

SUSTAINING “CHINESENESS” VIA CHINESE CLAN ASSOCIATIONS: YOUTH AND THE REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Traditional Chinese clan associations are often considered at risk in the face of rapidly developing technology and a shift away from traditional norms. Using Chan She Shu Yuen Clan Association Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (CSSYKL) as a case study, this paper explores how a centennial Cantonese ancestral clan association in Malaysia seeks to involve youth, and how the reproduction of social capital through youth participation contributes to its continued sustainability.

Methodology: This study collects data through fieldwork, participant observation, interview, and document review. Fieldwork was conducted at the clan house at Petaling Street, KL and observations were performed both physically and online. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 clan members using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework.

Findings: Data analysis reveals that youth serve as culture bearers, network builders, operational facilitators, and innovators in CSSYKL. While contributing to the effective functioning and sustainability of the clan association, youth benefit from the social capital developed through their participation. However, social capital can create barriers to inclusion and reinforce power imbalances within the clan association, limiting the potential of youth and openness of the organization.

Contributions: This study contributes to understanding the continuity of traditional clan associations in the 21st century, supported by youth’s participation. It highlights the cultural and social significance of clan associations in shaping youth’s cultural identity and social capital, as well as their impact on personal and communal life.

Keywords: Clan association, CSSYKL, social capital, clan identity, youth.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

As part of the Nusantara, Malaysia is an example of ethnic diversity, with an ethnic composition that includes approximately 21.6 million *Bumiputera*, 6.9 million Chinese, 2 million Indians, 230,700 individuals categorized as others, and 3.4 million non-citizens (DOSM, 2024). A widely explored topic in social science research is Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, focusing on the concept of identity, especially ethnic identity and the dynamics between different ethnic groups (Shamsul & Chan, 2025).

Malaysia's official records show that the ethnic Chinese constitute 22.4 percent of the country's citizen population, making them the second-largest ethnic group in the country (DOSM, 2024). The Chinese population in Malaysia forms part of the total overseas Chinese population, making it the world's third-largest Chinese diaspora after Indonesia (11.15 million) and Thailand (7 million) (Statista, 2024). Globalization and patterns of migration have shaped a dynamic global landscape filled with diverse and at times conflicting cultural norms and narratives, posing unique challenges to how Chinese diaspora communities navigate identity, behavior, and thought. This prompts a deeper reflection on the meaning and boundaries of "Chineseness" (Mu & Pang, 2019).

Chinese clan associations have long been regarded as an important asset of overseas Chinese societies. These voluntary organizations hold a significant position in the social structure of Chinese societies in Malaysia and elsewhere, as they are the institutions that preserve cultural heritage, advancing education, and strengthening social networks in Chinese communities (Kuah-Pearce, 2006). As a major hub for overseas Chinese communities, Malaysia is the birthplace of many Chinese clan associations. Historically, clan associations were established to assist Chinese immigrants with their daily needs and lives, functioning as the "cradle to grave intermediaries" (Ong, 2018) whom their members turned to for many important matters. In the present day, while discarding certain outdated functions, clan associations continue to serve their members, the Chinese communities, and the broader Malaysian society in various ways. As part of a multicultural and multiethnic society, Chinese clan associations serve as linkage points with new functions that encompass a diverse set of social exchanges, covering family and dialect groups, economy, legal system, education system, politics, religion and tourism (Chan & Khalid, 2019).

Clan associations are social organizations formed on the basis of familial connections or kinship ties. Their members share a common lineage that can be traced back to a shared male ancestor (Greif & Tabellini, 2017). These common traits foster a strong sense of belonging and shared identity among their members, serving as a crucial basis for establishing personal relationships and social networks that prioritize mutual trust and a sense of obligation. Given their roles as vital social structures providing mutual support, protection, solidarity, and identity to their members, clan relationships offer a unique framework for analyzing the importance of social capital. Social capital developed within clan groupings is essential for effectively pooling resources to achieve collective advancement (Wang et al., 2022). Examining the dynamics of social capital in clan associations can shed light on how social networks foster collaboration, group cohesion and societal integration.

Despite their historical significance, in recent decades, Chinese clan associations in Malaysia face various challenges, including declining membership, aging leadership, and perceived irrelevance among younger generations (Ng, 2019; Yeap, 2017). This decline is driven by factors such as changing social values, the allure of alternative social groups, and the weakening of emotional ties to the ancestral land. The sustainability of clan associations is under increasing pressure, putting their stock of social capital at risk of depletion. Consequently, many clan associations have explored new strategies, including the establishment of a youth section, to engage younger generations and ensure their continued vitality. Youth involvement in clan associations becomes central to reproducing and sustaining

these networks. In this context, the concept of social capital, which is characterized by networks, norms, and trust that facilitate collective action (Putnam, 2000), offers a useful lens for understanding how clan associations may endure through intergenerational continuity.

