kim, Tan Hup Seng and Tan Boo Liat, resigned from the Board of Trustees of the Methodist school.

The head teacher of the school, Rev. C.C. Kelso, strongly denied the existence of any religious activities intended to influence the students. He later tried to get support from Dr. Lim Boon Keng on this issue. However, afterwards it became clear to the head teacher that the "Isaiah" controversy was the result of Dr. Lim Boon Keng’s activities. According to Rev. C.C. Kelso, "We learned from our Methodist boys that he [Dr. Lim Boon Keng] was trying to induce their parents to send them to Raffles School."10 The controversy was so intense that Song Ong Siang, a Peranakan Chinese Leader, commented on its bitterness and intricacy.11

However, Song On Siang did not know that Dr. Lim Boon Keng was the "trouble-maker" who had caused the "Isaiah" controversy. Had he known, it would have created friction amongst the Peranakan Chinese, because some of them were devoted Christians.

8 Ibid., p.4.
9 Song Ong Siang, One Hundred years of the Chinese in Singapore, University of Malaya Press (reprinted), 1967, p. 292, see also The Malaysian Message, October 1895 to August 1896.
To counter missionary religious activities which were spreading Christianity within the Peranakan Chinese community, Dr. Lim Boon Keng promoted Chinese language and culture. He supported Kang Yu Wei's Reform movement and, together with Khoo Seok Wan, he launched the Confucian Revival Movement in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States. He used Chinese newspapers, such as *Jit Shin Pau* and *Tien Nan Shio Pao* and also the *Straits Chinese Magazine* to spread reformist ideas. He also encouraged the Peranakan Chinese to learn Mandarin. This led to the formation of two branches of a school to teach Mandarin. One was at the Chinese consulate and the other was at the Peranakan Chinese Recreation Club. Another Peranakan Chinese leader from Penang, Dr. Wu Lien-teh, also supported the movement and promoted reformist ideas among the Chinese in Penang. Dr. Koh Leap Teng, another Queen's scholar, had the Confucian Temple in Penang built in 1904, for the same purpose.

The reformist group also intended to direct the attention of the Peranakan Chinese to their motherland. In one article, on the role of the Babas in the development of China, Dr. Lim Boon Keng made an appeal to the Peranakan Chinese to support or if possible to return to and work for China. He urged:

> While every son of man is trying to get whatever good is to be got, why should you Straits Chinese remain contended at home? Why should you not go forth and take your fair share of the inheritance of that which belongs to sons of Han?

But the influences of reformist groups, which were linked with China, was small within the Peranakan Chinese community. According to Stephen Leong:

> ... many Straits-born Chinese, by virtue of their Western education and their status as subjects of the British Empire, aligned themselves with Britain...

The Peranakan Chinese leaders, such as Dr. Lim Boon Keng, seemed to recognise that the interests and aspirations of the Peranakan Chinese were

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13 Diana ooi, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.
14 Khor Eng Hee, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
16 Oong Hak Ching, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-70.
confined to the Straits Settlements and the Malay States. He was able to continue leading the Peranakan Chinese by playing a dual role, maintaining a double loyalty to Malaya, as a British subject, and to China as an Overseas Chinese. As a British subject, he expressed his loyalty by serving with the British Government in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council.

The majority of the Peranakan Chinese were fiercely loyal to the British Government and did not show any tendency to participate in any political activities which related to the Chinese Motherland. As far as they were concerned, they belonged to Malaya and vice-versa. This attitude was manifested in Peranakan Chinese newspapers such as the Bintang Timor (3 July 1834 - 2 July 1895) Kabar Slalu (5 January - 6 May 1924), Kabar Uchapan Baru (4 February 1926 - 15 January 1931), Bintang Peranakan (December 1930 - April 1931) and Sri Pranakan (April 1932 - June 1932).17

Song Ong Siang published the first Peranakan Chinese newspaper, Bintang Timor, which means “Eastern Star” with the objective of promoting social and political awareness among the Peranakan Chinese. Song, unlike Lim Boon Keng, never took a part in any activities which concerned motherland China. Bintang Timor always made an appeal to the Peranakan Chinese and other local-born peoples to wake up and enlighten themselves. This intention was reflected in to verses of poetry which urged:

\[
\text{Matahari chondong zohrah beridar} \\
\text{Chayanya lempah sluroh bandar} \\
\text{Merika yang lalai dibri sedar} \\
\text{Mendengar berbagai wana dan mbar.}^{18}
\]

[The sun is setting,  
Venus ascends and her  
light spreads over every city  
The sleeper must awaken,  
and listen to all that is happening.]

