



The Overseas Chinese

Ethnicity in
National Context

EDITED BY
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THE OVERSEAS CHINESE

Ethnicity in National Context

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to our wives

Vera and Gretchen

and to our children

Eileen and Penny, Karim and Keir

Contents

Chapter 1

- The Overseas Chinese:
Common Denominators of a Changing Ethnicity
by Hendrick Serrie and Francis L. K. Hsu 1

Chapter 2

- The Chinese in Calcutta:
The Reproduction of Hakka Identity
by Ellen Oxfeld 13

Chapter 3

- The Chinese in Northern Thailand:
A Preliminary Perspective on Kinship and Ethnicity
by Ann Maxwell Hill 43

Chapter 4

- The Chinese in the Philippines:
From Aliens to Cultural Minority
by George H. Weightman 65

Chapter 5

- The Chinese in Brisbane:
Segmentation and Integration
*by Lawrence W. Crissman, George Beattie
and James Selby* 87

Chapter 6

The Chinese in New Zealand:
Persistence, Change and Innovation
by Charles P. Sedgwick

115

Chapter 7

The Chinese in New York City:
Kinship and Immigration
by Bernard Wong

143

Chapter 8

Chinese Immigrant Children in New York City:
Bicultural Conflicts
by Betty Lee Sung

173

Chapter 9

Chinese Around the World:
The Familial and the Familiar
by Hendrick Serrie

189

References

217

Index

227

Chapter 1



The Overseas Chinese: Common Denominators of a Changing Ethnicity

Hendrick Serrie
Francis L.K. Hsu

Introduction

Immigrants from China have made their home in many countries of the world. In the process of adapting to different national host cultures, they have retained or modified some elements of traditional Chinese culture and have eliminated others. There are cultural denominators that identify Chinese culture everywhere, while at the same time Chinese ethnicity varies with the unique features of each host nation. The articles in this book describe, compare and analyze a wide array of Chinese communities: in East, Southeast and South Asia, in Europe, and in North and South America.

Serrie has examined thirteen monographs of mainland, "offshore," and overseas communities in a synchronic comparison of recruitment

principles and purposes of Chinese social organizations. Crissman, Beattie, and Selby; Sedgwick; Weightman; and Wong add a diachronic dimension to their analyses, noting the changing laws affecting Chinese immigration to Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Peru and the United States, and showing the demographic consequences and changing social groups. Oxfeld, Hill and Sung focus on particular segments of Chinese communities, namely Hakka tannery entrepreneurs, Yunnanese mothers, and Chinatown teenagers, in Calcutta, northern Thailand and New York City, respectively.

Psychocultural Orientations

Several scholars relate their findings to the psychocultural orientations discerned in traditional Chinese culture by Hsu. In *Under the Ancestors' Shadow* (1948) Hsu described the importance of patrilineal kinship for the Chinese. In *Americans and Chinese* (1953) he contrasted the kinship orientation of Chinese culture with the orientation towards individualism and contractual associations in American culture. In *Clan, Caste and Club* (1963) he contrasted these Chinese and American orientations with the orientation towards religious and occupational castes in (Hindu) Indian culture.

Hsu then developed the hypothesis that the dominant dyad or two-person relationship in Chinese culture is father-son, and that the psychocultural attributes of continuity, inclusiveness, authority and asexuality that inhere in this relationship permeate other aspects of Chinese society and culture. In contrast, in American culture the dominant dyad is husband-wife, and its inherent attributes of discontinuity, exclusiveness, volition, and sexuality are pervasive in American society and culture (1965; 1968; 1971; 1972; 1974).

In an analysis of thirteen Chinese communities around the world, Serrie concludes that many of the functions of Chinese social organizations, whether or not they are structured on the basis of kinship, express the Hsu attributes of continuity, inclusiveness, authority, and asexuality.

Wong demonstrates that, while the dominant dyad of the New York Chinatown "incomplete" family was father-son, it was complemented by a mother-child dyad back in China. The father-son dyad is also dominant in the "non-residential extended family," which owns and operates a business. But among the families of professional Chinese,

American-born Chinese, and well-off or well-educated New Immigrants, the dominant dyad is husband-wife. Finally, it is Wong's observation that among poorer New Immigrant families, the children — who are more familiar with American culture — tend to dominate their parents.

