

THE CHINESE OVERSEAS

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THE CHINESE OVERSEAS

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CONTENTS

VOLUME III COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE GLOBE

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
-------------------------	----

PART 10

Southeast Asia	1
-----------------------	----------

37 Creolized Chinese societies in Southeast Asia	3
G. WILLIAM SKINNER	

38 Boundaries and transgressions: Chinese enterprise in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Southeast Asia	45
CARL A. TROCKI	

39 The contribution of the Chinese to the development of Southeast Asia: a new appraisal	69
CLAUDINE SALMON	

40 Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia: overseas Chinese, Chinese overseas or Southeast Asians?	88
LEO SURYADINATA	

PART 11

Migrant States of North America, Europe, and Australia/New Zealand	107
---	------------

Section 11.1: NORTH AMERICA

41 Race, ethnic culture, and gender in the construction of identities among second-generation Chinese Americans, 1880s to 1930s	109
SUCHENG CHAN	

CONTENTS

- | | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 42 | Roots and the changing identity of the Chinese in the United States | 144 |
| | L. LING-CHI WANG | |
| 43 | A historical approach to ethnic stratification: the case of the Chinese in Canada, 1858–1930 | 171 |
| | PETER S. LI | |
| 44 | Transnationalism, neo-liberalism, and the rise of the shadow state | 191 |
| | KATHARYNE MITCHELL | |

Section 11.2: EUROPE

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 45 | Introduction | 217 |
| | FRANK N. PIEKE | |
| 46 | Chinese transnationalism in Britain: a longer history | 232 |
| | GREGOR BENTON | |

Section 11.3: AUSTRALIA/NEW ZEALAND

- | | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 47 | Chinese migration 1901–47: under the Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act 1901 | 264 |
| | C. Y. CHOI | |
| 48 | Chinese women as transnational migrants: gender and class in global migration narratives | 281 |
| | JAN RYAN | |
| 49 | Chinese immigrants and transnationals in New Zealand: a fortress opened | 302 |
| | MANYING IP | |

PART 12

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|-----|
| Smaller communities elsewhere | 323 | |
| 50 | Coolies, shopkeepers, pioneers: the Chinese of Mexico and Peru (1849–1930) | 325 |
| | EVELYN HU-DEHART | |
| 51 | Evading the divine wind through the side door: the transformation of Chinese migration to Japan | 347 |
| | H. RICHARD FRIMAN | |

CONTENTS

- 52 Still "guest people": the reproduction of Hakka identity
in Calcutta, India 370
ELLEN OXFELD
- 53 The Chinese "South Africans": an interstitial community 396
KAREN L. HARRIS



Part 10

SOUTHEAST ASIA

CREOLIZED CHINESE SOCIETIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA¹

G. William Skinner

Source: Anthony Reid, ed., *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 51–93.

The historical migration of Chinese to Southeast Asia has yielded a wondrous array of adaptive, acculturative, and assimilative phenomena. When approached with a judicious mix of social science and historical methods, the Nanyang becomes a virtual laboratory for studying the dialectics of ethnicity. I focus here on a particular type of ethnogenesis—at one time thought by anthropologists to be theoretically improbable, if not impossible²—namely, the creation through “fusion” of a new sociocultural system that achieved autonomy and stability despite continued contact with both parent societies. In three distinct parts of Southeast Asia—the Philippines, Java, and the Straits Settlements of Malaya—such intermediate social systems evolved through the blending of indigenous and Chinese elements. As of the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese Mestizos of the Philippines, the Chinese Peranakans of Java, and the Chinese Babas of Melaka (Malacca), Penang (Pinang), and Singapore in each case constituted a discrete and stable community alongside of, but clearly distinguishable from, Chinese as well as indigenous society. In each instance the cultural mix of Chinese and indigenous elements had stabilized into a “tradition”, and the language of daily use within the community—while clearly influenced by Chinese in grammar as well as lexicon—was an indigenous-based creole.³

My objectives in this paper are to sketch out the historical development of these three intermediate societies, characterize their creolized cultures as of the late nineteenth century, account for their limited occurrence in only certain regions of the Nanyang,⁴ trace their differential fates in the twentieth century, and explore some of the reasons for the differences.

