View the Cultural Identity and Acculturation of Overseas Chinese in Modern China from the Perspective of Chen Xingtang

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Abstract. Chen Xingtang was a native Chinese of the straits and the first native-born Chinese writer in Singapore. It can be seen that Chen Xingtang’s family education and adult behavior in his early childhood were deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture through sorting out his collected works, which showed a “different kind” in the Chinese society at that time. Facing the pressure of changing times and westernization, he not only showed hesitation and anxiety about the traditional culture, but also showed recognition and adherence to traditional culture. Especially in the dispute of cutting braids, although he compromised and conceded, his adhering to the principle actually reflected the cultural adaptation side. In addition, the truth of his respecting Confucius and the criticism of the traditional ethics was also a proof. From this point of view, the attitude of the native Chinese community represented by Chen Xingtang was to adapt to the local social life, but also to adhere to the cultural traditions.

Introduction

Chen Xingtang, a native Chinese of the Straits Settlements, could not be compared with for the reason that his contemporaries, Lim Boon Keng (1869-1957), Wu Lien-the (1871-1941), Song Ong Siang (1871-1941) and others were famous. Therefore, his academic attention was very little. In 1881, there were 9527 Chinese in Singapore, accounting for 11% of the total population.¹ It can be seen that Chinese on the Straits are an important part of Singapore’s population. Chen Xingtang was a very unique and influential figure in the society. It was a rare literati who left such rich accounts in the early Chinese of the Straits Settlements, and it was these accounts that enabled later generations to have a glimpse of his life experiences and thoughts. In addition, Chen’s works had high literary and historical value.

Current Research Abroad

But so far, the academic research on Chen and his works are extremely weak. The only book that can be seen is a booklet of Vietnam Travel Note written by Chen Xingtang, which was found by Mr. David K.Y. Chang working in the Singapore’s National Archives in 1985 in the Eastern Department of the British Library. Then he wrote Vietnam Travel Note—the earliest extant monograph of Chinese literature in Singapore and Malaysia,² published a manuscript of the travel note, made a detailed study of the author’s experience and the content of the travel notes, sorted out and punctuated Vietnam travel in the appendix. Inspired by this, another Singaporean scholar, Yeap Chong Leng, compiled 33 pieces of chen’s works, which were scattered in the Lat Pau and the Star Puu after consulting many sources, punctuated, segmented and wrote an essay to study chen’s life, thoughts and literary achievements. In the end, she published Chen Xingtang Anthology in 1994.³

Domestic Research Status

What made people sigh with emotion was that in 1888, Vietnam Travel Notes was published by Lat Pau Press, although only 100 copies were printed at that time. But in Guangxu seventeen years (1891), it was included in Wang XiQi’s XiaoFangHuZhai YuDiCongChao in the tenth where Only some words were deleted from 3,429 words to 2,121 words and the author’s signature “Penang
Chen write” has only surnames but no first names. In spite of this, apart from the above two Singapore scholars’ research on Chen Xingtang, only a few scholars have quoted his records and no scholars at home and abroad have did research on it yet. The author ventures to view his attitude towards Chinese traditional culture from Chen Xingtang Anthology.

Chen Xingtang’s Biography, His Works and Multicultural Formation

Chen Xingtang’s Biography and Works

Chen Xingtang (1861-?) Zi Xingtang, the owner of Min Qiu Zhai, originally from Zhangzhou, Fujian, was born in Singapore (say Malacca). He is regarded as Singapore’s first native-born Chinese writer. He began to learn traditional Confucianism at the age of nine. At the age of 19, he gave up Confucianism and studied business. He worked for Fengxing Shipping Company. Since then, he had the chance to visit all parts of Southeast Asia and broaden his knowledge. At the age of 30, he realized that there were many treasures in the poetry and books, and worked hard to read and write. In 1888, his first work Vietnam Travel Note was published, which was the earliest extant Chinese literature in Singapore and Malaysia. Since then, more than 20 years, he has published 33 works in the Lat Pau and the Star Pau, and he also wrote Min Qiu Zhai collection. From the above-mentioned life experience, Chen’s cultural diversity and tolerance, rich and complex thinking, and his cultural thinking will directly affect its own value orientation.