Sung shows Chinese adolescents in New York City to be family-oriented and situation-centered — another of Hsu's terms — and to have conflicts with American teenage attitudes of resisting authority, expressing sexuality, and emphasizing individuality.

The Familial and the Familiar

Following Hsu, Serrie finds that the principles of recruitment in overseas Chinese social groupings indicate a preference for patrilineal kinship. In their early decades, however, overseas communities had too few kinsmen to replicate the traditional lineage structures of the mainland. Serrie finds that overseas Chinese communities extend the principle of kinship, substituting the "familiar" for the "familial" in widening circles of identification until sufficient numbers for a viable organization are reached. The principles of kinship, surname, residence, and origin are invoked not only in order to achieve critical mass for an organization, but may also serve to subdivide an aggregate of people too large to maintain kin-like face-to-face relationships within the organization.

The outermost boundary of familiarity is Chinese ethnicity, and the next outermost boundary is that created by the different Chinese languages. Oxfeld's research on the Chinese in Calcutta indicates that they are separated into three groups based on language and locality: the Hakka, the Cantonese, and the Hubeinese.

Kinship-Oriented Social Organization

Serrie's synchronic analysis of a global sample of Chinese communities yields three types of social organization. First, there is the more or less traditional rural village or town of old China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, structured according to ties of kinship, residence, and contract, in order of decreasing importance. Second, there is the overseas urban minority community, organized on the basis of surname as a substitute for kinship, origin as a substitute for residence, and contract.

Third, there is the marginal mainland or overseas community, where the Chinese are so few in numbers or scattered so thinly across the rural or urban landscape, that formal social organizations are minimal and organized solely in terms of contract.

Weightman's research on the present-day overseas Chinese in Manila indicates a postwar strengthening of kinship-based organizations. The patrilineal extended family and the lineage or clan are common; the concentration of a few surnames is very dense; exogamy prevails in multiple surname groups as well as clans; and even Chinese Christians continue memorializing their ancestors.

Wong relates the different types of family structure in New York City to changing United States immigration policies. The exclusionist laws of 1882 and 1924, which prevented both the importation of Chinese women and the intermarriage of Chinese men with white women, maintained a Chinatown of bachelors and "incomplete families" composed of fathers united with sons old enough to leave their mothers, who remained in China. The repeal of these laws during World War II, and the passage in 1945 and 1953 of acts permitting entry and citizenship for war brides, refugees, and "stranded professionals," saw the rise of conjugal or nuclear families. The 1965 amendments establishing clear preference for skilled persons opened migration to entire families and to individuals who joined "enlarged families." These post-1965 New Immigrants also established "nonresidential extended families" in order to jointly operate a single business.

Segmentary Sociopolitical Organization

The articles on the Chinese of Australia and New Zealand build on Crissman's segmentary model. This points to the internal division of the Chinese community, first along dialect lines and next along lines of locality or surname, in order to achieve effective self-government without creating formal governmental institutions requiring hierarchical administration and representational politics.

Sedgwick sees the segmentary system as a series of changing responses, not only to the sociopolitical environment of New Zealand, but to international concerns focusing on mainland China, and to an internal cycle of corporation-fragmentation within the Chinese community itself.

In both countries, the rise of Communist China has required that the overseas Chinese maintain a low political profile, and athletics has emerged as a nonthreatening and major expression of Chinese ethnicity. (This is in pronounced contrast to the Chinese in New York City, who, according to Sung, experience feelings of inadequacy and ambivalence about sports.) Sedgwick observes a new parallel segmentary structure built on sports organizations or Christian churches alongside the older social divisions pertaining to the original homeland in China.

In Australia, Crissman, Beattie, and Selby plot the influx, since World War II, of Chinese students, refugees, and other immigrants from Southeast Asian countries, arriving with education, business and other professional skills, and capital for investment. Similarly, they plot the rise of younger generations of Chinese born and raised in Australia, also possessing superior education, business or professional skills, and capital for investment. These traits that pave the way to economic success are accompanied by a much more hospitable external social climate and a high degree of integration. A new segmentary system has emerged here also, but the subdivisions of the postwar immigrant Chinese are established, not on the basis of their original ancestral homeland in China, but on the basis of the countries of their own birth and childhood: Malaysia-Singapore, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and Hong Kong.

