



(Credit: Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall website)

<p>Title: <i>Nanyang and the Founding of the Republic</i> 南洋與創立民國</p> <p>Type: <i>Memoir</i></p> <p>Author: <i>Teo Eng Hock</i></p> <p>Year of Publication: 1933</p> <p>Current Location: <i>Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, Gallery 1</i></p>
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Nanyang and the Founding of the Republic - What's Your (Hi)story?

“*Nanyang and the Founding of the Republic*” (《南洋與創立民國》). This is the title of a seemingly modest publication penned by a Mr Teo Eng Hock (張永福) and published in 1933. It is amongst the first few artefacts that visitors encounter as they venture into the galleries at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. Yet, its presence is often left unnoticed, as visitors tend to be drawn to the suite of family photographs across the hallway which are more visually prominent.

What is so special about this 80-year-old book that accords it the status of a key artefact at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall?

In every (hi)story that is told to future generations, often what is important is not just *what* is being told but also *who* is telling it. In this case, “*Nanyang and the Founding of the Republic*” documented the timeline of events and activities related to Dr Sun Yat Sen’s revolutionary cause that took place in Nanyang, as well as the contribution of the Nanyang supporters towards Dr Sun’s vision for a Republic (of China). It is significant too that these stories were relayed by Mr Teo Eng Hock, the gentleman who graciously lent his villa to Dr Sun to serve as a revolutionary base in Singapore. Teo, together with his associate Tan Chor Lam and nephew Lim Nee Soon, formed part of the core support network that helped advance Dr Sun’s cause in this region.

Thanks to a recent reprint of this publication by Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, I was finally able to get a glimpse of its contents first hand. Not only did the reprint make more copies available for circulation, the curatorial team at Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall has also painstakingly translated the entire text into simplified Chinese characters. These now make it possible for a wider audience to access the text more easily. Besides providing anecdotes about Dr Sun’s lifestyle in Nanyang (for instance, his love for mangoes and other tropical fruits, and his hobby in horseriding), Teo’s memoir also enclosed several passages

of letters and correspondences with Sun and his supporters. This formed the basis for much of the subsequent historical research on Dr Sun's connection with the Chinese in Nanyang.

While Teo was not the first to write about Dr Sun and Nanyang, his contribution provided a different geographical imagination of the Chinese revolution. Other commemorative works tended to be centred on the uprisings in China with overseas Chinese primarily featured as part of the fundraising arm, but Teo provided an alternative perspective to explain how the overseas Chinese in Nanyang were not necessarily peripheral to the revolution. Even so, the efforts of the Nanyang supporters were widely perceived to be a sub-plot of the broader revolution that eventually paved the way for a new Republic of China in 1911.

Personally though, I have always wondered about the extent to which such sentiments amongst the people in Nanyang may have influenced the process of nation-building in Singapore. When talking about the rise of nationalism in Singapore, we often attribute it to the immediate post-World War Two period, when it became increasingly apparent to the people in Singapore that perhaps we should not depend on an external power to defend us (or so it is written in our history textbooks). While the Japanese Occupation was indeed a catalyst that fueled anti-colonial attitudes amongst the local populace, I wonder if the early seeds of political consciousness planted by Dr Sun and his local supporters could have been a contributing factor for the spread of nationalist sentiments in the 1950s, at least among the Chinese community.

Admittedly, many Chinese based in Singapore were sojourners and at that time still regarded China as their homeland, so any feelings of loyalty would have been most likely directed to China, not Singapore. That said, we should also bear in mind that the 1950s was also a time of uncertainty in China after the People's Republic of China was formed and the Chinese Communist Party rose to power. The new political situation would probably have led the Chinese in Singapore who were not left-leaning to reconsider their intention to "return home" to their motherland and think about making Singapore their home instead. Thus, it is plausible that amongst those who eventually stayed on, some already understood the workings of democratic ideals and did not need much more convincing to buy into the notion of Singapore as a democratic republic. This is at best a hypothesis, of course, and requires further historical research, but it is nonetheless a new perspective for us to think about.