

# *Cultural Frontiers: The Cultural Frontier Perspective of the Late Qing Dynasty—Focusing on the Chinese Community in Singapore and Malaysia*

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**Abstract:** This article explores the cultural frontier perspective of the late Qing government, centering on the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaysia. It argues that although the rulers' view of the frontier gradually evolved towards a political frontier perspective under the international legal system due to changing circumstances, their attention to cultural frontiers did not diminish, especially in relation to overseas Chinese communities. The Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, as "frontier residents" in the cultural sense, played an important role in the transformation of the late Qing government's cultural frontier perspective. By analyzing the late Qing government's re-recognition of the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaysia, the establishment of consulates, localized efforts, and the cultural identity of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, this article reveals the changes in the Qing court's cultural frontier perspective during the late Qing Dynasty and its impact on the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaysia.

## 1. Cultural frontier and Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia

### 1.1 The connotation of "cultural frontier"

The connotation of "frontier" is very rich, until now the academic community has not been able to form a unified definition. In the article "The connotation and Characteristics of Chinese Frontier", Li Dalong<sup>[1]</sup> made a detailed analysis of the different connotations of frontier. Ma Dazheng<sup>[2]</sup> pointed out that "Chinese frontier is a historical and relative concept, and a relatively clear answer can only be obtained after comprehensive consideration of political, military, economic, cultural and geographical factors". This paper argues that "cultural frontier" or the concept of culture in "frontier" is crucial in the historical period, in modern times and even in the new era. The cultural frontier refers to the unity of cultural landscape difference and cultural identity, which is simply called "land complex", which is also the viewpoint of Berkeley School<sup>[3]</sup>.

Throughout historical periods, the concept of "border regions" as defined by different dynastic rulers has undergone subtle changes, but it fundamentally aligns with the views of cultural superiority and the idea of "under heaven, all land belongs to the king; at the edges of the land, all subjects belong to the king". Scholars such as Ma Dazheng and Zhao Guanhai<sup>[4]</sup> have provided a more comprehensive discussion on the "border perspective" during historical periods. Although it

may seem to address governance structures, administrative systems, military defenses, and spheres of influence, it has not formed a strictly defined "boundary perspective". This article argues that what is referred to as border regions in historical contexts often signifies cultural borders, specifically ideological borders.

Confucius, the "cultural leader", set the tone during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, stating: "If the Xia adopt the customs of the Yi, they become Yi; if the Yi adopt the customs of the Xia, they become Xia", and "The descendants do not plot against the Xia, and the Yi do not disrupt the Hua". Kong Yingda explained in the "Zuo Zhuan Zheng Yi": "China is called Xia because of its grand rituals, and it is called Hua because of its beautiful clothing and adornments". Li Dalong summarized this by stating: "Hua Xia' primarily emerged due to cultural differences; at that time, the vassal states that accepted the feudal system of the Western Zhou were all included within Hua Xia, collectively referred to as Hua Xia, to distinguish them from the culturally relatively backward Yi, Man, Rong, and Di". Wu Wenzao's definition of "border areas" is similar: "The southeastern provinces, defined by the sea, are essentially national borders and are not regarded as border areas. In contrast, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, located in the heart of the country, are referred to as border areas. This clearly does not refer to the borders of the nation but rather to cultural borders"<sup>[5,6]</sup>. Although Ming Dynasty ruler Zhu Yuanzhang defined border areas as "lands outside civilization", overall, it largely adhered to the policies of the Kangxi and Qianlong eras, which mixed the population of Han and non-Han peoples, promoting "education and assimilation" of border residents<sup>[7]</sup>.

During the late Qing Dynasty, with the passive establishment of the treaty system and the process of division by foreign powers, the rulers' view of the border shifted to a territorial perspective. However, their attention to cultural borders did not diminish, especially when facing overseas Chinese communities. Correspondingly, overseas Chinese also have different cultural identifications with China. This article primarily explores the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia.

## 1.2 The New Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese as "Border Residents"

This article argues that the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore can be regarded as "border residents" in the sense of cultural frontiers. Zhuang Guotu asserts that the term "Chinese" refers to non-citizens who maintain a certain degree of Chinese culture and bloodline<sup>[8]</sup>. Clearly, cultural symbols are the primary considerations. Scholars such as Wang Genwu point out that "they are neither Chinese nor overseas Chinese", and instead refer to this group as the "Hua people"<sup>[9]</sup>. First, cultural frontiers differ from political frontiers; they are characterized by permeability and ambiguity in spatial terms, and by lag and continuity in temporal terms<sup>[10]</sup>. Therefore, although the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore do not fall within the realm of political frontiers, their profound identification with Chinese culture allows them to be considered "border residents" in the context of cultural frontiers, especially the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore during the late Qing period.