In one editorial on 4 May 1895, the Bintang Timor, even suggested that the Peranakan Chinese should prepare themselves to participate in the government of the country. Bintang Timor urged:

\[
Pada waktu ini, peranakan kita berdiri menegok orang orang
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17 Cited ibid., p. 57.  
18 Ibid., p. 203.
putih perentah negri atau bandar (municipality) maka harinya nanti datang apabila dia orang sendiri tiada mau berdiri sahaja melain dia musti masok tangan membuat undang-undang dan merentah negri.19

[At this moment, our local born just see the white men rule municipality or country. There will be a day when they themselves not only observe, but also get involved in law-making and ruling the country.]

Kabar Sialu expressed the loyalty of the Peranakan Chinese to the British Government. In one editorial, dated 5 January 1924, it wrote:

Kita bikin ini daily News (akhbar Harian/maksud kita (intention) iaitu kasatu; hormatkan, bsarkan dan pihara sama lindong-kan (protect) bendera Inggeris. Sbab Pranakan Bab-Tionghua sudah dibranakan dibawah British flag, dan dibawah naong (shadow) nya kita sudah dan ada skarang mendpaat banyak k'untongan.

Kedua: hajat-kita (desire) iaitu kita mahu bangsa-kita boleh jadi padai stia (hati-betol; faith) stiawan kepada Bendera-Inggeris sampaikan kita orang smua menjadi kita anak-rakyat (subjects) British flag yang baik (good citizens) itu.20

[In publishing this Daily News, our first intention is to respect, to praise and to maintain and protect the British flag.

As a consequence of being born under the British flag and British protection, the Pranakan Chinese have already ained many ben­

Our second intention is, if possible that our race will become enlightened loyal ... to the British flag ... until we all became good subjects of the British flag.]

Other Peranakan Chinese newspapers in the Malay of Baba Malay language published during the 1920s up to 1930s, showed and promoted the Peranakan Chinese identity as loyal subjects of the British Government. These newspaper also promoted and encouraged social and political aware­

20 Cited Song Ong Siang, op. cit., p.319.
China.

To promote their interests in various fields, the Peranakan Chinese organized an association which served as a pressure group. The Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) was formed by Song Ong Siang, Lim Boon Keng and others on 17 August 1900 in Singapore. The objectives of this organization were:

(a) To promote among the members an intelligent interest in the affairs of the British Empire and to encourage and maintain their loyalty as subjects of the Queen.

(b) To offer facilities for the discussion of all questions relating to the social, intellectual and moral welfare of the Chinese British subjects in the colony.

(c) To appoint a representative committee in London to watch over the interests of the Association.

(d) To promote the welfare of British subjects in any other lawful or constitutional manner.

(e) To encourage higher and technical education for the Chinese in some practical way.

(f) To take any requisite lawful step for the defence of the rights and privileges of British Subjects.²¹

The Singapore SCBA initially attracted 800 members. Tan Jiak Kim was appointed as the President and Song Ong Siang as the Honorary Secretary-General. The British Government seemed to favour the SCBA leaders serving as Chinese unofficial members in the legislative body of the Straits Settlements, but they served in the capacity of Chinese spokesmen, not as representatives of the Peranakan Chinese.

After the formation of the Singapore SCBA, another branch was set up in Malacca in October 1900. The SCBA (Malacca) succeeded in enrolling 200 members, but this branch was closed in 1904 because of a lack of interest among members. In Penang, according to Diana Ooi, "The Northern Colony remained obdurate and it was not until twenty years later that an SCBA was eventually founded there."²²

The SCBA liked to give the impression that they were loyal subjects

²¹ Diana Ooi, op. cit., p. 94.
²² Song Ong Siang, op. cit., p. 324.
of the Government and Britain. When the Duke and Duchess of York visited Singapore in 1901, the SCBA took the opportunity to express their loyalty to Britain. According to Song Ong Siang, the SCBA conceived and carried out the idea of erecting a Chinese Pagoda surmounted by the figure of Britannia holding a torch in her uplifted hand, “an emblem of the Chinese social fabric illuminated by the light of science and western progress.”