Chinese clan associations in Malaysia have been extensively studied by both local and international scholars, but most studies examine the history and overall development of clan associations in the country, with some situating Malaysian clan associations within broader Southeast Asian studies. While some studies focus on specific clan associations, research on youth participation and the reproduction of social capital within these organizations remains limited. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical studies exploring the lived experiences of young participants and how they benefit from their membership and participation.

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the role of youth in sustaining a traditional clan association through the lens of social capital. Using Chan She Shu Yuen Clan Association Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (CSSYKL), a centennial Cantonese ancestral clan in Malaysia, as a case study, this study explores how youth's participation contributes to the reproduction and continuity of social capital in the clan association. It also examines the benefits and limitations of social capital derived from clan participation. This study is unique, given that traditional culture and clan organizations are often considered at risk in the face of rapidly developing technology and a shift away from traditional norms. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the continuity of Chinese clan associations in the 21st century, supported by the participation of younger generations, in this case, Generation Y and beyond. This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- i. In what ways do youth play the role of agents of traditional continuity?
- ii. How do youth reproduce social capital through their roles and functions in sustaining the clan association?
- iii. What are the benefits and limitations of social capital gained through clan association?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical and evolving roles of Chinese clan associations in Malaysia

As one of the countries with the highest overseas Chinese population in the world (Shao, 2018), Malaysia hosts a plethora of Chinese associations. The statistics from the Registry of Societies Malaysia showed a record of 11,710 registered Chinese associations in 2010, including those based on kinship, locality, trade, education, and alumni groups (Luo, 2012). Among these associations, clan associations were the earliest forms of social organizations emerging with the mass arrival of Chinese immigrants in the late 19th century to early 20th century (Liew, 1998). Generally, clan associations can be classified into two main categories: the first is kinship-based organization, or *zongqin hui* (宗亲会), which is based on a common surname, lineage, or ancestry; the second is locality-based organization, or *tongxiang hui* (同乡会), which is based on the same place of origin or a common dialect (Chen, 2022). Despite these variances, the two types of clan associations are not always clearly distinguished from one another; occasionally, they intersect and even form combined clan associations (Chen, 2022).

Clan associations were instrumental in promoting unity and solidarity among people belonging to the same family, particular locality or dialect group. They served social, cultural, and financial functions by supporting clansmen with employment, healthcare, and basic education services, traditional festival celebrations, dispute resolution, and community representation (Kuah-Pearce, 2006). Some of these functions, however, have diminished in present-day Malaysia. As the country develops into a modern nation, the role of Chinese clan associations has gradually evolved. In response to political and socio-cultural changes, clan

associations – once formed to meet Chinese immigrants’ basic needs – now focus on preserving and promoting Chinese culture and heritage, with some branching into business, politics, and sports. (Lu, 2024). As they become more localized, clan associations have also broadened their activities to include wider community interests, supporting nation-building efforts and fostering a shared national identity (Ng, 2019).

2.2 Social Capital and Clan Associations

Clan associations have long served as repositories of social capital by offering support networks and enabling collective action for mutual benefit (Wang et al., 2022). Social capital refers to the benefits and resources individuals can obtain from their social relationships and membership in a group (Bourdieu, 2018). Putnam (2000) further categorizes social capital into two forms: bonding (exclusive) and bridging (inclusive). Bonding social capital involves inward-looking connections that promote in-group solidarity and reinforce exclusive identities, while bridging social capital consists of outward-looking ties that connect people across diverse social backgrounds (Putnam, 2000).

Clan association’s social networks are interconnected and built around regular interactions, as well as the sharing of knowledge, resources, and support (Fan et al., 2023). Clan members develop a collective identity based on shared lineage or dialect groups. They create strong bonding social capital that promotes in-group solidarity and reinforces exclusive networks, shared values, and internal cohesion (Chen, 2022). This affiliation allows clan members to claim access to resources possessed by their associates. More broadly, by engaging with external organizations and the civic community, clan associations provide a platform for members to develop bridging social capital, connecting them with individuals from diverse social groups and facilitating resources and information exchange across these networks (Setijadi, 2016).

Social capital is characterized by the presence of dense networks, established social norms, trust and reciprocity (Bekkers et al., 2008; van Deth, 2008), which are essential elements in clan associations. In this context, dense networks are indicated by a web of connections and relationships within clan networks. Norms inform clan members about the acceptable and unacceptable conducts, shared expectations, and responsibilities within the group. Trust is built through consistent interactions, continuous adherence to conventions, and the fulfilment of commitments within the clan association; it fosters a sense of dependability and assurance among clan members (Wong, 2007). Reciprocity within clan groups often involves mutual obligations and support. It encourages clan members to assist each other, based on the understanding that what is given will eventually be returned, either directly or indirectly (Warren, 2008).

