

The background of the book cover is a collage of various panels from Chinese comic books. At the top, there are three panels: a woman in a black robe, a man in a white robe holding a sword, and a woman in a black robe with a man in the background. Below these, there are more panels: a man in a white robe, a man in a white robe with a sword, and a man in a white robe with a sword. The panels are arranged in a grid-like fashion, with some panels overlapping others. The text is overlaid on a white rectangular box in the center of the cover.

CHINESE ADAPTATION AND DIVERSITY

Essays on Society and Literature
in Indonesia, Malaysia & Singapore

Edited by
Leo Suryadinata

Centre for Advanced Studies / Singapore University Press

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Published for
CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES
Faculty of Arts and Social Science, NUS



SINGAPORE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

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Kent Ridge, Singapore 0511

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ISBN 9971-69-186-8 (Paper)

Typeset by : Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd
Printed by : Bradford Press

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Preface

The eight essays in this book originate from a joint project between the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) which started in 1988. These papers are from the section dealing with Southeast Asia.

The major theme of the project is Chinese emigration and settlement, with reference to the process of adaptation. However, there was no rigid framework for the participants to follow. As resources were limited and many participants had been involved in other projects before they joined, each one was requested to work in his or her own field while paying attention to the general theme.

As the NUS team is made up of members with different disciplines — sociology, history, literature, economics, and political science — our work reflects the differences in our training. Nonetheless, all of us are interested in Chinese communities in this region, especially in Chinese culture and society. As the strengths of the team lie in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, we have produced studies of Chinese society and literature in these three ASEAN states.

As the co-ordinator of this project for the Southeast Asia section, my responsibility was to put together the papers from my team. The papers featured here are about Chinese immigrants in Indonesia, Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore; the problems that they faced in the western colonies, their social, cultural, and economic activities; and their attempts to adjust to the new environment, especially after these colonies became independent. The process of change and adaptation is reflected in their communities and their literature. However, since the three countries have Chinese communities of different sizes and political experiences, it must be expected that they have different types of Chinese society and culture.

Because of this common theme, I have, after consulting with my fellows participants, entitled: Chinese Adaptation and Diversity: Essays on Society and Literature in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues for participating in the project. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Centre for Advanced Studies (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, NUS) for supporting this project.

Leo Suryadinata
June 1993

A Note on the Transliteration of Chinese Words

I have allowed the use of both Wade-Giles and Pinyin in this book provided that it is used consistently in a chapter. Well-known Chinese personalities will appear in their local spellings. Chinese characters will also be provided when available.

Editor

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1

CHINESE ADAPTATION AND DIVERSITY IN SOME ASEAN STATES: AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Leo Suryadinata

The emigration of the Chinese from China to Southeast Asia began in the eleventh century. However, owing to the difficulty in transportation and the prohibition against the Chinese from freely leaving and re-entering China, the number of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia was small. The mass migration of the Chinese to Southeast Asia only took place after the colonization of the region towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the present century, and was a result of the push factor in China (political instability and famine) and the pull factor in Southeast Asia (the colonial powers were exploiting the economic potential of new colonies).

This book examines the development of Chinese societies and cultures in some Southeast Asian states, namely Singapore, Malaysia (Malaya), and Indonesia (Dutch East Indies). What were the factors which contributed to the development of these communities? How did they adapt to the new environment and develop local identities?

It appears that the nature of the Chinese communities studied here differs from country to country. Factors such as the size of the Chinese community, the length of stay of the Chinese in the country concerned, and the role of the state (e.g., government policies, etc.) contributed to the shaping of local Chinese society and culture.