The Peranakan Chinese also expressed their gratitude to the royal family:

We are deeply sensible that it was to the very liberal and benevolent policy of her late majesty the Great Queen Victoria of Blessed and Glorious memory that we owe in a very great measure our present prosperity.

The Peranakan Chinese attitude met with a good response from the British Government. The British authorities were clearly and positively in favour of it and also strongly supported the Malayan-born Chinese who were English-educated and who had become professionals. These were groomed and nurtured to serve as spokesmen for the whole Chinese community.

Unofficial Chinese members in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council and the Federal Council in the Federal Malay States were Peranakan Chinese or Malayan born Chinese. Many SCBA leaders, such as Tan Jiak Kim, served as unofficial members in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council: he served between 1889-1891 and 1902-1915. Also in the Council were Seah Liang Seah, (1883-1890 and 1894-1895), Dr. Lim Boon Keng (1898-1901 and 1915-1920) and Song Ong Siang (1925-1927).

During the 1920s, the acting Colonial Secretary introduced a proposal in the Legislative Council to appoint a select committee to study the need for council reform. This event led to a great increase in the level of political activity among the Peranakan Chinese. Lim Boon Keng, unofficial Chinese member in the Legislative Council welcomed the government proposal for council reform. He said:

The question of reform is in the air and the Government may be heartily congratulated that it has not waited for the public to clamour for it. The people of this colony are well known for

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23 Cited ibid.
being very long suffering and patient, and (it is) just as well that the Government has come forward to offer them the reform, which in other colonies has already been initiated.26

In the same year, Lim Boon Keng also made an appeal to the government to let Asian people in the Straits Settlements be given an opportunity to serve in the public service. He said:

..., [the native of the Straits Settlements] should have the right when he is fitted by moral character by high education in the best University, that if there is a chance, that chance should be given to him to join the [public] service. At present he is absolutely unable to do so. He is a stranger and a foreigner in his own country. Some of our best men who have a little brain have to go else­where to get recognition and... [he does] not think that is the best thing for... [them].27

The Government appointed a Select Committee whose members were chosen from the Legislative Council, including Lim Boon Keng. This committee invited the public to submit any proposals or opinions on council reform to it. Malacca had set up its SCBA again in 1916. In the Straits Settlements, only Penang did not have any association to represent the Peranakan Chinese.

On 16 November 1920, 25 Peranakan Chinese in Penang organized a meeting in the Chinese Town Hall to discuss forming an SCBA for Penang.28 At last, the SCBA (Penang) was set up in that month. Lim Eow Thoon, a former Municipal Commissioner was elected as President and Lim Seng Hooi as Honorary Secretary, but it was too late for the SCBA to submit a memorandum for the Select Committee. Instead, as individuals the Peranakan Chinese leaders from Penang, including Lim Ching Ean and Heah Joo Seng, submitted their own memorandum to the Select Committee. Further memoranda were from the Singapore SCBA and Malacca SCBA and others.

The Select Committee made a report in early 1921 which recognized that:

26 Cited ibid.
27 Diana Ooi, op. cit., p. 95.
... the instinct of loyalty to a motherland (Straits Settlements) has been confined to the Malays, the Eurasians and a growing body of Straits-born Chinese. But in numbers and in wealth these classes represent at present but a small proportion of the population.29

This report also proposed the enlargement of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements by increasing the number of unofficial members until they formed a majority. It proposed that the number of official members including the Governor, should increase to thirteen, and unofficial members to fourteen, as a first step towards extending the representative character of the council. The colonial government did not implement fully these recommendations. The numbers of the Legislative Council were increased to twenty-seven: thirteen unofficial and fourteen official members, including the Governor himself.

The majority of the members, official or unofficial, were European. It meant that the Asian contingent, including the Chinese, were unable to determine the Council's decisions. Thus, the Peranakan Chinese would not be able to play an important role in this body.

