ABSTRACT

Chinese, being the largest ethnic group in Singapore, have played an important role in the country’s policy-making and social well-being. Studies on Chinese leaders in Singapore are many; however, most of these studies focused on the period before Singapore’s independence, while leaders in the years of Singapore’s nation building were less frequently examined.

This dissertation therefore aims to examine the role of Soon Peng Yam, a prominent Chinese leader in the sixties, in the years of Singapore’s nation building. It focuses on the years 1959-69, as this is both deemed to be the prime time of Soon Peng Yam’s career as well as the turbulent years of Singapore’s nation building.

To date, there is a lack of critical analysis of Soon Peng Yam’s activities. Materials for this dissertation were drawn from the following sources: interview transcripts with Soon Peng Yam deposited in the National Archives of Singapore (Oral History Department), the compilation of Soon’s speeches and activities from local newspapers and magazines in the collection “Du Mu Cheng Lin—Soon Peng Yam and his time” (独木成林—孙炳炎和他的年代) and several commemorative magazines of Chinese Clubs (in particular, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce Industry) and Huiguans headed by Soon Peng Yam from the sixties onwards. In addition, for this study, I conducted a personal interview with Mr. Soon Peng Yam himself.

This study reveals that although after its independence, the government of Singapore took over the responsibility of attending to the welfare of the Chinese community, a duty previously assumed solely by the Chinese leaders during colonialism. Chinese leaders, however, continue to play an important role in the country, although less significantly.

It is hoped that this dissertation can contribute to the study of the Chinese community in Singapore in the sixties.