Additionally, personal identity is also important within the networking context. According to Shamsul (1996), identity is shaped within two distinct social frameworks: one defined by those in positions of authority, and the other shaped by the everyday experiences of ordinary people. The “authority-defined” reality reflects the perspectives and narratives imposed by dominant power structures, while the “everyday-defined” reality emerges from the lived experiences of the general population (Chan et al., 2024). The two are intertwined in the operationalization of social capital.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a qualitative research approach that combined fieldwork, participant observation, in-depth interview and document review as its primary data gathering methods. The collection of data was done in the natural setting of the people (clan association members) and places (clan house) under study. The qualitative method is deemed suitable as it allows for

in-depth exploration of the socio-cultural dynamics and lived experiences of clan members within a real-life context. The key idea behind qualitative research is to learn more about the topic from the participants’ experiences and perspectives. Thus, in the entire qualitative research process, participants’ meaning is at the core of the researcher’s attention (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The research setting was Chan She Shu Yuen Clan Association (CSSYKL), a traditional clan association that has long initiated efforts to involve youth in its activities. CSSYKL was founded as a clan consanguinity organization in Kuala Lumpur in 1896 to serve individuals with the surname ‘Chen’ (陈/陳). It is one of the earliest Cantonese clan associations in Malaysia that still remains active even today, long after the initial wave of Chinese migration to Malaya during the British colonial era had subsided. Its century-old clan house is a popular tourist site and has been listed as a historical cultural relic and a protected heritage building by the Malaysian government (CSSYKL, 2016). Owing to its historical, ethnological and social significance, CSSYKL is an important resource for studying traditional Chinese clan associations in Malaysia.

To collect first-hand materials, the researchers have made multiple visits to the main research site – CSSYKL’s clan house at Petaling Street, Kuala Lumpur – on various occasions. Participant observations were conducted both physically and online between December 2019 and September 2021, during events such as clan meetings, festive celebrations, ritual ceremonies, and social gatherings. To gain a deeper understanding, in-depth interviews were conducted between December 2019 and June 2023, with two members of the CSSYKL Board of Trustees (Youth Advisors) and 11 youth members who have experience ranging from one to 10 years or more in the clan association. The total 13 respondents comprised nine males and four females from diverse educational backgrounds and professions. Table 1 below presents the respondents’ demographic information and interview dates.

Table 1: Respondents’ demographic information and interview dates

Respondent	Gender	Education	Profession	Year joined	Interview date
R1*	Male	N/A	N/A	N/A	December 2, 2019
R2	Female	College	IT	2003	December 15, 2019
R3	Female	College	Citizenship Planning	2019	February 7, 2021
R4	Male	College	Technician	2013	August 22, 2021
R5	Male	Secondary school	Insurance agent	2017	March 23, 2023
R6	Male	Secondary school	Businessman	2015	March 29, 2023
R7	Male	University	Businessman	2000	March 29, 2023
R8	Female	University	Tuition center owner	2022	April 3, 2023
R9	Male	College	Businessman	2018	May 13, 2023
R10	Female	University	Sales agent	2022	May 13, 2023
R11	Male	University	Student	2022	May 15, 2023
R12	Male	University	Lawyer	2018	May 27, 2023
R13*	Male	University	Businessman	1999	June 22, 2023

*Respondent is a member of the CSSYKL Board of Trustees, serving as an advisor to the Youth Section.

Note: Education, profession, and year joined information was not available for one respondent.

The respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the study and provided their consent to participate. All interviews, except for one conducted via email (R13), were held in a one-on-one, semi-structured format, and lasted about an hour.

Respondents were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is typically used in exploratory research to identify the most relevant individuals to address the research questions. The pre-determined criteria include: (1) the respondent is a member of the Youth Section of CSSYKL; and (2) the respondent is active and regularly participates in CSSYKL's activities, for example, attending major clan association events. Besides, snowball sampling was also adopted to select information-rich respondents who can provide the researchers the most effective resources related to the central issue of inquiry (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling is a widely used approach in qualitative research that relies on networking and referrals. In this case, the researchers began with a few youth members who met the research criteria and agreed to take part. These initial respondents were then asked to recommend other suitable youth members for interview. The recruitment of respondents ceased when additional interviews did not result in discovery of new codes or new concepts, hence determining the point of data saturation (Charmaz, 2006).