With the enlargement of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, new members, including Tan Cheng Lock from Malacca, were appointed. Tan Cheng Lock was the most outspoken critic of British policies and played a crucial role in promoting Malayan national consciousness among the Peranakan Chinese and the Chinese community in general. He was born in Malacca on 5 April 1883, son of Tan Keong Ann and Lee Seck Bin.30 His grandfather, Tan Chong Bock, and his great grandfather has also been born in Malaya. They were descended from Tan Hay Kwan of Fukien Province, China, who was a navigator and owner of a junk, trading between Celebes Island and Malacca. Tan Hay settled in Malacca when he was still young and died in Malacca in 1801. The Tan family had been in Malacca for more than 200 years.

Tan Cheng Lock was educated at the Malacca High School and the Raffles Institution in Singapore. In 1902, R.W. Hullet recruited him as a teacher of English at Raffles Institution. But a few years later he returned to

30 Ibid, p. 28.
Malacca to become the assistant-manager of the Bukit Kajang Rubber Estate. Later he became one of the richest men in Malaya. Afterwards, politics became an important part of his life. He was well known in Malayan politics as a great leader of the Peranakan Chinese and a Malayan nationalist. His involvement in the life of public service began in 1912 after he was appointed as a member of the Malacca Municipal Council. Three years later he was elected as the president of the Malacca SCBA. Tan Cheng Lock, like other Peranakan Chinese leaders, was frustrated at the attitude and policies of the British, which excluded this community from responsible posts in the government such as the civil services. After he joined the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, he continued the battle for better treatment of the Peranakan Chinese and other British subjects. Even though he was a newcomer in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council he participated actively. Immediately after he joined the Council, Tan Cheng Lock criticized the government for its failure to implement all the recommendations of the Select Committee on the question of Council reform. Tan also asked the government to open up the civil service to Asiatic communities. Song Ong Siang, who replaced Lee Chuan Guan in representing the Chinese community in Singapore in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, shared the same view regarding the Council reform and the issue of the civil service. But Tan was a more outspoken critic of government policies. According to K.G. Tregonning, Tan's criticism of the government in his first speech was "unprecedented in the annals of the Legislative Council." Tan Cheng Lock's viewpoint was also far in advance of other Peranakan Chinese leaders. For instance, he raised the "Colour Bar" issue, whereby Asians were discriminated against and Europeans favoured, in government services. He demanded that Chinese and Asians should be given an opportunity to participate in public office.

In 1924, Tan Cheng Lock again criticized the government on the public office issue. Tan said:

The exclusion from the Malayan civil service of those who are not of purely European descent has, since it was first introduced in 1904, engendered discontent in this country and as sure as the sun will shine tomorrow, will cause some agitation if we wait for

31 Ibid., p. 28.
32 Ibid., p. 29
33 Cited ibid., p. 29.
too long . . . . To (my) mind, it is a matter of simple justice that the natives of this place by which I mean all non-European British subjects, should be admitted to the civil services of their country . . . . 34

Tan Cheng Lock also proposed in the Legislative Council on 1 November 1926, that the ultimate political goal should be a united self-governing British Malaya with a Federal Government and Parliament for the whole of it. 35 He said, "... I [Tan Cheng Lock] think it is high time that we commenced to take action towards forging the surest and strongest link of that united Malaya by fostering and creating a true Malayan spirit and consciousness amongst its people to the complete elimination of racial or communal feeling." 36 He added that they should aim at building up a Malayan community with a Malayan consciousness closely united with the British Empire.

Another SCBA leader from Penang, Lim Cheng Ean, who became a member of the Legislative Council in 1929, was also an outspoken critic of government policies, particularly on the issue of the civil service. 37 In 1932, the Colonial Government established two units of the civil service, one for the Straits Settlements and the other for the Federal Malay States. The Straits Settlements Civil Service admitted a limited number of Asian members but the Malayan Civil Service was opened for Europeans and, at the lower ranks, for the Malays only.

In early 1930s, Peranakan Chinese political consciousness intensified due to certain factors, such as the Depression and the revival of political issues which threatened the future of this community. On 11 October 1930 Wan Boon Seng and other Peranakan Chinese set up Bintang Pranakan to serve the interests of their community. This newspaper claimed it was "the only Straits born Chinese Romanised Malay Weekly Journal in British Malaya." 38 The objectives of Bintang Pranakan were to promote a sense of unity among the Peranakan and to show and maintain their loyalty to the Government and to work for the advancement of the Peranakan Chinese community.

