

SPOTLIGHT: FOR WHOM THE NING YEUNG BELL TOLLS

BY YUEN

No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* of thy *friends* or of *thine owne* were; any mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.¹

The focus of this month's MV Spotlight is a bell. More specifically, the Ning Yeung Wui Kuan (宁阳会馆) Bell belonging to the oldest Chinese clan association in Singapore. Usually ignored and by-passed for the much grander Revere Bell² around the corner, this artefact is a symbol of the enduring and inextricable link overseas Chinese will forever have with their ancestors' and ancestral homes in China.

The Bell, incidentally, was also THE instrument of choice for the piece of music commissioned specifically to commemorate the reunification of Hong Kong & China. While the British marked the end of an era with *Last Post* on bugle, China played part of 天, 地, 人 *Heaven, Earth, Mankind (Symphony 1997)* on a set of ancient *bianzhong* (编钟)³. In the same way that the singing of this set of 65 ceremonial bronze bells excavated from the graves of a Marquis almost 2,500 years ago are sounds from the past heard in the present, each and every one of Singapore's Chinese Clan Associations connect its clansmen with their past to the present.

"Maybe there really is no distinction between the past and future – everything is a circle." (Tan Dun, composer of *Symphony 1997*)

HISTORY OF CLAN ASSOCIATIONS



Figure 1: Ning Yeung Bell

The Chinese have had a long history of emigration in the name of exploration, trade and quest for a better future; going back before 200BCE when the 1st Emperor of China Qin Shi Huang sent a convoy of 3,000 virgin boys and girls out in search of elixirs of immortality.

More recently, the system of *kongsi* (公司⁴) or clan-halls emerged to help fellow Chinese diaspora overcome economic difficulty, social ostracism, and oppression overseas.

Their importance cannot be over-stated as these clan-associations became the backbone of Chinese communities worldwide, and many even developed into multinational conglomerates, notably the Teochew Ngee Ann Kongsi started by Gambier King Seah Eu Chin in 1845.

¹ Hemingway excerpts a portion of John Donne's *Meditation XVII* in the epigraph of his novel *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, which, thematically, seems to underscore the significance of community and fellowmen. These are the values embraced by young American Robert Jordan as he leaves home to fight in the Spanish Civil war. And these values are the very reasons behind the founding of most Chinese clans in Singapore.

² Originally presented to St Andrew's Church in 1843, its provenance is traced back to the relatively recent history of Church Bells which were first introduced into Christian Churches in AD 400. Pales in comparison to the more than 2,500 years history of Chinese Bronze Bells dating back to the beginning of the Warring States period (战国时代).

³ This set of ancient bells took 6 men with wooden mallets to play, and when it was first brought out from the tomb, composer Tan Dun recalls the moment "body shaking, eyes wet" as the bells were "delivered to him after 2,400 years from another world".

⁴ The word *kongsi* 公司 in Chinese language today literally translates to "company or corporation" which usually suggests a business firm that is recognized by law, and operates with a degree of mercantilism. Less used these days is *kongsi* as a reference to triad societies, which was interchangeable with *hui* 会.

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Most of these Chinese clan associations, also known as *wuikuan* (会馆) were formed along the lineage of dialect groups⁵. This formation of affiliation and network based on common language, customs and values provided invaluable support for the new arrivals, creating a community similar to home; with solidarity and comradeship as the guiding ethos. Some smaller and tight-knit clans were also formed by clansmen sharing the same surname, while another group of clan associations were established on the basis of trade or occupation.

THE RAFFLES CONNECTION

The Ning Yeung Bell that is on display in the Singapore History Gallery belongs to Ning Yeung Wui Kuan (宁阳会馆), which is the oldest Chinese clan association in Singapore. Set up initially as a temple in 1822, it soon evolved into an assembly hall and ancestral temple for Cantonese immigrants from Taishan (台山) county in Guangdong Province.

The original *wuikuan* (Figure 2) was situated facing South Bridge Road founded by Cho Ah Chee (or Tsao Ah Chih曹亚志⁶) the carpenter who sailed in with Sir Stamford Raffles on 'S.S. Indiana' from Penang in 1819.

As a "local" Chinese, he had volunteered to be part of the 1st core team to come ashore to negotiate with the *penghulus* (native headmen) and ascertain that there was no Dutch settlement in Singapore.

For his instrumental role, Cho obtained the site at the corner of Hokkien Street to build his *wuikuan* which was, unfortunately demolished in 1962 and replaced by a 5-storey clan building.



Figure 2: 寧陽會館 (demolished 1962)

The association itself was later relocated in 1995 to Ann Siang Hill and then again, to a rather insipid location at Geylang Lorong 8 in 2005.

HOUSE OF CHO



Figure 3: Before demolition in 1974

A 2-storey building situated at No. 1 Lavender Street was also believed to have been presented to Cho by Sir Stamford Raffles. However, this house was also torn down to make way for a small public park at the junction of Lavender Street and Kallang Road after the Government acquired the 135 year old House of Cho for the purpose of road widening.

Mr Cho's final resting place too, like his home & *wuikuan* had been relocated. He died in 1830, and his body was exhumed from its original burial grounds in Ann Siang Hill and re-buried in the Peck San Teng

⁵ Locality clans associations are classified into 4 main groups: Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan & Sanjiang. Those along dialect lines were predominantly Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew and Hokkien.

⁶ Cho was also said to have given Rochor Road its name when he set up Wu Zhu (梧槽) as a branch of the Heaven and Earth Society (天地會) in the Rochor Area to help with their efforts to overthrow the Manchurians and restore the Ming in China (反清復明).

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Cemetery (广惠肇碧山亭⁷) in Thomson Road.

CLANS TODAY



Figure 4: Ning Yeung Wui Kuan celebrating 190th Anniversary; May 2012⁸

Clearly, the role and purpose of Chinese clan associations in Singapore has been redefined since 1822 when the concept of *wuikuan* was first initiated by Cho. As clan and clan members grew and prospered together with the development of Singapore, their contributions to the Chinese community have also gone beyond the provision of basic assistance such as food and lodging.

Like corporations, their reach has extended into education, health-care and charitable organizations. The Chinese community today no longer perceives clan halls as integral social aid but views them as a preserver of their heritage.

Chinese clan associations, like the 2,500 years old *bianzhong*, are still going strong.

The ancient bells first brought out for the 1997 Hong Kong Handover ceremony were heard once again at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. *Wuikuans*, which seemed to have fallen out of favor in the last couple of decades, are back in the spotlight finding relevance in SG50 and beyond as the younger generation of Chinese are once again exposed to their own dialects and long forgotten culture.

When the Ning Yeung bell was first cast almost 200 years ago, this island was in transition, just as Singapore was back in 1965 with the country in political disarray and widespread social insecurity. Given the instability of times then, the ringing of the bells may be the hopeful metaphor of a harmonious society. A view that still resonates strongly with the Chinese in Singapore today; one that brings us back to our bell – our clan associations.

No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe... for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

⁷ In 1979, one of the largest Chinese cemeteries of its time (almost 400 acres of land with over 100,000 graves) Peck San Theng was taken over and turned into part of Bishan New Town. And ever since then, Mr Cho's ashes are now housed, rather discreetly amongst 1000,000 other niches in a columbarium in Bishan.

⁸ Photo from our Minister of Transport Mr Lui Tuck Yew's Facebook page; Mr Liu seated front row, 6th from left. He also posted several other photos of him with possibly, the oldest member of the Ning Yeung clan at Ning Yeung Wui Kuan's 190th Anniversary.