The Chinese Boycott: A Social Movement in Singapore and Malaya in the Early Twentieth Century*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the causes, developments, characteristics, and significance of the 1905 anti-American boycott movement in Singapore and Malaya. The author argues that the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya in the first decade of the twentieth century should not be simplistically classified into two camps, the supporters of the Reformists and those of the Revolutionaries, as conventional wisdom has suggested. In 1905, Chinese with different political ideologies all worked together to boycott American goods for their self interests. They were concerned about their rights of residency and work in the British colonies. They feared that should the anti-Chinese policy prevailed in the United States, the British government would adopt a similar measure against the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya. The author also argues that the boycott movement was one of the earliest popular movements in the region because the Chinese from different social strata were all mobilized. More significantly, the 1905 boycott laid the foundation for popular support of the revolutionary movement in the subsequent years.

In June 1905 two unusual public meetings were held in Singapore and Penang, respectively. On June 20, about 200 Chinese rallied at the Thong Chai Hospital on Wayang Street, located in downtown Singapore, and passed a resolution to boycott American goods [U.S. National Archives 1833-1906: June 23, 1905]. Six days later, Chinese merchants in Penang gathered in Pingzhang Huiguan, the Chinese Town Hall, in support of the boycott [ibid.: July 4, 1905]. The two historical events unveiled a series of anti-American activities in Singapore and Malaya. This paper aims to examine the development of the boycott campaigns in the region, analyze the characteristics of the social movement, and investigate the significance of the anti-foreign protest. To understand the causes of the 1905 Chinese boycott in Singapore and Malaya, one

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