Self Ascription vs. Ascription by Others

Ethnic identity is created, not only out of a group's own sense and definition of itself, but also by the sense and definition that the outside host society has of it. Oxfeld sees Chinese ethnicity in Calcutta as dialogical or reflexive; it is generated within the Hakka community and, at the same time, is reinforced by Hinduism, with its ideas of ritual purity and caste, and by Indian politics, which includes Chinese Indians in the lingering resentment felt toward the Peoples Republic of China.

Indian economy and society target enterprises and occupations such as the Hakka Chinese tanneries as unclean and the province only of untouchables. Dietary differences, in which Chinese are accustomed to eating beef, which is forbidden by Hinduism, and pork, which is forbidden by Islam, as well as frogs, snakes, and the like, also isolate the Chinese. Even though they hold Indian citizenship, the Chinese in Calcutta feel

insecure in their host culture. During the 1962 war between India and China, thousands of Chinese Indians were deported or put in concentration camps.

The Chinese who operate tanneries in Calcutta are relegated to the periphery of society. This is expressed territorially by the location of their tanneries on the outskirts of the city, and socially by the strict boundaries on social interaction between Chinese tanners and non-Chinese Indians. They interact only in economic or bureaucratic contexts and maintain strict social boundaries with employees, business associates, and occasional friends who are not Chinese.

Yet while the Hakka Chinese are peripheral to Calcutta society, Oxford observes that they express their own sense of centrality, placing non-Hakka persons at the periphery. They use the Chinese word *ren*, meaning "person," only with regard to fellow Hakka Chinese. They apply the word *lao*, meaning "bumpkin," to other Chinese in Calcutta who are not Hakka, e.g. the Cantonese and the Hubeinese. The word *gui*, meaning "ghost or devil" is reserved for all non-Chinese, which are divided into *wu gui*, "black ghosts" such as Hindu and Muslim Indians, and *fan gui*, "white ghosts" such as Europeans.

The Host Culture Environment

The political and social environment of the national host culture has been a major factor in defining the social organization of all overseas Chinese communities, as well as determining the course of assimilation or separation of the Chinese and host people.

Weightman describes the Chinese in the Philippines, a country with Hispanic colonial traditions and a brief period of American control prior to independence. Here, despite the strong antipathy towards Chinese, intermarriage during the Spanish period produced a group of Filipinized Chinese mestizos who were absorbed as part of the new elite. By contrast, until recent times the exclusionist laws of the American government have made Philippine citizenship impossible for most Chinese immigrants and have given rise to the separated Chinese community of today.

The historical contrast between Anglo exclusionist approaches to immigrant Chinese in Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and the United States, on the one hand, and the Hispanic assimilationist approach in the Philippines, on the other, is reinforced by Wong's remarks on the rapid assimilation of the Chinese in Lima, Peru.

Wong shows the Chinese in Lima to be least concerned with patrilineal kinship or surname, in comparison with the Chinese in New York City or Manila. Despite the Hispanic tradition of the Philippines, the present-day Chinese in Manila are far more active in the maintenance of lineage or clan and surname organizations than are the Chinese in New York City. Weightman would attribute this to U.S. exclusionist policies, which overshadowed the Hispanic tradition during the period of American control of the Philippines, combined with anti-Chinese propaganda under the Japanese occupation during World War II and the rise of Philippine nationalism afterwards.

Assimilation and Intermarriage

However secure adult immigrants may feel about their ethnicity in whatever alien context they may find themselves, children born and raised in the new cultural environment will find their own ethnicity to be complex and problematic. There is the pull towards the culture of their parents, the source of life and care; but there is also a push towards the culture of their peers, especially when it is the source of friends, future spouses, and employment.

Assimilation and intermarriage go hand in hand. Through history the disposition of the Spanish to marry Chinese is in vivid contrast to the racist separatism of the English-speaking peoples. Since the 1960s the rise of a well-educated, capitalized Chinese business and professional class, combined with racial and ethnic egalitarian movements, has produced a change in Anglo racism, such that intermarriage between Chinese and Anglos has become commonplace. At the same time, in Southeast Asian countries nascent national chauvinism and xenophobia against the Chinese, combined with their status as an economically advantaged minority, has produced new barriers to assimilation. Ironically, it is resulting in a "Chinese brain drain" from those countries to such Anglo countries as Australia, Canada, and the United States.