In an editorial dated 20 December 1930, Bintang Pranakan explained the aim of its publisher in setting up this newspaper. It wrote:

34 Cited ibid., p. 30.
35 Cited ibid.
36 Oong Hak Ching, op. cit., p. 217.
38 Ibid., p. 3.
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Sbab ini Bintang Pranakan punya publisher Baba-baba Peranakan jadi itu sebab dengan sbrapa boleh kita mau majukan pasal Pranakan Tonghua. 39

[Because this Bintang Pranakan belongs to a Peranakan Chinese publisher, it should promote the Peranakan Chinese cause.] and urged:

Disini tempulah yang lain-lain Pranakan Tonghua mesti kluarkan plohrnya dan kasi tau sama orang-orang dunia yang Pranakan Tonghua juga tau pasal council Reform and voting . . . 40

[At this moment the Peranakan Chinese must work hard to inform the people of the world that they also understand the subject of council reform and voting.]

In its editorial, dated 14 March 1931, it continued to express its loyalty to the government. According to the editorial:

Kita kluarkan ini surat kabar sa'minggu satu kali maksud kita yang pertama-tamanya mau hormatkan, dirikan dan membalaskan trima kaseh kepada Bendera Inggeris yang sudah amat banyak kepenan dan kasi chukup perlajaran, kesenangan dan keuntungan kepada sklian Pranakan di [seluruh] British Malaya . . . [Jika kita rakyat British yang sejati] . . . kita mesti unjokkan kita punya hati chinta kepada ka-Raja-an Inggeris. 41

[We publish this newspaper once a week (with) our objectives being to respect, to uphold and to say thank you to the English flag which works really hard and give protection, education and prosperity to all Peranakan Chinese in the whole British Malaya. As we are really British subjects, . . . we must show our love to English (sic) government.]

But due to economic hardship and the increase in Overseas Chinese political activities some members of the Peranakan Chinese began to identify themselves as Chinese and look towards China. One Peranakan Chinese put it thus:

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid, 14 March 1931, p. 31.
41 Ta Chen, Emigrant Communities in South China, Institute of Pacific Relation, N.Y. 1940, p. 279.
For years we used to send our children to the government school so that after graduation they could become government clerks or commercial salesmen in some European business. But these opportunities have decreased in recent years (1930s). Therefore, ... [we] send our children to Chinese schools in the hope that they may later find employment in China ... .42

One of the Peranakan Chinese who demanded that the British Government should educate them in the Chinese language wrote:

Circumstances over which the Straits-born Chinese had no control forced them to adopt the Malay language as their mother-tongue to their great regret but now they have opened their eyes to the desirability, advisability and necessity of having an elementary grounding in their mother-tongue. So that they might retrieve their position as ‘Chinese’.43

However, the Bintang Pranakan criticized the attitude of those Peranakan Chinese who looked down on the Malayan Language as their mother tongue. The Bintang Pranakan editorial dated 7 February 1931 remarked:

... jikalau betol yang kita jati Pranakan, kenapa kita mesti segan mau chakap Melayu ... bukah-kah chakapan Melayu, chakapan Pranakan. Slalu kita mesti ingat itu perchakapan orang tua-tua, “Jangan kasi orang tempak-kan KACHANG LUPA-KAN KULIT-NYA ... ”44

[... if its was true that we were really British Straits-born, why must we be ashamed to speak in the Malay language ... Isn’t Malay language our language? We must always remember what old people said, “Don’t let other people say, peanut forget its skin ...”]

On 7 March 1931, Bintang Pranakan reaffirmed its view on the political loyalty of the Pranakan Chinese. The newspaper wrote:

Banyak orang-orang ada menanya satu sama lain iaitu jikalau apa-apa pasal sebila mana mesti Pranakan Tionghua champor? Kita punya pikir, skilian-nya, Jati Pranakan Tionghua mesti jaga—

42 “Wayfarer" (pen name) writing to The Malacca Guardian, 16 January 1933, p. 5.
43 Bintang Pranakan, 7 February 1931.
44 Ibid, 7 March 1931, p. 3.
[Many people are asking among themselves, if something happens, which side should the Peranakan Chinese support? In our view, every true Peranakan Chinese must protect their own homeland (Malaya) because all of us are British subjects (and) at the point something happens, race must be put aside. Government must move forward. In our opinion, if our own fathers happened to be under a different flag, when (we) met in the theatre of war, son and father must fight against each other because everyone must defend their own government.]