As the Qing government's maritime bans became increasingly strict and social conditions deteriorated, coupled with the aggressive colonization of Singapore and Malaysia by Western powers, people from Southern China became the pioneers of "going to the South Seas." They brought not only the belief in making money and labor but also traditional Chinese culture. In other words, they played the role of "others" in a "foreign land", while simultaneously constructing a "local" identity.

## 2. The Concept of Cultural Frontiers in the Late Qing Government

### 2.1 The Shift in Rulers' Perspectives

For a long time, the rulers held a negative attitude towards overseas migration, showing indifference to the safety of overseas Chinese lives and property, allowing them to fend for themselves, and even persecuting returning overseas Chinese. Emigrating overseas was regarded as a form of disloyalty to the homeland, which also resulted in a loss of labor. The late Ming rulers were extremely indifferent to the "Manila Massacre", where Spanish colonizers slaughtered Chinese people, even considering that they deserved their fate. This was followed by the "Red Creek Incident" perpetrated by Dutch colonizers in Indonesia<sup>[11]</sup>. In 1647, the Qing court's "Great Qing Legal Code" clearly stipulated: "Any officials or soldiers who privately go to sea for trade, or migrate to islands for residence and farming, shall be treated as traitors and executed. Those who collude with local officials to let them go shall also be executed; those who fail to act will be dismissed and never reinstated. Officials will be demoted by three ranks, and military and civilian governors will be demoted by two ranks, while provincial governors will be demoted by one rank but allowed to remain in their posts". Subsequently, maritime bans were issued multiple times in 1656, 1661, 1734, and other years. On the eve of the First Opium War, although the maritime ban was relaxed, "the government still did not clearly recognize that Chinese people had the right to go abroad under government protection". However, the "Treaty of Beijing", signed after the Second Opium War under duress, not only legalized the emigration of Chinese laborers but also provided them with protection. It stipulated: "The Emperor of the Great Qing allows the governors and ambassadors of all provinces to issue orders that henceforth, any Chinese citizens who wish to go abroad, whether in British territories or elsewhere, to work, are permitted to sign contracts with British citizens, whether alone or with family, and to travel on British ships to trading ports without obstruction. The provincial ambassadors should also consult with the British plenipotentiary to review local conditions and establish regulations to protect Chinese laborers." With the establishment of the General Administration in the 1870s, the Qing government's attention to overseas Chinese became more systematic. Of course, during this period, incidents of contract labor abuse also accelerated this process. In 1866, the Qing government formulated the "Continued Labor Recruitment Regulations" to protect the rights of overseas Chinese laborers. In 1868, the Sino-American "Burlingame Treaty" was signed, allowing Chinese laborers and other Chinese, such as merchants and students, to freely migrate abroad. In 1877, the first consulate in Chinese history was established in Singapore, and in the following decades, the Qing court set up a total of 46 embassies and consulates in major countries around the world.

It can be said that the Qing rulers' perception of overseas Chinese shifted from "traitors" to "overseas subjects", from strictly prohibiting to protecting their rights. On foreign soil, overseas subjects are "others", but because they share a close geographical connection with the homeland, possessing common blood ties and culture, the rulers still recognized their identity. The "Burlingame Treaty" even stipulated the freedom to migrate abroad without a time limit for returning home.

### 2.2 Reassessing the Rulers' Understanding of the Chinese Diaspora in Singapore and Malaysia

Prior to this, the government's knowledge of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore and Malaysia was largely based on hearsay. Although there were works like Wei Yuan's "Chart of the World's Ocean" of the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia was often biased. For instance, "Ying Huan Zhi Lue" frequently recorded the leadership system of the Chinese community, known as the Kapitan system: "In Java... the people from Fujian and Guangdong who have settled there number

in the tens of thousands. The Dutch select the capable among them to serve as Kapitan, who specifically manage Chinese legal matters". It also noted that "the population of people from Fujian and Guangdong is rapidly increasing... disputes among Chinese are settled by the Kapitan". In 1866, Bin Chun, on a mission from the Qing court, traveled to the West and made his way to Southeast Asia. He noted, "The Chinese in Singapore, upon hearing that there was a Chinese official here, came to pay their respects, donning hats and formal attire". To express gratitude for the warm hospitality from the Chinese communities in Vietnam and Singapore, Bin Chun composed several poems: "The roads are bustling as the festival approaches, stars arrived in Champa last night; the Chinese crown is seen again, all speak of the grace bestowed upon the clear seas." He lamented, "Even in foreign lands, it feels like returning home, as the scenery of China recalls the peach blossom charms." It is evident that Bin Chun was deeply moved by the enthusiasm of the Chinese in Singapore during his first encounter and recognized their identity and cultural ties to their "hometown". As late Qing officials increasingly traveled to Southeast Asia, their understanding of Singapore and Malaysia deepened. Show in Table 1:

Table 1: The books recorded by officials in late Qing Dynasty about the overseas Chinese society in Southeast Asia.