In addition to data obtained through fieldwork, observations and interviews, documentary data from CSSYKL website, social media, meeting records, leaflets, yearbooks, and promotional materials were also analyzed. This enabled the researchers to perform triangulation to enhance the credibility, validity, and richness of the research findings by cross-verifying data gathered through different methods (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). It is necessary to note that the data collection for this study was divided into two stages as the process was affected by the prolonged Covid-19 pandemic that restricted physical activities.

The data were transcribed and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarize with the data, generate initial codes, searching for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce the report. Themes were generated inductively to reflect respondents' views and contextual nuances. To maintain confidentiality, respondents' names were anonymized using codes (e.g., R1, R2).

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Formation, Organizational Structure and Aims of the Youth Section

CSSYKL formed its Youth Section in 1986 as part of the efforts to attract more young people to join the clan association (CSSYKL, 2011). The Youth Section is a main division within the CSSYKL structure which represents all youth members aged 18 to 45. Based on CSSYKL Secretariat Office's records, as of May 2023, the clan association had a total membership of 2,650. Among them, 284 were youth members, both males and females, making up 10.7 percent of the total membership of CSSYKL. Table 2 below presents the breakdown of youth members by age range.







Table 2: Breakdown of youth members by age range (as of May 2023)

Age range	Number of members
20-30	32
31-40	148
41-45	104
Total	284



The Youth Section is led by a 20-person committee which is elected every three years. The Committee consists of the President, Deputy President, three Vice Presidents, a Secretary and a Deputy, a Treasurer and a Deputy, a Liaison and a Deputy, two Directors (Mandarin and English) for Culture and Education Affairs, four Directors for Industry and Commerce, Recreation, Information, Welfare, and three Executive Committee Members. The Youth Section is also guided by six advisors, including three Advisors, an Executive Advisor, and two Honorary Advisors. As part of the leadership development and succession strategy, the Committee has to appoint seven representatives from among themselves to be part of the Board of Trustees of CSSYKL. These youth representatives also serve as intermediaries, facilitating the flow of information and enhancing communication between youth members and the central leadership of the organization. While adhering to the foundational principles and core purposes of the clan association, the Youth Section Committee sets goals and objectives for youth members, with the overarching aim of increasing their worth in career, family, and interpersonal relationships, thereby enhancing their quality of life and well-being.

Since its formation, the Youth Section has mainly focused on cultural, educational and social activities. Over the years, its scope of activities has broadened to include a greater variety of initiatives to cater to different interests and expectations of the younger generations. In November 2019, the Youth Section launched a series of major programs and activities, namely Members' Day, 'Chen Clan, One Family' Inter-Clan Visits, CSSY Lecture Series, Business Networking, and Corporate Visits, with the goals to enhance its visibility and expand its influence at the national level. Table 3 below presents a summary of the key programs and activities that the Youth Section organized and participated in.

Table 3: CSSYKL youth section's programs and activities

Type of event	Specific event	Description	Photo
Cultural event	Ancestor worship	Youth members performing ancestor worship during the Winter Solstice Festival celebration.	 (Source: Fieldwork photo)
	Traditional festival celebration	Winter Solstice Festival celebration	 (Source: Fieldwork photo)
Educational event	CSSY Online Lecture Series	Appreciation of Lingnan's Architectural Treasures – Online Tour of CSSY	 (Source: CSSYKL Facebook)
		Business and entrepreneurial lecture series	 (Source: CSSYKL Facebook)
	Public talk on the Era of Self-Media	 (Source: Online participant observation)	
Social networking event	Clan networking activity	Member's Day gathering	 (Source: CSSYKL Facebook)

	Youth networking activity	Online Christmas gift exchange activity	 <p>(Source: Online participant observation)</p>
	'Chen Clan, One Family' Inter-Clan Visits	Youth members visiting Chen Chi Zong Ci (Tan Kongs) Perak Utara, Taiping	 <p>(Source: CSSYKL Facebook)</p>
		Youth members visiting Sarawak Chen Youth	 <p>(Source: CSSYKL Facebook)</p>
	Inter-organizational networking	Youth members attending Malaysian Young Graduates Association (GRADUAN) Anniversary Celebration	 <p>(Source: CSSYKL Facebook)</p>
Business networking event	Online Business Networking	Online Business Networking session	 <p>(Source: Online participant observation)</p>
	Corporate Visits	Youth members visiting Innovans Palm Industries Sdn. Bhd.	 <p>(Source: CSSYKL Facebook)</p>

Organizational event	Organizational meeting	Youth Section Committee meeting	 <p>(Source: Fieldwork photo)</p>
Community event	Heritage awareness and preservation event	Youth Section co-organized Jogathon Warisan (Heritage Walk) for historic cemetery protection	 <p>(Source: CSSYKL Facebook)</p>

4.2 Youth as Culture Bearer, Network Builder, Operational Facilitator and Innovator

Through data analysis, the Youth Section appeared to be an important pillar of CSSYKL, playing multiple roles and functions in various facets of the clan association. Its roles in CSSYKL could be observed in two dimensions: In a broader scope, the Youth Section supported the parent association in organizing events and executing key plans; in a more specific scope, the Youth Section focused on youth-related agendas and activities. Collectively, the Youth Section served several key roles in CSSYKL as the culture bearer, network builder, operational facilitator, and innovator. These roles and functions are crucial for maintaining and sustaining the clan association.