The development of intermediate societies

The first step in the historical formation of these intermediate social systems had, of course, been the intermarriage of Chinese immigrants with indigenous women—but this phenomenon can hardly be viewed as anything exceptional in Southeast Asia. Prior to the late nineteenth century, women were simply not permitted to leave China, so that not only in the Philippines, Java, and Malaya but everywhere overseas, male immigrants necessarily turned to indigenous women. What was distinctive about developments in these three areas is that the offspring of these mixed alliances were not incorporated into indigenous society; they tended to avoid further intermarriage and to emphasize those aspects of their mixed heritage which served to set them apart from the mass of indigenes.

As the emergent intermediate communities took form, the descendants of successive waves of immigrants provided a continual supply of new recruits. Demographic processes were similar in all three cases. Chinese immigrants who remained overseas formed alliances with either locally born mestizo or indigenous women, but in either case the offspring were absorbed by the intermediate community. Mestizo men who did not marry within their own community took indigenes as wives, and their children, too, were absorbed into mestizo society.⁵ Finally, locally born mestizo women, in demand by both Chinese and mestizo men, seldom married indigenes. Thus, whereas few persons left the community from one generation to the next, there was a continual increment of new blood, both Chinese (via fathers) and indigenous (via mothers).⁶ Given these dynamics, intermediate creolized societies, once firmly established, were capable of quite rapid population growth. Moreover, these same dynamics ensured the growing prosperity of mestizo communities, for the wealth and property amassed by enterprising Chinese inevitably passed into the hands of mestizo heirs.

Intermediate creolized societies developed in Southeast Asia only after the establishment of European outposts. As is well known, the arrival of Europeans in the Nanyang brought new opportunities for the Chinese traders already active there, and sizeable Chinese settlements grew up in association with the fortified ports established by the Portuguese in Melaka, the Spanish in Manila, and the Dutch in Batavia. Mestizo children had appeared in these and other ports by the early seventeenth century, if not before, but incipient mestizo communities were repeatedly disrupted by the violent events that punctuated the seventeenth century and the first part of the eighteenth—not only sieges and rebellions but also expulsions and massacres specifically directed against resident Chinese. Stable and continuous development of Chinese mestizo communities began in Melaka only after the Dutch conquest in 1641, in the Philippines only after the Spanish expulsion of “surplus” Chinese in 1686, and in Java only after

the Chinese massacre of 1740 in Batavia and the violent events of 1741–42 in central Java.⁷

In the Philippines, the population of China-born males rose to over twenty thousand at several junctures during the century and a half beginning in 1600, and by the time the Chinese migration wave began to recede in the mid-eighteenth century (in response to shifts in both Chinese and Spanish policy), the mestizo “residue” had outstripped the Chinese community and was sufficiently large in many towns to be separately organized.⁸ In the Manila area, separate *gremios* (autonomous corporate organizations with jurisdiction over communal affairs) had been established for Chinos (China-born Chinese), Mestizos, and Indios (indigenous Filipinos). In smaller towns Mestizo but not Chino *gremios* were found alongside *gremios* for indigenous townspeople. By 1810, the number of Chinese Mestizos had grown to over 120,000, some 4.8 per cent of the total Philippine population, as against only 7,000 Chinese. During the next 50 to 60 years, population growth of the Mestizos continued to outstrip that of the indigenes, and in 1877 Mestizos totalled some 290,000 or 5.2 per cent of the entire Philippine population; in the same year the China-born population stood at 23,000. The period from the 1740s to the 1850s saw a spectacular rise in the economic power and social standing of the Chinese Mestizos. By 1850 they dominated almost all branches of trade, controlled those industrial sectors important for commerce, and were the chief money-lenders and (after the Catholic Church) land investors in the countryside. In terms of social prestige, Chinese Mestizos ranked well below Spaniards but were very nearly on a par with Spanish Mestizos, who were far less numerous. Indeed, leading Indio families commonly sought to assimilate to Mestizo society.⁹