<b>Author</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Title of the book</b>
Bin Chun	Fifth Year of Tongzhi	"Notes on Riding the Raft"
Zhang Deyi	Fifth Year of Tongzhi	"Maritime Adventures"
Guo Songtao	Second Year of Guangxu	"Chronicles of the Western Mission"
Liu Xihong	Second Year of Guangxu	"Diary of the English Carriage"
Zhang Deyi	Second Year of Guangxu	"Diary of the Envoy"
Zeng Jize	Fourth Year of Guangxu	"Diary of the Western Envoy"

By the end of 1867, Ding Richang, the governor of Jiangsu, indicated in a memorial submitted through Li Hongzhang that, "If consulates were established in countries with Chinese populations to manage affairs related to them, it would be well managed. All overseas trade should be supported and maintained by the government. If the government does not intervene in the merchants' benefits, those who leave China will surely long for their homeland". Starting in 1875, the Qing government began to dispatch officials to overseas posts gradually. The consulates became the frontline institutions for the government to protect overseas Chinese and implement its policies regarding them. In 1876, Guo Songtao, on his way to Britain, discovered in Singapore, "the Chinese people created a flag inscribed with the words 'Loyalty, Diligence, Integrity, and Justice' to honor their merits", and "a local official, Chen Hongxun from Fujian, came to pay his respects in formal attire". The Chinese in Singapore, Luzon, Indonesia, and other areas repeatedly petitioned the Qing court, expressing their willingness to fund the establishment of a consulate. Guo Songtao pointed out in his proposal for establishing a consulate in Singapore that "Western colonizers treat overseas Chinese harshly, which is why merchants everywhere are eagerly looking forward to the dispatch of a public envoy, hoping for a consulate to maintain the sentiments of the people". In 1890, Xue Fucheng, in a memorial urging the court to negotiate with the British regarding the establishment of a consulate, stated, "Regarding the British islands, if several consuls could be added, the annual expense would not exceed tens of thousands of taels, which would yield substantial unseen benefits, and the effect would be tenfold compared to the expenditure. Additionally, merchants and people repeatedly petition, and if neglected, it could lead to a long-lasting disappointment among the Chinese and invite scorn from outsiders." Wang Tao, in his discussion on establishing a consulate in Luzon, remarked, "I believe the role of a consul is extremely important yet also very challenging. If the right person is appointed, it would be sufficient to gather people's hearts for our use".

## 2.3 The Establishment of the Singapore-Malaysia Consulate and Localization Efforts

In 1877, the Singapore Consulate was established, with Guo Songtao recommending Hu Yaji to serve as the consul. Although Hu Yaji was very eager to donate to his homeland, he had received a Western education at a young age, which limited his understanding of traditional culture and gave him a weak concept of cultural governance. However, it is noteworthy that when Guo Songtao recommended him as consul, he had already donated to obtain the title of a district official.

After his death, Zuo Binglong, a graduate of the Tongwen Guan in Beijing, succeeded him as consul in 1880. Upon taking office, he initiated an enlightenment movement and a trend of promoting education. He founded the "Huixian Society" in the literary world, advocating for Confucian education; in the publishing industry, he helped establish the first Chinese newspaper, "Lian Bao"; and in education, he encouraged various dialect groups to set up private schools, such as Yulan Shushi, Guangzhao Yixue, Peilan Shushi, and Yangzheng Shushi. "Lian Bao" commented, "In addition to self-appointed Confucian teachers and those who set up their own teaching sessions, there are numerous private schools that cannot be counted". He also selected outstanding students to study in Guangzhou, strengthening ties with the homeland. At the same time, he formulated a series of cultural policies to "re-Sinicize" Singapore. He paid special attention to guiding local Baba (descendants of Chinese and Malays educated in English) to care about China's historical culture and current affairs, encouraging them to engage in public debate. Zuo Binglong himself once said, "I have lived in Xinzhu for nine years, unlike other officials who resemble educators". This shows that this "pure" Qing official made significant efforts in cultural assimilation and even referred to himself as an "educator". On October 24, 1887, Zhang Zhidong submitted a memorial titled "Proposal to Send Personnel to Discuss Protection in Various Nanyang Ports", suggesting that the court establish consulates in various Nanyang locations. He was the first to propose that consuls should shoulder the task of promoting traditional Chinese culture among overseas Chinese, "so that they may learn the teachings of the sages and the righteousness of Chinese propriety", cultivating the "intelligence and ambition" of overseas Chinese and "opening their thoughts on water sources and timber".