The Chinese in Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia) and Singapore, for instance, were divided into those who were contract labourers and those who were voluntary immigrants. The labourers became miners while voluntary immigrants found employment in trade and various service industries. The latter were active in the urban

economy and later became the backbone of the country's economy. Apparently, during the colonial period, the British introduced a policy of importing labourers to work in the mines and plantations so as not to upset the Malay community which comprised mainly peasants. It was during this period that the Chinese in Malaya and Singapore began to specialize in certain occupations according to dialect (speech) group. Mak Lau Fong's macro study on the speech groups in Malaya and Singapore establishes the fact that there was a pattern to this development of specific occupations and in relation to speech groups. The tendency of one speech group to specialize in a particular occupation was reinforced each time the occupation was joined by the newcomers of the same speech group. It could also be the case that a speech group had no choice but to specialize. For instance, the Xinghua (Henghwa) speech group, one of the last to come to Malaya and Singapore, was pushed into an occupation in which the other groups did not want to engage. The Xinghua immigrants became rickshaw pullers and later moved into other areas of transportation. This is the theme of a micro study by Cheng Lim Keak, who gives a detailed description and analysis of the Xinghua community since it was established in Singapore.

As the Chinese developed economically, many established local "money houses", initially to serve the Chinese community (e.g. in processing remittances to China) and to manage funds for their own businesses. These later became banks. Rosalind Chew's study traces the historical progress of local Chinese banks in Singapore, some of which developed into major banks after the Second World War. It should be noted that at the beginning Chinese banks were established along the speech group lines, only later did they become more integrated.

In colonial Indonesia, the Dutch used the Chinese as both contract labourers and traders, although in Java, there were large number of Chinese traders. This conscious Dutch policy encouraged the Chinese to become intermediate traders, serving the Dutch on the one hand and the indigenous population on the other. Leo Suryadinata's study shows how Dutch policies largely shaped the nature of the Chinese community. The Dutch introduced a policy which separated the Chinese from the native population. However, owing to the small size of the Chinese population in colonial Indonesia and its long historical settlement in the archipelago (especially in Java), many Chinese acculturated to local society and became *peranakan* Chinese, in contrast to the more recent immigrants (known as *totok*) who retained strong Chinese identities.

Despite this, both *peranakan* and *totok* were still "isolated" from the indigenous population.

After Indonesia attained independence, the government reversed this policy and began assimilating the Chinese into indigenous society. At the same time, it also attempted to undermine Chinese economic power. But, after the fall of Sukarno, Suharto encouraged Chinese participation in the economic sector, while continuing his predecessor's assimilationist policy. This resulted in the growth of Chinese economic strength and economic conflict arose between the indigenous population and the Chinese. As in Malaya and Singapore, the occupational structure of new Chinese immigrants (i.e., the *totok*) in Indonesia coincided with dialect (speech) groups, but the indigenized Chinese (i.e., the *peranakan*) took readily to an education in Dutch and became professionals or white collar workers. Thus, it was the *peranakan* Chinese who became more "Indonesianized".

In the field of culture in general and literature in particular, one can also see the process of adaptation. Most of the early Chinese immigrants were mainly men and that many married local women and settled down. Their descendants then became indigenized *peranakan*. The *peranakan* consequently lost their active command of the Chinese language and often adopted Malay, the *lingua franca* of the archipelago, as their medium of communication.

It is not surprising then that prior to the Second World War, *peranakan* Chinese literature in Malaya, Singapore, and Indonesia was written in Malay. However, owing to the small size of the *peranakan* community in Malaya and Singapore, the *peranakan* literature in these two areas was not well developed. *Peranakan* works remained little more than translations of mainly Chinese stories or novels. In Java though, where the *peranakan* were and are the majority of the Chinese population, the *peranakan* press grew and *peranakan* literature flourished. There were large quantities of *peranakan* writings, both translations and original literary works. Leo Suryadinata's article addresses the development of this literature from the nineteenth century to the present. He notes that before the war, *peranakan* works had both Indonesian and Chinese elements reflecting the *peranakan* background, but after the Second World War, especially since Indonesia's independence, *peranakan* writing began to be more Indonesian, reflecting the socio-political reality of that period. The majority of the *peranakan* writers, especially those who were active after the Second World War, have become Indonesian writers.