First, as the culture bearer, the Youth Section shouldered the responsibility of inheriting, preserving and transmitting the culture and traditions of the Chen clan. Clan associations are widely recognized as the guardian of Chinese culture and tradition (Tan & Tan, 2020). The intangible heritage is preserved through cultural activities such as ancestor worship, traditional festivals and anniversaries celebrations. Ancestor worship is an explicit symbol of Chinese tradition, demonstrating filial piety, memorialism, and social solidarity among the worshippers (Chan, 2003). As a central activity of CSSYKL, ancestor worship is conducted collectively at various occasions. During fieldwork, it was observed that ritual activities were led by clan leaders and elders, with Chen’s descendants paying homage to the spirits of Chen’s ancestors. This ritual signifies the continuity of lineage, reminding the Chen descendants the importance of knowing their ancestral origins and preserving the clan traditions (CSSYKL, 2016). Besides, CSSYKL celebrates traditional festivals, especially Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, as well as its anniversaries on a large scale, usually with a grand feast, performances and ceremonies. This was reported by respondents and corroborated through observations of the clan association’s website and Facebook posts. These celebrations are important representations of Chinese culture and tradition, reflecting the clan’s enduring customs, deep-rooted values, and strong communal bonds. Through these activities, youth learned about the clan’s history, core values, virtues, traditional customs and rituals. In turn, they helped document and disseminate the cultural knowledge to both clan members and the public through social, educational, and tourism programs, such as Members’ Day, cultural talks and CSSY tour guide training. According to R8, who was in charge of organizing historical and cultural archival materials and preparing tour guide content, it was important to keep proper records of these materials so that the knowledge could be preserved

and passed on to younger generations. This ensures cultural continuity as youth become active participants in sustaining and transmitting clan traditions.

Second, the Youth Section acted as the network builder of CSSYKL by hosting social networking activities both within and beyond the clan association. In essence, CSSYKL's networks extend beyond the clan association itself, spanning city, state, national, and transnational spheres. Correspondingly, youth engagement in networking roles was evident at multiple levels – from divisional and organizational to inter-organizational and beyond. Internally, the Youth Section organized Members' Day twice a year to connect clan members and strengthen familial bonds. At divisional level, the Youth Section organized smaller scale youth gatherings like Christmas party and birthday celebrations to foster relationships and emotional bonds among youth members. Externally, the Youth Section established connections with affiliated Chen clan associations across Malaysia through the 'Chen Clan, One Family' Inter-Clan Visits program, which aimed to deepen mutual understanding and foster closer ties among members of the Chen clan in the country. Other than that, the Youth Section also represented CSSYKL to join events hosted by various organizations such as Chinese assembly halls, trade associations, alumni groups, and sports clubs. Notably, the Youth Section introduced the Business Networking and Corporate Visits programs to enable youth members to explore business opportunities by connecting them with professionals and entrepreneurs from the business and corporate sectors (see Table 3 for various networking activities). Overall, through their engagement in various social and business networking activities, youth contributed to the reproduction of both bonding and bridging social capital by fostering, maintaining, and reinforcing ties within the clan association and a wider community.

Third, the Youth Section served as the operational facilitator in CSSYKL, supporting the clan association in coordinating events and activities, executing projects, handling publicity, and recruiting new members. CSSYKL organizes various cultural, educational, social, and charity activities throughout the year. At major clan events such as annual general meetings, anniversaries, and Chinese New Year banquets, youth mainly assisted in hosting, emceeing, managing logistics, and welcoming guests. As reported by R11, youth members usually helped with tasks that required more physical strength, while the clan leaders attended to VIP guests. By facilitating these tasks, youth contributed to the smooth running of clan events and shared the burden on senior members. In the long run, they enable the effective functioning and organizational continuity of the clan association.

Fourth, the Youth Section emerged as the innovator in CSSYKL. By introducing new ideas and initiatives, they helped the clan association to stay current with trends and progress. This was evident during the Covid-19 pandemic when the Youth Section launched a series of online activities – including health talks, virtual tours, business networking, social gatherings, and stay-at-home exercises – to keep the clan association active and its members connected in the virtual space while physical activities were restricted. In event execution and administrative aspects, the Youth Section adopted fresh approaches for traditional events and introduced reforms to conventional working and operational practices, such as digitizing documents and clan house entrance fee collections. In this aspect, youth helped bridge technological gaps, promote modernization and adaptation, and mediate between tradition and innovation within the clan association.