It can be seen from relevant records that Chen Xingtang was born into a wealthy family and a Chinese family with a relatively high social status, and his father was a relatively successful Chinese businessman. His brother Chen Gongxi is the most famous in his family. Chen Gongxi is his half-brother whose mother is his father’s first wife. But she died the following year after Gong Xi was born. Later, his father remarried and Xingtang was born. Chen gongxi (1850-1909) was a successful businessman. He was once a member of the bureau of the ministry of industry of Singapore, a member of the Chinese counselor bureau, a director of Shideli Shipping Company and Tanjung Bago Dock Company. Today, Singapore’s Gongxi Street is named in memory of it. Abundant family background gave him the opportunity to receive education, which was rare for Chinese at that time. For this reason, he was able to have time and fame to participate in the discussion of some important events and made his own voice after becoming an adult. These were not what ordinary native Chinese could achieve. He wrote in his poem Waiting Hong Junzhao Elegy: “He is a remnant of overseas, and only loves reading, not suffering from life. So he is not the same as ordinary people.” He was born in an abundant family and received education and left a large number of written accounts.

Chen Xingtang’s Multicultural Formation

The cultural background of Chen Xingtang was quite special. The mutual integration of Chinese and Western cultures and Southeast Asian local cultures made it possible to reflect on the attitudes of overseas Chinese towards traditional culture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries from multiple perspectives. In addition, he was very fond of travel. Wherever he could, he would go to visit. In the tour, he also described the local landscape geography, customs, products and so on. It was such a hobby to observe many places and compare with the situation in different regions that strengthened his belief in Confucianism.

As Peranakan Chinese, they would face the cultural identity and social adaptation and many other aspects of the choice. In order to adapt to the life in a foreign country, flexible cultural strategies may be divided into the initial stage of cultural adaptation—tolerance and the acceptance of the local language, way of life, cross-ethnic exchanges and so on. The acculturation in the advanced stage was the fusion of the political identity of the native regime and the ethnic intermarriage and the belief in the local region. Chen Xingtang was actually a “product” of cultural adaptation in the advanced stage, but he was different from others for two main reasons: First, strict family education and hard study at an early age. He Yugu, a friend of Chen Xingtang, who has been under strict family support since childhood and was steeped in the traditional Confucian style of study,
believed that Chen Xingtang could accept his father’s teachings and learned from each other and wrote books. What admired people most was that his father did not allow his children and grandchildren to learn western languages, speak western languages, and wear suits. It was a reason why Chen Xingtang could become a useful person. In this view, Chen Xingtang’s father was very critical in his growth, and he was not allowed to learn western languages and wear western-style clothes and also pay great attention to the study of traditional culture. As a result, Chen Xingtang grew up in Nanyang, but different from people in Nanyang. At that time, the Chinese in Singapore were too westernized and abandoned the traditional Confucian ethics, while Chen Xingtang followed Confucianism and Taoism, read Confucian classics, and did not westernize. Moreover, he could write articles, communicate friends to poetry, which was very rare.¹² It can be seen that most of the local Chinese have been westernized, and Chen was one of the alternative. Second, the introspection and concentration after the age of thirty. In fact, between the ages of 19 and 30, Chen forgot what he had learned as a child. Later, he gradually repented and realized the benefits of reading again. After the age of 30, he knew that the ancients were full of wisdom and started to read and write. Finally, he succeeded in compiling Min Qiu Zhai Ji.¹³ From this point of view, Chen’s acquisition of traditional culture not only benefited from his father’s “alternative” education when he was young, but also benefited from his awakening after he was 30 years old and gradually became addicted to traditional Confucianism. All in all, in addition to family influence, his choices in adulthood were also very important.

A Discussion on the Dispute over Cutting Braids and Respecting Confucius

In the 1890s, the Chinese on the Straits led by Lin Wenqing, Song Hongxiang and Wu Liande, carried out the cultural awakening and social reform movements, simplified the customs of marriage and funeral, and advocated the opium abolition and braids cutting in order to get rid of all kinds of malpractices in Chinese society.¹⁴ During the same period, the Chinese Singaporeans reconsidered their Chinese identity and national identity due to the influence of the Qing Dynasty and the British Empire and other aspects.¹⁵ These issues were reflected in debates such as braids cutting and respecting Confucius. Chen’s relevant remarks could also be explored a little.