One Peranakan Chinese not only shared the Bintang Pranakan view but suggested that Peranakan Chinese should not identify themselves as Chinese. According to him, they should call themselves “Sino-Malay”. He wrote:

Let them honestly ask themselves what they really want to be British subjects or Chinese. Can’t they realise that the British Government is not blind to the dual role they are playing by being both British subjects and Chinese at the same time . . . . Those who consider they are pro-China at heart and have hopes of returning to or serving that country some day, let them say so now and discard their rights as British subjects once for all. If they are products of this country and this is their home and their interests are wholly and permanently in it, then let them be manly enough to throw overboard their long forgotten Chinese ancestry.46

He suggested that “the local babas call themselves just “Babas” or “Sino-Malays” and adopt this “official name” [sic] and “come under the comprehensive category ‘Malayan’ and still claim all the privileges of being sons of the soil47 or “bumiputera.” Another Peranakan Chinese even suggested that the Peranakan Chinese should be defined thus:

46 Ibid.
47 Baba (pen name) writing to The Straits Times, 21 October 1931.
At least two generations of local birth, permanent local interest, absence of relative of any kind in China, no ancestral home in China, no desire to return to China, recognition (of) the colony as their adopted country, loyalty to British rule and sovereignty, declaration on oath may be asked if necessary.\textsuperscript{48}

Peranakan Chinese political consciousness seemed to reach its peak during the early 1930s. The Peranakan Chinese leaders, the SCBA, the Peranakan Chinese newspaper and also the Peranakan Chinese from the lower classes were promoting Peranakan Chinese consciousness and interests. They made claims for rights as sons of the soil, to be included in public office and other positions in government, and to have a greater say in policy-making bodies such as the Straits Settlements Legislative Council.

In 1931 the SCBAs of Penang, Singapore and Malacca cooperated and submitted a joint memorandum to the colonial government on the question of council reform. This memorandum declared:

\begin{quote}
The political consciousness of the Straits-born Chinese is a sign of healthy growth and their aspiration ought to be guided along constitutional lines for the promotion of the community. Your petitioners humbly pray that your excellency may be moved by a feeling of magnanimity to concede to the Straits born Chinese a greater measure through their respectable Associations in each of the settlements, the privilege to elect their own representatives on the Legislative Council in addition to the three nominated Chinese members nominated by Government at present.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

This memorandum was signed by the presidents of SCBAs; Lim Han Hoe (Singapore), Heah Joo Seang (Penang) and Tan Cheng Lock (Malacca). They demanded an increase in the numbers of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council to six members from each settlement. They hoped the government would allow them to choose their own representatives in the council. They also appealed to the government both to increase the number of unofficial members until they formed a majority in the council, and to nominate a Chinese member to the Executive Council.

The demands by the Peranakan Chinese were received by the government coldly. M.B. Shelly, the acting Colonial Secretary, rejecting the claims by the Peranakan Chinese because, in his view, they were not justified in

\textsuperscript{48} Cited Oong Hak Ching, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 220.
\textsuperscript{49} Cited, \textit{ibid.}
appointing six Chinese members to represent the SCBAs as the membership of these organizations was limited compared with “the numerical strength and vested interest of the Chinese community [other than the Peranakan Chinese] in the colony” which “… are so preponderant.” However, a Chinese was nominated to the Executive Council by the Government.

The SCBA disagreed with the government view that their demands were unjustified because their numbers were limited. In November 1933, at the annual meeting of the SCBA (Singapore), which was attended by Tan Cheng Lock and Lim K. Lay, Tay Lian Teck as chairman said that:

[The] Association does not represent the views of [all] the Chinese British subjects [because] our members [were] almost all the Chinese professional lawyers, medical practitioners, architects, bankers, accountants, merchants, and clerical classes [but] it is quality that should really count and not numerical strength.51

Nevertheless the SCBA made an attempt to increase its members. The SCBA Singapore succeeded in getting 20 new members and declared that it would “knock at the door of Government until it is opened.”52 Heah Joo Seang also made appeals to the Peranakan Chinese to become members of the SCBA. According to Heah Joo Seang:

We asked to be accorded the privilege of electing our own representatives on the Legislative Council but our request was turned down because it is considered that our membership is so small in proportion to the Straits-born Chinese community.53

He appealed to the Peranakan Chinese “… [to] help to make it [SCBA] a power in the land.”54 After his appeal, SCBA Penang got 20 more new members from professional groups, including medical practitioners, lawyers and accountants. It was apparent that the SCBA belonged to the elitist class of the Peranakan Chinese.