4.3 Social Capital Reproduction Through Youth Involvement

Clan associations are organizations that place great emphasis on ancestral lineage, mutual support and group solidarity. The sustainability of clan associations depends not just on the preservation and transmission of cultural traditions, but also the reproduction of social capital across generations. It requires the active involvement of younger generations to reproduce and maintain the social networks, trust, and norms embedded in social capital. In CSSYKL, youth's

engagement in cultural roles enhances their cultural literacy and strengthens their clan identity and sense of belonging. Clan identity can be viewed as an “embodied form of cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986), as it consists of shared descent, historical and cultural knowledge, customs, traditions, values, and virtues passed down through generations. Yang’s (1994) suggests that the development of relationships requires a certain level of familiarity between the parties involved. In this sense, clan identity provides a solid basis for forming personal relationships, serving as a catalyst for the formation of bonding social capital within the clan association. As two respondents noted:

“CSSYKL is a big family. When we meet an elder’s wife there, we call her zong sao (sister-in-law). We feel a sense of closeness, not as close as with our biological family, but closer than with friends. After all, we might share the same grandfather, so this blood relationship is considered very important.” (R4)

“I feel a sense of connection because we all share the surname, Chen. When the clan elders show their affinity, it really feels like a family. Once such family cohesion is established, I naturally feel a responsibility to work together to manage the association well.” (R8)

These excerpts illustrate that despite not having real biological connection, individuals are treated as kinsmen. Such bonds can be formalized and institutionalized through the clan association’s rituals and practices, and complete strangers can forge fictive kinship relations (Kwee, 2013). The sense of common identity motivates youth to work collectively to preserve their clan traditions and safeguard their heritage.

Nevertheless, social relationships are fluid and not permanently fixed by a one-time social rule or “an initial act of institution” (Bourdieu, 1986). Even in family groups, connection between members is constantly built, maintained, and shaped over time (Bourdieu, 1986). To ensure a stable and lasting network of relationships, individuals or groups need to invest their resources (such as time, money, and energy) to establish and reproduce useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profits (Bourdieu, 1986). The production of social capital is made possible through interactions among network members (Andriani, 2013). In CSSYKL, interactions among members occurred during social networking activities at multiple levels of the organization. Youth’s involvement in clan activities, either as organizing committees, program executors, event facilitators, or participants, enables them to interact with their clansmen in-person, establish connections and cultivate relationships. Regular and frequent interactions help to maintain both personal relationships and clan networks, as well as promote trust among clan members. This was affirmed by several respondents as they acknowledged that active participation in clan events increased their visibility among clan members, helped them develop mutual understanding, and gradually gained trust and recognition in the clan association. For example, R9 decided to start a joint venture with a fellow youth member, based on the relationship and trust they had developed through frequent involvement in CSSYKL. In his words:

“We opened a restaurant together because we developed trust and understanding through our participation in the clan association, which allowed us to collaborate and be recognized as potential shareholders.” (R9)

Active participation in social networks also helps foster the norm of reciprocity among individuals (Putnam, 2000). The norm of reciprocity encourages participants to act collectively, strengthening bonds within communities and fostering a greater connection to a larger community, along with a commitment to the common good (Adler & Kwon, 2002). This is

evident in CSSYKL, where youth members recognize their obligation to the clan association and the wider community due to the benefits they have received. As two respondents remarked:

“We always do things with the mindset of giving back to the clan association and to society. Even when we earn money through CSSY, it’s earned with that same intention. It’s never just about making money and then leaving or not caring about anything else.” (R5)

“Our mentors have connected us to many people and taught us many things. We gain a lot from this place, and I think we should also contribute something in return.” (R12)

These responses reflect a shared belief among youth members that the benefits they receive should be reciprocated by giving back to the association and society. Reciprocity operates on the basis that when someone receives a benefit, they feel a moral or social duty to return the favor. This helps reinforce social bonds and create expectations of mutual support.

4.4 Benefits and Impact of Social Capital on Youth Personal and Communal Life

Social capital is commonly tied to the ability of individuals to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks (Portes, 1998). It emphasizes the value of social ties, networks and trust as important assets (Green & Haines, 2016). Studies also highlight the significance of these resources in influencing the well-being of both individuals and groups (Huang et al., 2022). Based on analysis, social capital derived from clan association benefited youth in various ways. These benefits encompassed material and non-material aspects, which included network expansion, access to resources, skills development, deeper connection to cultural roots, and enhanced sense of belonging.