Cutting Braids

Faced with the severe impact of westernization, local Chinese elites and intellectuals have consciously strengthened Chinese consciousness and cultural identity, and braids have become an important symbol of Chinese identity, which was the main difference from other ethnic groups. According to Barth, a famous anthropologist, the cultural connotations of ethnic groups can be divided into two meanings: obvious symbols and signs and basic value orientation. However, what is changeable is obvious ethnic symbols and signs, such as easily distinguishable features: clothing, language, economic production methods, etc., while what is stable and easy to preserve is ethnic value orientation and national spirit.¹⁶ Obviously, the braid is an important cultural symbol, and the resulting dispute of braids keeping and braids cutting extended the issues of the braid and Chinese identity, cultural identity and national identity. Consul Zuo Binglong vigorously promoted learning in the 1880s and Consul General Huang Zunxian advocated culture and education in the early 1990s, which laid the foundation for the Confucianism movements that took place between 1897 and 1910.¹⁷ In this context, during a visit to Saigon in April 1899, Chen Qingduan, a member of the Ministry of Industry, told Chen Xingtang that “Lat produces Chinese, and many of them want to cut off braids” and asked him about the matter. Chen gradually clarified his views. On May 22 and 23, 1899, in the Lat Pao, he continuously published Chen Xingtang’s General Discussion on Cutting Braids. His literary theory discussed the reasons for writing, the westernization of Chinese, the advantages and disadvantages of keeping braids and cutting braids, and believed that “it is better not to cut braids”. Chen Xingtang linked braids to religious beliefs, customs, dress, ethics and morality, and believed that keeping braids enabled Chinese to follow Confucianism, and wearing Chinese clothes and learning Chinese books would not accelerate westernization.
On another occasion, in many of that year, Yu Jinsheng gave him a book written by local people, which not only advised the Chinese to cut their braids and learn the local Malay language. The book also believed that braids were reserved for the Qing people and all hair were reserved for Han people. This argument was fiercely attacked by Chen, who argued that persuading people to cut their braids would lead to a Chinese identity crisis, and the book did not address the question of how to identify after cutting their braids. As for the examples cited in the book, such as Japanese, Xinjinshan Chinese and Nanyang Chinese women, he refuted them one by one and cited Nanyang Chinese women and the Huis as negative examples, opposing wearing Chinese clothes after cutting braids. Of course, he does not deny that braids do have a lot of inconvenience, and listed one by one. Under the general trend of cutting braids, Chen Xingtang chose “curve salvation”, that is, conditional braids abandoning. The proponents of braid cutting signed a petition to the king of England requesting permission for two new laws and the establishment of a new society. He also listed ten proposed articles of association of the new society, and the main meaning was to distinguish betweennaturalized Chinese protected by the British government, keep the original customs and habits, not be force to believe in Catholicism, but respect and worship Confucius, etc. If approved by the king of England, the ceremony of cutting braids and changing new clothes would take place on an auspicious day. In addition to celebrating new life, he hoped that the Chinese would think of the source and follow Confucianism. If the above conditions can be met, Chen Xingtang felt that cutting braids, modification and change of nationality were acceptable because the basic symbols of the Chinese people, such as Confucianism and Confucius, have not been discarded.

Respecting Confucius

Apart from the braid, an important Chinese symbol, Confucius was also an important symbol of traditional Chinese culture. 10 years after the publication of The General Discussion on Cutting Braids, Xing Esheng’s Confucius’s Birthday Should Be Closed for Business was published in Lat Pau. The main meaning of this article was to celebrate Confucius’ birthday in all walks of life. Some industries needed to stop work to celebrate Confucius’ birthday, while others needed not. The article prompted Chen to write an article on Sept.26, 1910, in which he expressed his opinion in the Lat Pau.[18] Chen Xingtang affirmed the point of view, in favor of the Chinese people to celebrate Confucius’ birthday together. Ye Jiyun, the chief editor of the Lat Pau, commented highly on Chen Xingtang after this article. He thought although he grew up in Singapore, but he never forgot his motherland. To study the Chinese language to the best was a Singaporean Chinese with lofty ideals. In fact, this was a serious westernization problem facing the Chinese community in Singapore at that time. [19] Against this background, Chen Xingtang’, a “gem”, seemed to have found his bosom friend.

From the dispute and respect for Confucius can be seen that Chen Xingtang was also in constant cultural adaptation. “Acculturation includes not only the passive process influenced by local power, but also the active participation and creation. Localization has the localization of cultural dimensions, that is, cultural localization; At the same time, there is the localization of consciousness, that is, to become a part of the local and identify with it.”[20] He didn’t accept the disappearance of cutting braids and Confucian culture, but actively participated, put forward his own opinions and ideas, and actively adapted to the environment. Whether cutting braids or respecting Confucius, in his opinion, braids and Confucius were important symbols of traditional Chinese culture, and should be treated with caution.