Peranakan Chinese participation in political activities did not achieve any positive results for their community. In fact the reverse happened; it created a situation which was more unfavourable to them. In response to

50 The Straits Times, 22 November 1933.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
Peranakan Chinese demands, the Malays emerged to promote and protect their rights as sons of the soil in Malaya. For instance, a Malay newspaper, *Suara Benar*, condemned the claims by Tan Cheng Lock that the Peranakan Chinese has rights as ‘sons of the soil’. According to this newspaper:

_Hak orang-orang Melayu itu bukan kerana mereka beranak di Malaya bahkan kerana anak-anak Melayu berbangsa asal mempunyai tanah airnya. Hak beranak di tanah air orang dan hak mempunyai tanah air jauh berbeda._

[The rights of the Malays arise not only from being born in Malaya, but also through being indigenous to the country. The right to be born in a foreign country and the right to belong to that country are greatly different.]

Lim Chin Yan, the Penang Peranakan Chinese member in the Legislative council, retaliated with the remark:

... who said this is a Malay country?" When Captain Light arrived, did he find Malays, or Malay villages? Our forefathers came here and worked hard as coolies, weren't ashamed to become coolies - and they did not send their money back to China. They married and spent money here, and in this way the Government was able to open up the country from jungle to civilisation. We've become inseparable from this country. It's ours, our country . . . .

Heah Joo Seang, the president of Penang SCBA also joined in the conflict with the Malays on the “son of the soil” issue. In his view, this issue would become “a germ of latent racial hostility.”

The British attitude towards the Peranakan Chinese claims “in a large part reflected the views of the Malay rulers in whose hands sovereignty theoretically lay.” Malay Sultans always felt uneasy at the increasingly vocal claims for political rights and “admission to the government services.”


57 Cited Tan Chee Beng, op. cit., p. 226.

Sir Andrew Caldecot, as Chief Secretary, pledged that "there was no question of introducing against the wishes of the rulers, any Chinese or Indian elements into the Malayan Civil Service in the Malay States." 59

Instead of yielding to the demands of the Peranakan Chinese community, the colonial government reemphasized a strong "pro-Malay policy" which was reflected in the decentralization policy carried out under Clementi during the 1930s. Under the decentralization scheme, the powers of the Malay Sultans, Residents and State Councils were increased by the loosening of the Federation structure. One of the aims of this policy was to attract the Malay Sultans in the UFMS to join in the Union of Malaya, but the main reason was Clementi's anti-Chinese attitude. The Peranakan Chinese leaders were convinced that this policy itself was the product of a pro-Malay attitude and that it had very definitely served the Malay cause. 60

To the Peranakan Chinese, it was clear that there was no way they stood to gain in the immediate future from the loosening of federal ties while they stood to use both politically and economically. Hence Tan Cheng Lock, as Peranakan Chinese leader, strongly opposed this policy, fearing that the decentralization scheme will tend to develop, produce and perfect in the Malay States a purely autocratic form of government based on the taxation of the people, whose energy, labour, capital and enterprise are the mainstay of those states without their adequate and effective representation in them as is largely the case in the Unfederated Malay States. 61

The decentralization controversy became intense and far-reaching until the Colonial office considered it necessary to send a mission under Brigadier-General Sir Samuel Wilson to Malaya in the autumn of 1932, as an impartial observer. 62 One of the members of the mission was Edward Gent who was still a junior officer at the Colonial Office. It should be noted that Gent became the head of the Far Eastern Department of the Colonial Office in the late 1930s and played an important role in formulation of Britain's post-war policy towards Malaya.