Most respondents recognized clan association as a platform to build contacts and expand their social networks, offering them the opportunities to connect with people of diverse backgrounds, ages, interests, professions, and social statuses. Network expansion brought the advantage of access to resources, such as information, guidance, business deals, client referrals, and work opportunities, which would not otherwise be easily available. R11 described clan association as a “springboard” that enabled him to reach prominent individuals in the business and corporate worlds. Through the Corporate Visits program and inter-organizational networking activities, R11 had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with industry leaders and company founders. In his words:

“As a university student, I have benefited from these connections – they help me secure internship and job opportunities. These connections would have been beyond my reach without the platform provided by the Youth Section.” (R11)

Respondent 12 echoed this view, stating that he built a lot of connections within a short time after joining CSSYKL. This gave him the confidence to set up his own legal service firm given the regular client base from the clan association networks. He shared:

“When I first came to Kuala Lumpur, my social circle was quite small. But after joining CSSYKL, I got to know people both within and outside the association. My social network grew tremendously, and it gave me more confidence to start my own legal firm at that time.” (R12)

These examples illustrate how bridging social capital developed through membership and participation in the clan association helps youth members expand their social circles and enhance their upward mobility. This is consistent with Benton’s (2016) study which suggests

that involvement in voluntary organizations helps bridge the gap between individuals' social standing and their access to valuable resources from their network.

Apart from this, most respondents considered CSSYKL a training ground for developing and enhancing personal and professional skills. In CSSYKL, youth's roles at the divisional and organizational levels required different skill sets to handle various situations and engage frequently with people. They were also expected to understand the unwritten rules and customs of the clan association, such as showing respect to the elders. Through organizing events, leading task groups, and facilitating activities, youth had opportunities to interact, collaborate, and assume roles that helped them develop essential skills, such as interpersonal, professional, leadership, organizational, and ceremonial skills. In this aspect, R11 stated that he had an added advantage over his peers in adapting to the workplace, given his early exposure to the social etiquette of the clan association. R12 affirmed this view, highlighting that the intricate people relationships he observed in the clan association had provided him with a deeper insight into the interpersonal dynamics and the complex group interactions. This helped him navigate both his role in the clan association and his professional career more effectively. This finding aligns with van Deth et al.'s (2016) study, which illustrates how associational involvement positively influences pro-social attitudes and social skills, thereby reducing transaction costs.

Other than material benefits, social capital derived by clan association also offers non-material benefits, or in Bourdieu's (1986) term the "symbolic profit," such as a deeper connection to cultural roots, cultural pride, and a sense of belonging. These intangible gains are related to emotional values and identity rather than economic benefits. All respondents confirmed this, stating that participation in CSSYKL had enhanced their knowledge of Chinese culture and clan traditions. This enabled them to connect more deeply with their cultural roots and better appreciate their ancestral legacy. Greater awareness of their culture and ancestral history also strengthened the respondents' sense of cultural pride. As two respondents noted:

"After learning more about the history of prominent Chen clan figures, I came to appreciate the contributions our predecessors made to the Chinese community and Malaysian society." (R5)

"When I share with my foreign friends about clan associations, they are impressed by it. These exchanges convey to them that I am ethnic Chinese, and that I take pride and confidence in my heritage and cultural identity." (R11)

More importantly, being a part of CSSYKL provides a sense of belonging to most of the respondents. They described the clan association as a big family and a place like home, where they felt accepted and valued. In their words:

"Clan association is a place that values human touch. Going to CSSYKL is like returning to the childhood home, where everyone just greets you and asks if you have eaten." (R9)

"I feel a sense of belonging here. It's like a place to rest one's feet, a place where people can find comfort, aside from home. It's a place that makes me want to contribute." (R10)

Essentially, these emotional values contribute to the positive experience of the respondents in clan association and help promote their emotional well-being. The benefits of social capital on emotional well-being are observed across various cultural contexts, including South Korea (Han et al., 2011), Australia (Lignier et al., 2024) and Finland (Tuominen & Haanpää, 2022).

The findings of this study affirm that the positive effects of social capital are broadly applicable across different contexts, as respondents noted that the bonds formed in CSSYKL fostered feelings of support, care, recognition, and value within the clan community.

Together, the material and symbolic benefits derived from the clan association function as drivers in two dimensions. First, they promote youth's well-being, positively influencing their personal and communal life and contributing to their social, cultural, professional, and emotional development. Second, they serve as a driver in the cyclical process of producing and reproducing social capital within the clan association. The benefits gained motivate the youth to invest time and effort into clan activities and sustain their membership and participation, a process through which they cultivate a sense of reciprocity and an obligation to give back to the clan association.