As noted earlier, a *peranakan* literature in *baba* Malay did not develop well in Malaya and Singapore partly because the Straits-born Chinese (as they called themselves) formed a relatively small community scattered throughout the urban centres of the former Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. Furthermore, few *peranakan* received a Malay education. Instead, under British colonial rule, they preferred an education in English for self-advancement, and the literate among them wrote in English. But despite a century of English education, the Straits Chinese did not develop a literature in English as such either, although they had an English language press and for more than a decade, supported a reputable English language magazine. Koh Tai Ann's article discusses why the Straits-born Chinese did not originate a literature in English, and why and how a literature in English began to emerge only after the Second World War in the wake of nationalism. The establishment of a local university and the introduction of tertiary education in the humanities other than in law and medicine, intense exposure to an English literary tradition, and the socio-political context of a growing anti-colonial struggle in a multiracial society made the English-educated elite, the majority of whom were Chinese, believe in the need to foster and forge a national identity that would not only include but transcend ethnic affiliations. For the more recent Chinese immigrants this meant ceasing to think of themselves as *huaqiao* (Chinese sojourners), but as "Malayans"; for the Straits-born and other English-educated Chinese this meant being less pro-British. As it was the poets who attempted to introduce local themes and to express a Chinese sensibility in an English which they had "domesticated" for the expression of a unique local "Malayan identity", Koh Tai Ann's article focuses on their work and their responses to developments after the achievement of independence. In Malaysia, literature in Malay was declared to be the "national" literature in 1969. Since then, established writers in English, feeling less able to practise their craft have either emigrated to Western countries or found publication opportunities in Singapore. To this day no successor generation of writers in English seems to have emerged in Malaysia. In contrast, in Singapore, where tensions remain between the "Chinese-educated" and the "English-educated" Chinese, the writing in English is not only surviving, but flourishing in all literary forms.

Chinese immigrants who came to Malaya and Singapore in the twentieth century began to develop much of their own literature in Chinese. Understandably, this Chinese literature, commonly known

as *Mahua* literature, is “overseas Chinese” literature. The writers came from China and they wrote from the perspective of a *huaqiao* (Chinese sojourners). Nevertheless, their works mainly reflect the local Chinese society rather than that of mainland China. Yeo Song Nian’s article discusses this literature from the May Fourth Movement (1919) until the coming of the Japanese (1942), noting that the local orientation in *Mahua* literature is quite evident.

However, since the Second World War, *Mahua* literature has gradually been transformed into a Malayan literature in the sense that the writers had begun to consider Malaya as their homeland and wrote their works from that perspective. The influence from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and later, Taiwan, is still apparent, but increasingly, local themes dominate *Mahua* literature, as they do *Xinhua* (Singapore Chinese) literature. Lee Ting Hui’s article shows the decisive influence of political ideology and the state on the development of this literature. As with Koh Tai Ann’s paper, Lee’s article also focuses on poetry because it reflects the ideological and identity issues most clearly. Dividing *Mahua/Xinhua* literature into three periods, Lee argues that soon after the war, left-wing ideology became dominant in local Chinese literature. This left-wing literature continued to grow after the establishment of the PRC and the rise of the anti-colonialist movement in Malaya and Singapore. Both the form and content of the literature were heavily influenced by mainland Chinese writers and the realist school became the major stream. However, when Singapore became part of Malaysia, the government’s suppression of left-wing ideology caused *Mahua/Xinhua* poetry to be influenced by right-wing ideology from Taiwan. This ideology began to grow and eventually became dominant in post-independent Singapore literature. The form and content of *Xinhua* poetry are similar to the form and content of poetry in Taiwan, and modernist poetry became the major stream. Since Singapore’s independence, the theme of nation-building has also been reflected in the poetry.

Most of the Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia (more correctly, the ASEAN states) settled down and became nationals of their adopted lands. Some, however, were not able to adjust to post-independence socio-political change in the region and have emigrated again, not to their ancestral land but to the west. There they began the process of adaptation all over again, just like their forefathers who first came to Southeast Asia.