Criticism of Practices that Not Conforming to Traditional Chinese Ethics and Customs

No matter whether the traditional moral ethics had defects or not, Chen Xingtang basically accepted it and those who run counter to it would be criticized. It was especially obvious to Vietnamese, native Chinese and other groups. He criticized the “bad” customs of the native Chinese-Ming villagers and the natives in Southeast Asia with traditional Confucian etiquette and customs.
Criticism of Vietnamese

The Vietnamese were very similar to the Chinese in many aspects, such as worshipping God and Buddha, architectural style, reading and writing, weddings and funerals, etc., but the “more common men and more relaxed women” were very different from the Chinese. Secondly, Vietnamese dressed in black clothes with hair all over their heads wrapped in the back of the head, could hardly distinguish between men and women. Chen criticized the health condition of the Vietnamese. Only when Vietnamese women married Chinese people could it be improved. Chen not only focused on describing the daily life and customs of the Vietnamese, especially the description of the differences with the Chinese, but also criticized the behavior of Vietnamese women, believing that they did not respect women’s morals and integrity. [21] In addition to his comments on Vietnamese people, Chen also specially wrote “Vietnamese Custom Theory” to study women, marriage customs, the comparison of the past and present, and Chinese-Vietnamese hybrids. He criticized Minh Hường Congress as a descendant of Chinese, believing that it was completely localized or westernized and lost the Chinese tradition. [22] He was deeply saddened by this. Both the criticism of certain customs of Vietnamese and the criticism of villagers in Ming Dynasty clearly showed that Chen was deeply influenced by Chinese traditional values.

Praise for the Native Chinese in Penang

Compared with the criticism of Vietnamese and Vietnamese ming villagers, the sharp contrast was the appreciation of the native Chinese in Penang. Chen Xingtang’s dream of an overseas Chinese society should be the same as that of the native Chinese in Penang. Such a typical Chinese society, although located outside the country and surrounded by other ethnic groups, retained a large number of traditional cultural customs.

Chen praised the local Chinese in Penang for observing the customs of Han etiquette, like speaking mandarin, wearing Chinese clothes, and being courteous to their relatives and friends were “second to none in Southeast Asia” [23]. This was the most exemplary Chinese society in his mind.

Although his views were somewhat questionable, it was extremely valuable that he was able to uphold Chinese traditional culture and made his own voice against the background of the westernization of Chinese society in Singapore at that time.

Conclusion

Under the background that the Chinese in the Taiwan straits were mainly engaged in business and were generally westernized, Chen Xingtang’s unique performance was particularly brilliant. He was very firm in recognizing the traditional Chinese culture and respecting the way of Confucius and Mencius, and did not drift with the tide. In the face of changes in the overall social environment and the decline of the Qing dynasty incompetent, in real life, he showed a constant adaptation to the local society. He even claimed to be an “adherent”, which could deeply reflect the status of the local Chinese society at that time. Facing a powerful society that has assimilated and lost its own traditions, it relied only on the blood of an individual without the support of the Chinese government. To some extent, the right of cultural interpretation was worth eulogizing.

Even if Chinese across the Straits changed their costumes and cut their hair braids, people from other ethnic groups still thought you were not the same as them while the traditional Chinese people did not recognize them, the native Chinese in the crevice should be able to understand the confusion and anxiety among them. The Chinese and other ethnic groups is mainly different from the culture, and the culture is the foundation of maintaining the ethnic boundary. [24] Whether it is cultural symbols such as changeable costumes, braids, languages or a relatively stable spiritual core, it is the cultural boundary between the Chinese ethnic group and other ethnic groups, which is also an important symbol to maintain the ethnic group.

Identity is compatible with cultural tradition and self-recognition is Chinese, that is, recognition of traditional Chinese culture and ethics different from western culture. people should stick to these concepts instead of denying them, such as sticking to braids and respecting Confucius. As an
important cultural symbol, Chinese traditional dress and pigtails cannot be discarded easily, even if they have many shortcomings. In meeting certain conditions, it can also be appropriate to give up, which is particularly evident in the fight to cut braids and the debate. Behind the debate is the concern and compromise of traditional culture in Chinese society. It is also a helpless cultural adaptation, seeking to preserve their own cultural traditions to the maximum. However, if the overseas Chinese society wants to continue the Chinese language and culture, the task is mainly undertaken by the Chinese schools. In the early Singapore, there were private schools, Meng Guan, and so on. At most, there were more than 50 private schools. After 1904, there were more than 300 new Chinese schools, such as Yingxin School and Guangzhao School, which had appeared in 1942. Only by receiving education from Chinese schools can Chinese people fundamentally resolve the crisis of the mother tongue and cultural identity. Otherwise, even if Chinese keep the hair braids and respect Confucius, it won’t help in the end. In the absence of the country, it is extremely difficult for the descendants of Chinese people to continue to adhere to the original cultural identity by relying on individuals or Chinese communities to inherit and protect the traditional culture of the Chinese people. From Chen Xingtang, it can be clearly seen its firm cultural identity. At the same time, it is also obvious to see its helplessness for cultural adaptation.

Acknowledgements

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[5] Whether or not the collection is published is not known. According to the Collection of Collected Works Yan (Star Pau, February 21, 1894), this is the preface of Min Quizhai’s collection, which roughly illustrates his life experience of reading and studying, but does not indicate whether it is published or not.