The counterpart communities that arose in Java were firmly established in north coast towns during the eighteenth century. While Chinese communities in Java go back many centuries earlier, the descendants of early immigrants for the most part became at least nominal Muslims and eventually assimilated to indigenous society.¹⁰ The last significant spate of conversions occurred among Chinese survivors of the 1740 massacre,¹¹ and thereafter non-Muslim Chinese Peranakan communities experienced steady growth and robust development all along the north coast. By the early nineteenth century, the Chinese quarters of Javan towns were dominated numerically, economically, and socially by the creolized Peranakans. The so-called “Chinese” officers through whom the Dutch indirectly ruled the “foreign-oriental” population were in fact Peranakan leaders. Nowhere, not even in Batavia, were the Chinese *per se* separately organized; unassimilated immigrants appeared everywhere as marginal to Peranakan society.¹²

At each step of the way, the Peranakan population of Java was somewhat smaller than the Mestizo population of the Philippines, but the

pattern of growth was comparable during the nineteenth century. Peranakans totalled approximately 100,000 in 1810, 145,000 in 1860, 220,000 in 1890, and 250,000 by 1900.¹³ During the same century the far less numerous immigrant Chinese increased from roughly 8000 to 24,000. The economic roles of the Chinese Peranakans in Java were essentially similar to those of the Chinese Mestizos in the Philippines, and the Dutch no less than the Spaniards considered them essential to the colonial economy. If anything, the Peranakans achieved a heavier concentration of wealth and economic power than their Philippine counterparts; they formed, after all, a much smaller proportion of the total population—approximately 1 per cent in Java as against 5 per cent in the Philippines. In both legal status and general social standing, Peranakan society was intermediate between indigenous society and that of the Dutch and Dutch Eurasians.

In comparison with Java and the Philippines the three Malayan territories that in 1826 were conjoined to form the Straits Settlements appear minuscule. In 1678, the total population of Melaka, then a Dutch colony, was less than 5000, of whom some 850 lived in Chinese households. It was in Melaka that Baba society first took shape, and it is notable that already in 1678, Chinese adult males were largely settled in domestic units, mostly with indigenous women, including slaves of Batak, Balinese, and Javanese origin.¹⁴ Approximately half of the Melaka Chinese lived in the city proper, for which we have a precise breakdown: 127 Chinese men (each heading a household), 140 women (presumably not enslaved), 93 adult male slaves, and 137 adult female slaves. Of the 219 children, 60 were the offspring of slaves, some presumably fathered by the Chinese household heads.¹⁵

Conditions in Melaka under the Dutch attracted few Chinese immigrants, so that the emergent creolized society had a long period of incubation with relatively little incorporation of new Chinese "blood". By 1750, the Chinese population of Melaka had increased to 2161, over one-fifth of the total population;¹⁶ the few China-born Chinese in this figure were essentially marginal to the established Baba community. In 1786 the British occupied Penang, which soon flourished at the expense of Melaka. In 1787 the founder of Penang, Francis Light, wrote: "Did not the Dutch keep a strict watch over the Chinese, most of them would leave Malacca".¹⁷ And, indeed, when the British captured Melaka in 1795, a sizeable contingent of Chinese Babas migrated to Penang. Only the preceding year, Light had noted of the Chinese settlers in Penang: "As soon as they acquire a little money they obtain a wife and go on in regular domestic mode to the end of their existence". These Hokkien settlers and the Baba immigrants from Melaka eventually formed a single intermediate society whose norms were, for the most part, set by the Babas but whose language was a creole based on Hokkien rather than Malay.¹⁸ Babas from Melaka also flocked to Singapore after that island was annexed by the British in 1819. In this case they were the dominant group among the first Chinese settlers, and for

two generations thereafter the Babas of Singapore were often referred to as Melakan Chinese.

