Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the roles and functions that lineages play in the social and cultural experiences of certain segments of Singapore’s Chinese community. Since Maurice Freedman argued over half a century ago that beyond the nuclear families and their immediate kin, the Chinese in Singapore normally did not organize themselves according to the ideal of lineage, researches on Chinese voluntary associations in Singapore have by and large overlooked the fact that the practice of organizing kinsmen around the ideas of lineage has persisted up to the present day. The paper looks at two cases — the Wengshan Hongs and the Bangtou Bais — of lineage practices in contemporary Singapore. The former highlights an intangible display of kinship consciousness in a religious space. Gods, rather than ancestors, are symbols that help to bind its kinsmen together. By comparison, the Bangtou Bai lineage is very explicit in the display of their common ancestry identity. The common surname association, the religious space, and the lineage space have been converged. It is the contention of the authors of this paper that the two cases can represent two major strategies of combining religious affiliations and memories of ancestors in a fast-developing urban environment.