4.5 Limitations and Challenges of Social Capital Derived by Clan Association

Social capital, while largely beneficial, has shortcomings. It is known as a “double-edged” phenomenon, and its effects on individuals and groups are not always positive (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017). In clan association context, the limitations of social capital are observed in the network's exclusivity, conventional recruitment model, and strict hierarchical structure. Albeit having an extensive network, it is evident that CSSYKL's web of relationships is predominantly concentrated within the Chinese community, limiting opportunities to build bridging social capital with other ethnic groups. According to R13, even within the Chinese community, some youths from English-speaking backgrounds are not interested in clan associations due to their strong emphasis on Chinese culture and Chinese language. For clan associations operating in a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia, the network exclusivity may limit youth's opportunities to interact with other cultural groups and reduce their exposure to diverse perspectives.

Besides, CSSYKL's members recruitment mainly relies on traditional recruitment methods, such as family ties and personal referrals from existing members. This can be seen in the recruitment of most respondents via their parents or friends. After they join the clan association, they tend to replicate the recruitment method by recommending potential members from among their kin, friends, and acquaintances. Although it helps to bring new blood into the organization, it tends to perpetuate the existing social networks and limit outreach to those without prior connections.

Furthermore, CSSYKL is seen to follow a strict hierarchical structure, where the central leadership is dominated by senior clan members. According to R1, to bridge the gap between the older and younger generations, CSSYKL's Board of Trustees has reserved seven positions in the Board for the youth representatives; however, their roles are limited to director-level positions. According to R12, to be promoted to a board director position, one must have been in the association for a long time, usually after spending some years in the Youth Section or receiving a recommendation. R6 further elaborated on this perspective, stating:

“Whenever I take on tasks, I usually consult our elders first and ask for their opinions. However, many new youth members aren't aware of this. They sometimes act first, and then when the bills come, the elders question them. The generation gap is especially evident when money is involved, because the elders focus on conserving, while we focus on creating. We want to do things differently; for example, we propose to upgrade the entire IT system of the clan association, but some elders may think that we are spending a lot of the association's money.” (R6)

The statement indicates that while the stringent practice contributes to the stability of the central leadership, it may also limit youth to executing roles rather than taking on core decision-making

responsibilities within the clan association. In other words, while social capital can be a beneficial resource to generate strong group cohesion, it can also create barriers to inclusion and reinforce power imbalances within the clan association. This limits the full potential of youth and openness of the organization.

Overall, this case study has demonstrated that there is an existence of both “authority-defined” elements of youth identity formation through the hierarchical structure of clan association participation, as well as the ability to fulfil their individual identity needs in an “everyday-defined” sense by using it as a platform for personal self-expression of Chinese culture.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study shows that youth is an indispensable force in CSSYKL, playing essential roles in preserving the clan culture and traditions, building networks and connections, facilitating events and operations, as well as driving innovation. Through their roles and function, youth reproduce social capital by establishing social networks, building trust, and reinforcing norms of reciprocity, which in turn helps enhance collaboration, mutual support, and social cohesion within the clan association. In this process, clan identity, an embodied form of cultural capital, serves as a catalyst for the development of social capital. Put together, these elements are essential in the sustainability and adaptation of the clan association in a modern world. Correspondingly, the social capital derived from clan association enables youth to obtain various benefits that help them advance individually and collectively. However, it is necessary to highlight that social capital also poses challenges and potential limitations for youth, as reflected in the exclusivity and hierarchical nature of the clan association.

Theoretically, this study offers an additional perspective on social capital in the traditional Chinese clan association context. With the focus on the Youth Section of CSSYKL, this study provides an insight into youth’s associational participation and the reproduction of social capital in sustaining the clan association. The findings of this study have practical implications for both youth and clan associations. Youth who wish to develop their social capital can explore the opportunities of joining clan associations or similar organizations. Meanwhile, clan associations can leverage the energy and innovative ideas of youth to develop new initiatives, increase exposure and encourage community engagement. By engaging youth in meaningful roles, clan associations can foster intergenerational collaboration, bridge the gap between older and younger generations, and ensure their continued relevance and vibrancy. The intertwining of “authority-defined” and “everyday-defined” elements of identity formation must not be ignored.

This study is limited by its small sample size, which focuses on a single surname-based clan association in the urban setting. Clan associations and youth in semi-urban and rural areas may have different experiences and encounter different challenges due to the environment they live and operate in. Future studies could expand the scope to cover clan associations in different localities, as well as other types of social organizations, such as chambers of commerce, alumni associations, and national youth groups. This may offer diverse perspectives and insights into youth associational activities in the country, by comparing the current development of organizations with different purposes.

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