Meanwhile, the Baba community in Melaka proper, depleted through emigration, had declined to no more than 1000 by the time of the first British census in 1817.¹⁹ In fact, in comparison with Penang and Singapore, Melaka saw little economic growth during most of the nineteenth century. By 1860 the Baba community in Melaka numbered approximately 6000 as against 4000 Chinese; in the 1880s the Baba population stabilized in the 7000 to 8000 range and that of the Chinese in the 10000 to 11000 range. By contrast, Penang and Singapore were attracting ever increasing numbers of migrants from China, and their Baba communities grew rapidly. In Penang, where Babas numbered fewer than 1000 in 1800, the community grew to nearly 9000 in 1851 and some 23,000 by 1891. In Singapore, where they numbered fewer than 1,000 in 1823, the Baba community grew to nearly 4500 in 1851 and approximately 16,000 by 1891.²⁰

Thus, in the 1890s Babas numbered between 45,000 and 50,000 throughout the Straits Settlements, accounting for 9 to 10 per cent of the total population. As with their counterparts in Java and the Philippines, they were predominantly traders and businessmen, and generally lacked the working-class elements heavily represented in the larger population of Chinese migrants. They were socially as well as economically supreme within the non-British sector of society. In the words of Maurice Freedman, "The dominance of Baba culture in the nineteenth century was due not simply to the passage of wealth from generation to generation, but also, and perhaps mainly, to the absorption of successful immigrants into Baba society".²¹ Early in this century a Western missionary characterized the Babas as "the most highly educated and most influential section of the Chinese community in the British possessions . . ." and noted that their creole was the "business language" not only in the Straits Settlements but in portions of the Federated Malay States as well.²²

Creolized cultures

Before attempting to explain why it was that intermediate Chinese societies arose only in particular regions within the Malaysian world and not elsewhere in Southeast Asia, I should like briefly to characterize the culture of these three societies at the time of their heyday—roughly 1850–70 in the case of the Philippine Mestizos, 1880–1900 in the case of the Malayan Babas, and 1890–1910 in the case of the Javan Peranakans. The members of each society spoke a distinctive language that most linguists would have no hesitation recognizing as a true creole; it was the mother tongue of all children born into the community.²³ The Chinese parent language in each case was Hokkien, the Southern Min language spoken in the Zhang-Quan region of Fujian, whence the great majority of Overseas Chinese traders

originated in the seventeenth century.²⁴ The Austronesian parent language was Malay in the case of Baba creole and originally also in the case of Peranakan creole. However in Peranakan communities away from the north coast of Java, considerable relexification subsequently occurred, with Javanese, Sundanese, or Madurese words (depending on the region) being substituted for the Malay.²⁵ Far less is known about Philippine Mestizo creoles,²⁶ but the most likely scenario is that the creole spoken in the Manila area developed from a Hokkien-Tagalog pidgin; when Chinese mestizos from central Luzon settled in other islands of the Philippines, relexification occurred with substitutions from the local Philippine language for Tagalog words.