During Sir Samuel Wilson's visit to Malaya, Tan Cheng Lock again

59 Cited ibid., p. 114.
60 Rupert Emerson, Malaysia; A Study in direct and Indirect Rule, University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, reprinted 1966, pp. 313-324.
61 Cited ibid. p. 323.
62 Ibid., p. 323.
repeated his opinion opposing the decentralization scheme. He expressed his fear that “... a powerful State Council dominated by the Malays and a pro-Malay British Resident may, for instance, shape the land, educational and other policies of the states, should it have control over them, to the detriment of the non-Malay inhabitants therein.”

The Peranakan Chinese conflict with the British authorities regarding the decentralization policy did not go further than words. The most obvious reason was because it was almost exclusively the business class of the Peranakan Chinese who opposed government policies. They could not fail to recognize that any radical overturn in the country would hurt their interests.

Disillusioned with British policy, the Peranakan Chinese became politically inactive in the middle of 1930s. Tan Cheng Lock himself retired from the Legislative and Executive Councils in 1934 and had a long holiday in Switzerland.

During the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1941), the Peranakan Chinese emerged from isolation to take part in fund-raising activities for the China Relief Fund. Some Peranakan Chinese made it clear that their activities were not politically motivated. Chu Kei Hai, the Vice President of the SCBA of Singapore said that:

Some people have tried to make it an excuse that because they are British citizens they are not allowed to contribute to the China Relief Fund... this is a mistake which requires correction. After all, anybody who contributes to a fund like this is only performing an act of humanity.

Dr. Lim Boon Keng, former president of the Singapore SCBA, formed the Straits Chinese China Relief Fund Committee of Singapore which affiliated with the SCRFC. Lim Boon Keng became its chairman, Mrs. Lee Choon Guan became Vice-Chairman and other Peranakan Chinese leaders such as Tay Lian Teck, the president of the Singapore SCBA and T.W. Ong (who after World War II became president of the Singapore SCBA) were appointed as committee members. This was the first purely Peranakan Chinese organization to take part in activities of the Peranakan Chinese organization to take part in activities concerning China. Some writers consider the

63 Ibid., p. 324.
64 Ibid., pp. 320-321.
65 The Straits Times, 16 November 1937.
66 C.F. Yong, op. cit., p. 211.
involvement of the Peranakan Chinese organization in SCRFC activities as a mark of solidarity between China-born and the Peranakan Chinese communities in Singapore between 1938 and 1941.67

At the outbreak of the European War, in September 1939, the Peranakan Chinese expressed their support for the British Government. Tay Lian Teck, the president of the Singapore SCBA made an appeal to the Peranakan Chinese to prepare to defend the British empire. He declared, “this is our home...we should protect this country with our lives.”68 Later the SCBA contributed $550 to the Malayan Patriotic Fund. The SCBA also appealed to the government to seriously consider extending the manpower register, in order to include compulsory registration of all Chinese British subjects.

During the Japanese invasion of Malaya, the Peranakan Chinese collaborated and supported the British Government in fighting against the invaders. The Peranakan Chinese avowed that they would “sink or swim” with the British Government. One of the Peranakan Chinese leaders who really ‘sank’ (drowned) was Tay Lian Teck, the president of the Singapore SCBA. But some Peranakan Chinese leaders from Malacca evacuated to India. The Japanese invasion disrupted the development of Peranakan Chinese politics.

Peranakan Chinese, who formed a sub-ethnic group of Chinese, considered themselves as part and parcel of Straits Settlements and enjoyed the status of British subjects. The English educated Peranakan Chinese formed their own political organization, with the SCBAs of Singapore, Malacca and Penang as the mouthpiece of their community. They expressed their loyalty to the British crown through the SCBAs, the newspapers and magazines in the Baba Peranakan language and English, and through their leaders in government bodies. As loyal British subjects and with a long historical connection with Malaya, the Peranakan Chinese claimed the right to share political power in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States.

The British authorities always appreciated the existence of the Peranakan Chinese as a loyal subject. But they were untouched by the moderate or reasonable demands of the Peranakan Chinese. This can be explain by the fact that Peranakan Chinese being a peripheral society was not in a strong position to pose any serious threat to the British rule. Developments during the end of 1941 and after the World War II unified the Peranakan and the rest of the Chinese population in Malaysia and Singapore in fighting for their common interests — a greater share in the political life of post-war Malaya.

67 Ibid.
68 The Straits Times, 1 November 1941.