What is the contribution of this collection of papers to the study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia? What is badly needed are

comparative studies in order to discern patterns of society and culture among the "overseas Chinese". Through comparative studies, one can generate some "theories" which may deepen our understanding of this ethnic group.¹

While the essays collected in this book are not comparative as such, they lay a groundwork for such an approach. From these country-oriented studies, one can discern the characteristics of the different Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, and hence identify patterns of development of ethnic Chinese society and culture in the region.

According to the studies, there are a number of factors which contribute to the nature and development of ethnic Chinese society. The first factor, which is quite obvious, is the relative size of the Chinese community. It seems that the larger the proportion of the Chinese community, the more "Chinese" its character is. Among the three countries under examination in this book, Singapore has the highest percentage of Chinese in its population (78%), followed by Peninsular Malaysia (31%), and Indonesia (3%). Naturally, the Chinese in Singapore are more "Chinese" than those in Indonesia.

Clan and district associations have been important in Singapore and Malaysia. However, the role played by these associations appears to be less important in Indonesia in recent years. The Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia are still divided along the dialect group lines, but it is not the case with the Chinese Indonesians because of the gradual disappearance of the dialects in the country.

Apart from size, the history of an ethnic Chinese community in an adopted country is also important. The Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia are recent immigrants compared with the Chinese in Indonesia (particularly in Java). The latter no longer have an active command of the Chinese language, and as a result their culture and literature have become more indigenized than in the case in Singapore and Malaysia. In Singapore and Malaysia, Chinese language literature is flourishing, while in Indonesia it is a dying art. In the past, Indonesian language literature written by the *peranakan* Chinese was well developed but in recent times, this has gradually been merged with Indonesian national literature.

The role of the state is also crucial. The three countries have adopted different cultural policies towards the Chinese population, policies which are linked to the relative size of the local Chinese community. Singapore opted for cultural pluralism, while Malaysia, for an accommodationist policy with a strong emphasis on Malay language and culture, and Indonesia pursued an assimilationist

policy. This of course directly affected the development of Chinese society and culture. In Singapore, English and Chinese (Mandarin) are preferred languages, while in Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) rather than English or Chinese is encouraged; in Indonesia, Chinese language education has been banned and only Bahasa Indonesia is promoted. As a result, Chinese society in each country has a distinctive character, and each produces a different type of "Chinese" literature.

It is clear that "overseas Chinese" are far from being a homogeneous group. They differ from country to country and even from subgroup to subgroup within one country. The diversity of the "overseas Chinese" and their identities are important points for us to bear in mind. Although this book only covers three countries, it may also throw light on the Chinese in the rest of Southeast Asia.

Note

- ¹ I have mentioned this point in my earlier work. See "The Ethnic Chinese in the ASEAN States", in Leo Suryadinata, ed., *The Ethnic Chinese in the Asean States: Bibliographical Essays* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), p. 32.

2

OCCUPATION AND CHINESE DIALECT GROUP IN BRITISH MALAYA

Mak Lau Fong

Introduction

Factors contributing to migration decision making in modern times are much more complex than in the early days when the primary motive to emigrate was essentially economic. This motive of improving on one's life chances can be expressed in terms of finding a job that would earn one a subjectively better living. The formation, change, and persistence of the occupational patterns of immigrants have naturally been a great concern in many studies on early immigrants. Enquiries into Chinese immigration are no exception.

Early Chinese immigrants in North America exhibited a universal occupational pattern, because they were mainly slotted into residual categories of occupations which were deemed menial and undesirable. While capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism well account for Asian migratory movements before the Second World War,¹ the host countries' work environment, which was regulated by both labour market forces and immigration laws, determined the type of job an immigrant held. Contract labourers were left with no choice as to type of work and location of worksites. The majority of Chinese contract workers recruited during 1861-70 worked in gold mines, railroad construction, and later in plantation and farming.²

Early voluntary immigrants and freed contract labourers were also not given any better range of occupational choice in North America. Research findings³ consistently portray them as operators in businesses such as restaurants, laundry shops, and grocery stores. A Chinese immigrant's occupation was thus highly predictable, because of the limited range of occupational categories that were available to him.