I may illustrate the nature of these creoles by reference to the Baba language of Melaka and Singapore. From Shellabear's account²⁷ it appears that in origin the lexicon was perhaps two-thirds Malay and one-fifth Hokkien Chinese, the remainder being Dutch, Portuguese, English, Tamil, and assorted Indonesian languages. The Malay base was itself distinctive in many ways, including a number of regular phonological transformations.²⁸ Compare, for instance, Baba *keré* ("hard") and *pané* ("hot") with *keras* and *panas* in standard Malay; *tiké* ("mat") and *pute* ("rotate") with *tikar* and *putar*; and *kalo* ("if") and *hijo* ("green") with *kalau* and *hijau*.²⁹ The prefixes and suffixes of other Malay dialects had largely been dropped from Baba speech, a simplification of Malay syntactic structure that reflects the uninflected Hokkien syntax. Naturally enough, words of Hokkien origin were concentrated in certain domains, most notably religious, business, and household affairs, and in general, words whose referents are uniquely Chinese tended to be of Hokkien origin. The Hokkien derived *gua* and *lu* were used for "I" and "you", whereas the third-person pronoun was taken from Malay. Words of Hokkien origin were pronounced (without tones, of course) with Malay phonemes. Several features of Baba syntax clearly derive from Hokkien. For instance, in Baba speech the demonstrative precedes the noun as in Hokkien, whereas in Malay it follows. Thus, *itu buku* ("that book") and *ini hari* ("today") in Baba Malay, but *buku itu* and *hari ini* in other varieties of Malay. Another telling example concerns possessive syntax: in Hokkien, the construction glossed "his room" corresponds to "he" followed by a possessive particle plus "room"; the word order in Baba speech is identical: *dia* ("he") *punya* ("possess", used as a possessive particle) *bilik* ("room"). The phrase *dia punya bilik* contrasts sharply with *bilik dia* or *biliknya* in standard Malay.³⁰

In the basic subsistence realms of food, clothing, and housing, the cultures of all three intermediate societies could fairly be described as creolized.³¹ The cuisine included not only Chinese dishes and indigenous dishes, usually called by names derived respectively from Hokkien and the relevant native language, but also a number of specially designated dishes

unknown to either Hokkien Chinese or indigenes. Modes of attire varied markedly from one area to another and fashions changed over time, but in the nineteenth century, at least, the clothing of both men and women in each of the three intermediate societies was distinctive.³² Baba women had basically two modes of attire, one the *koon* and *sah* of Chinese origin, the other the *baju kurung* and *batik* of indigenous origin, but the material, the details of cut and fashion, and above all the accessories rendered Baba women always readily distinguishable from either Chinese or Malay.³³ Peranakan, Baba, and Mestizo houses dating from the mid-nineteenth century and earlier typically conformed to a modified Chinese plan, with a central court.³⁴

In many elements of kinship structure, the emphasis had shifted away from the patrilineal, virilocal, and patriarchal bias that was basic to the traditional Hokkien system.³⁵ Chinese surnames were retained in all three intermediate societies, along with surname exogamy.³⁶ But apart from this survival, the kinship systems had become essentially bilateral rather than patrilineal. The localized patrilineage of the Hokkien Chinese had disappeared, and in its place a bilateral kindred was evident during rites of passage. There was a distinct tendency in the ancestral cult to worship the lineal ascendants of the mother as well as of the father. Weddings might be held, and the bridal chamber prepared, in the parental home of the bride as well as of the groom. Uxorilocal marital residence, everywhere wholly acceptable, was the preferred form in the Straits Settlements, most of eastern Java, and certain regions of the Philippines.³⁷ Daughters inherited along with sons, and in particular the inheritance of real property tended to follow marital residence. Kinship terms for senior relatives were for the most part derived from the Hokkien, those for junior relatives from indigenous terminology. But the terminological *system* was a distinctive combination of Hokkien and indigenous patterns.³⁸

Religious culture among Babas and Peranakans was a fairly direct derivative of Hokkien practices.³⁹ The chief departures relate to the altered kinship system (e.g. the bilateralization of mourning customs), the incorporation of indigenous curing rituals, and the assimilation of local saints as objects of worship. Philippine Mestizos were generally Catholic, as we shall see below, but Chinese elements had long been incorporated in the manner made familiar to us by folk Catholicism elsewhere. A very popular mestizo cult was that identifying the Virgin of Antipolo, a protector of travellers, with Mazu, the patron deity of Hokkiens in general and of seafarers in particular. Religious processions in connection with feast days were regularly punctuated by fireworks in traditional Chinese fashion and accompanied by a band playing Chinese instruments.⁴⁰

This brief notice of selected elements of Baba, Peranakan, and Mestizo cultures must suffice to suggest their peculiarly creolized character. It should be clear that the cultural mix was creatively distinctive rather than