In 1891, Huang Zunxian, a staff member of Li Hongzhang and a friend of Zuo Binglong, took office. During his tenure, he continued to follow Zuo's policy of emphasizing cultural education. He established the "Tunan Society", encouraging Chinese and overseas Chinese to pay attention to the issues of foreign aggression against China and urging them to seek change and innovation. He declared in the newspaper the purpose of its establishment: "I wish to discuss morality with gentlemen, covering both Chinese and Western governance methods, as well as ancient and modern scholarship. I hope that in a few years, talented individuals will emerge to respond to the signs of heaven and serve the country; this is my humble wish, which I aspire to day and night". At the same time, he actively communicated with wealthy merchants, attempting to expand the influence of Chinese culture. With his support, the famous Singapore philanthropist Qiu Shuyuan made many attempts in culture and education, promoting Confucianism, founding publications, spreading Confucian teachings, and supporting Liang Qichao's reform efforts.

From 1877 to 1911, the Qing government sent a total of 12 consuls, including Su Guiqing, Liu Yulin, Luo Zhongyao, Wu Shiqi, Feng Yi, Sun Shiding, Su Ruizhao, and others, who all, to varying degrees, influenced the local Chinese community through cultural and educational means in a subtle manner.

In 1887, Zhang Zhidong, the then Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi, suggested in his memorial "Proposal for the Establishment of a Consulate in Penang" that "Penang has exceptionally talented individuals, leading among all ports, and it is appropriate to appoint a vice-consul". He also recommended establishing a school and acquiring classical texts for storage

and distribution, allowing local gentry and consuls to select Confucian scholars as teachers to instruct local Chinese youths at any time, with the aim of enabling them to “learn the teachings of the sages and the proper rituals and morals of China”. Officials such as Ding Richang, the Governor of Jiangsu, Wang Kaitai, the Governor of Fujian, and the late Qing scholar Wu Guangpei expressed varying degrees of concern about the alienation of overseas Chinese and advocated for a strategy of cultural enrichment. By 1905, Zhang Bishi, a prominent businessman from Nanyang, took the lead in establishing the earliest modern school in Singapore and Malaysia—the Chinese School—under the title of “Minister of Commerce and Minister of Education for Nanyang” appointed by the Qing government. Emperor Guangxu even bestowed upon them the plaque “Voice of Education Southward” and a complete set of “Collection of Ancient and Modern Books” as a gift from the court.

This article argues that “Voice of Education Southward” is not only a layout for Chinese education in Penang but also a measure for cultural influence on the Chinese communities across Nanyang. The plaque “Voice of Education Southward” was also sent to Surabaya and Java in Indonesia during the same period. Later, the Qing court dispatched Liu Shiji, the Governor of Guangxi, to serve as a commissioner for the Education Office in Guangdong and Guangxi, encouraging the establishment of schools and fundraising in Nanyang.

Liang Qichao even published an article in 1919 stating, “As for the new countries in Nanyang, it is also a legitimate path for national self-determination. Overseas Chinese, with their immature culture, still need the assistance of people from the mainland to develop”. This indicates that the Qing court viewed the establishment of consulates in Singapore and Malaysia not only as a means to protect the rights of overseas Chinese but also regarded Nanyang as a “new country”, endowing it with hopes for national self-determination. Although Liang Qichao maintained a contemptuous attitude, it is undeniable that he regarded cultural governance as an effective means to rule over the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia, viewing Nanyang as part of the homeland. This phenomenon was evident not only in the aforementioned cultural and educational aspects but also in the appointment of local Chinese leaders to official positions. In other words, the court's actions captured the hearts of local Chinese and overseas Chinese, and granting them titles satisfied their desire to be “local emperors”.

### **3. Cultural Identity of the Chinese Community and Overseas Chinese in Late Qing Singapore and Malaysia**

On one hand, the Qing court implemented strategies for cultural governance over the Chinese community and overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, while on the other hand, the overseas Chinese expressed a sense of loyalty to the Qing court.

“It is noted that the merchants residing in Java have not forgotten their roots, cherishing their titles and feeling deeply grateful for the heavens and the earth. They are inspired by the beauty of the clouds and the colors of the sunset, educating their children with a love for their homeland, while their hearts long for the northern capital. They encourage all people to attend school, even overseas, aspiring to wear the official robes”.