Chinese immigrants to the British Straits Settlements were by and large of the same two categories: contract labourers and voluntary immigrants. The range of occupational choices for contract labourers did not seem to be much wider than that of their counterparts in North America, partly because the nature of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism varied very little within a specific time period. They were recruited chiefly as labourers to work in mining sites and plantations of many kinds. As in North America where the immigrants' former settlements later developed into towns and cities, environs of worksites of the Chinese immigrants were also transformed into urban areas.

Voluntary Chinese immigrants and freed contract labourers in the Settlements differed considerably from their North American counterparts in two important aspects of occupational choice. First, except for the professional class of occupations which very few of them were qualified to hold, the early Chinese immigrants were reported to be in the other four major occupational classes, namely, domestic, commercial, industrial, and agricultural. The type of vocations in these four classes spanned a wide spectrum, ranging from hawking to financing.

The degree of internal constraint on the immigrants is the second point of departure. For the Chinese immigrants as a whole in the Settlements, external constraints were manageable, but internally self-created constraints as a result of rigid group boundary were relatively imposing. The constraints created therefrom naturally reduced the immigrants' choice on a group basis. Such internal constraints were not felt among the North American Chinese immigrants, because of their relatively monolithic composition in dialect/locality origins: most of them were from *siyi*, or the four districts (Xinning/Taishan, Xinhui, Kaiping, and Enping) and *sanyi*, or the three districts (Nanhai, Panyu, and Shunde).⁴

Given the two conditions, namely externally imposed constraints and internally created group constraints, four models of occupational choice are possible. The two extreme models are each characterized by "externally free-internally free" (EF/IF) and "externally constrained-internally constrained" (EC/IC) conditions. The other two may be seen as conditions that are "externally constrained-internally free" (EC/IF) and "externally free-internally constrained" (EF/IC). The EC/IF model may be illustrated by the North American experience and the EF/IC model by the Chinese immigrants in the early Straits Settlements.

That Chinese immigrants in the early Straits Settlements were dialect bound is well documented. The effects of this binding permeated not only into residential settlements and social organization, but also occupational structure. A number of early observations associated some trades and occupations with certain dialect groups.⁵

An ecological perspective stressing the role of secret organizations has been offered to account for such a relationship between contract labourers and their types of job.⁶ But, Yen suggests clan ties, or its extended territorial connections, as an explanatory factor.⁷ This suggestion is plausible, insofar as the level of generalization is confined to only voluntary/freed contract labourers. One has yet to be convinced as to how hundreds of thousands of workers could congregate to work in deserted areas like tin mining sites and plantations of various kinds if formal organization of labourers was inefficient. It certainly makes sense to see these workers as bonded through their dialect origins, but clan network may be more readily employed in explaining the occupation-dialect group affinity of the voluntary immigrants and the freed contract labourers. And yet this occupational snowballing effect operated primarily on the later immigrants, and the occupational choice of the first immigrants was believed to be a historical accident.

Shortly, we shall present some observations on such an occupational pattern.

Source of Data

Information on trades and occupations of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements is available from both direct and indirect sources. The former includes Census of Population reports and, to some extent, literature on occupational guilds and news reports in the Chinese newspapers, while the latter consists of inscriptional data and documented observations made by contemporary local residents.

The first scientific census of population in the Straits Settlements was conducted in 1871; thence there was one almost every decade. Unfortunately, occupational category for that issue was only sub-classified according to three ethnic types, namely, Europeans, Eurasians, and Natives. The 1891 and 1901 censuses removed the occupation entry, because the return of occupation was said to be of little value owing to "the constant changes of occupation that occur among the Native Population, especially among the Chinese".⁸ The category on occupation was resumed in 1911, but was then sub-