“Our people have a strong attachment to their ancestral homeland. Although they reside on that island, owning land and having descendants, they still long for their hometown. Their clothing and customs remain unchanged. Despite being separated by vast oceans, with no access to education, they can only harbor sincere feelings and cannot fulfill their wishes to return”.

“Although these individuals live overseas, they look up to the living beings and hope for blessings, seeking protection from the central court at all times”.

“When merchants in various ports see the dignified presence of the Han officials, they look up to

the heavenly protection and all cheerfully welcome and pay their respects, praising the emperor's benevolence. Their urgent request for protection is most pressing... If the court were to establish a consulate to provide support, the people's hearts would naturally unite, and the invisible protection of the Nanyang would be substantial”.

From the wording of these three historical sources, it is evident that Qing officials vigorously described the overseas Chinese's attachment to their homeland and their recognition and inheritance of traditional culture. Terms like “the land of our parents”, “the ancestral homeland”, and “the central court” reflect a perspective that emphasizes the mindset of being in Nanyang while still being attached to the Qing court.

If we consider the actions of the overseas Chinese from the perspective of Qing rulers, we may find their behavior somewhat biased. However, through their own literary records, we can more directly observe their mindset at that time.

In the “Preface to the Restoration of the Public Tombs in the Province of Fujian on the Sixteenth Year of Guangxu”, it is recorded: “As people of the central land, the deceased are all from Fujian. Why not gather their souls to rely on each other? Those who live on will deeply cherish their hometown and seek the blessings of the deities. It is a matter of love for friends and a record to ensure immortality”.

Chinese merchants Zhang Bishi and Liang Biru, in the “Regulations for the Establishment of the Chinese Academy”, clearly followed the framework of Zhang Zhidong's “Regulations for the Academy” to cultivate future generations and transmit their spirit. Chapter Two of the Chinese Academy's regulations stipulates that classes are divided into eight sections: “Filial Piety, Brotherhood, Loyalty, Trustworthiness, Propriety, Righteousness, Integrity, and Shame”. Chapter Three specifies the curriculum, which includes “Self-Cultivation, Reading Classics, National Language, Foreign Languages, History, Geography, Arithmetic, Physics, and Physical Education”. Chapter Four states, “On the Empress Dowager's birthday, the celebration of longevity, Confucius's birthday, and the festivals of Qingming, Duanwu, Zhongyuan, Mid-Autumn, and Winter Solstice, there will be a day off”. Chapter Six advocates for year-round respect for Confucius, suggesting that “on the first day of each month and during regular school days, the supervising teachers and staff should lead the students to perform three kneelings and nine prostrations before the revered sage, and after the ceremony, students will bow three times to the supervising teachers and once to the staff before leaving”.

In the “Inscription of the Restoration of Tianfu Palace” by the Fujian Association in Singapore, it is recorded: “Our Tang people came from the mainland by sea to trade in this land. We rely on the Holy Mother for navigation, successfully crossing great rivers and settling peacefully, with prosperity and well-being, all thanks to divine protection. Our Tang people, grateful for the blessings, have collectively decided to establish Tianfu Palace in the region directly south of Singapore, facing the mountains and rivers, as a temple for ancestral worship of the Holy Mother”.

It is clear that whether in ancestral worship at graves, educational practices, or religious beliefs, the Chinese community and overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia consciously defined their identity as Chinese from the motherland rather than purely Singaporeans or Malaysians. Wherever one is, culture resides there. On one hand, they directly came from South China, inheriting most of the cultural genes; on the other hand, the colonial government did not impose strict control over their culture, providing ample space for cultural creation; furthermore, the Qing government, adhering to the idea of cultural governance, still regarded the overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia as its subjects on the cultural frontier, thus implementing a series of cultural education and ideological "governance".

## 4. Conclusion

In summary, the perception of frontiers during historical periods has undergone changes due to shifts in the political landscape. However, the understanding of cultural frontiers has remained relatively stable. Under the influence of the international legal system, the late Qing government's re-evaluation of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore and Malaysia, along with the establishment of consulates and localized efforts, not only safeguarded the rights of Chinese nationals and overseas Chinese but also reinforced their cultural identity through the dissemination of cultural education and ideological concepts. The attachment of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia to their homeland and their inheritance of traditional culture reflect the permeable and continuous nature of cultural frontiers. The cultural frontier perspective during this period not only influenced the identity of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia but also provided important historical experience and theoretical foundations for modern China's views on frontiers and overseas Chinese affairs.

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