In Thailand, Hill contrasts the overseas Chinese from Kwangtung and Fukien provinces, who are intermarrying and may be assimilating, with the "overland" Chinese from Yunnan province, who tend not to intermarry and are less assimilated to Thai culture. Although Yunnanese youth sent off to high school or university become enamored of Thai culture and attempt to reject Yunnanese culture, they must ultimately return to it in order to obtain the only employment available to them,

usually in the Burma-Thailand trade that is controlled by the Yunnanese. Moreover, while the Kwangtung and Fukien Chinese have difficulties in finding spouses among their own groups in the urban areas of Thailand, the Yunnanese have sufficient young women available for marriage, all raised in a strict, conservative Chinese tradition and prepared to do the same for their own children.

The Australian-born Chinese in Brisbane are further assimilated. A majority have intermarried with whites and the use of Chinese language in the home has declined. In the mid-70s they expressed opposition to the admission of Chinese refugees from Vietnam, their common Chinese origin notwithstanding.

In New York City, Chinese range along a continuum of assimilation. Working with Chinatown adolescents, Sung probes the psychocultural conflicts inhering in growing up with two ethnic referents. In opposition to a home life that stresses dependence on the family, respect for authority, reporting misbehavior, academic achievement, and thrift in all things, the schools and neighborhoods tend to value individualism, physical and verbal aggressiveness, demonstration of affection and other feelings, erotic dress and behavior, frank sexual expression, and excellence in sports.

Sung reports teachers pointedly underlining American values to Chinese children practicing otherwise, and schoolmates and neighborhood white, black and hispanic children attempting to interact in ways that are normal to them and idealized in the mass media. Because many aspects of the American way of life are attractive to Chinese children, the opposition between Chinese and American values and behavior poses choices to Chinatown adolescents that are painful and sometimes immobilizing. If we follow Wong's analysis, almost all available good jobs will lure these children out of Chinatown when they are grown, and they will join those affluent Chinese who straddle both cultures and marry partners of whatever ethnicity they choose.

India stands in sharp contrast to other host nations. The religiously defined, occupationally based, hierarchical, hereditary caste system presents a fundamentally different kind of social reality that allows cultural and ethnic groups and subgroups a means of coexisting and preserving their ethnic distinctions indefinitely through time. According to Oxfeld, the Hakka Chinese are the only immigrant group that rejects the caste system. They focus strictly on the accumulation of wealth within an entrepreneurial ethic as the determinant of status differences within their own enclave.

Rejecting the fundaments of Hindu society, however, increases Hakka Chinese insecurity about their situation in India. Oxfeld reports that, starting the late 1970s, Hakka Chinese from Calcutta began emigrating to Europe, Australia, and Canada, especially to the city of Toronto. In Toronto, the pattern of Chinese settlement is widely dispersed; no occupation is monopolized by Hakka Chinese, and what were considerable financial assets in India convert to modest Canadian sums. Hakka children attend public schools, not private Hakka-run schools as in Calcutta, and Hakka children show signs of embracing Canadian culture.

The Practical and the Primordial

Some scholars (e.g. Glazer and Moynihan 1975:19) see ethnic identity in terms of primordial identifications and powerful emotions generated by a sense of shared physical and cultural traits. Oxfeld presents the Calcutta Chinese in terms of a contextual approach to ethnicity, and suggests the supposed dichotomy between the two approaches can be resolved by understanding that the enculturational experience of childhood is deeply internalized in every individual and leads to the compelling emotional identifications so often associated with ethnic identity in adulthood. Sung shows that in a radically different cultural environment, Chinese immigrant children are painfully conflicted as they experience opposing enculturational contexts. And Wong points out that within the American context, Chinese children, with their surer knowledge of the host culture, are often dominant over their immigrant parents.

Ethnicity, like nationalism, does not last forever. For any group, it lasts only for as long as it is needed. The primordial aspect of ethnicity, then, must be contrasted with its pragmatic aspect.

The purpose of culture is to provide human beings with an extra-somatic substitute for instinct. Each specific culture offers to its members an accumulation of ready-made solutions for coping with a particular natural and social environment. When the environment changes, the culture must change or survival is threatened.

Ethnicity, which is never a complete culture in itself, is even more susceptible to change than the host culture matrix of which it is a part. Just as nationalism arises when one nation state encounters cross-cultural difficulties in its efforts to survive and prosper with other nation states, so ethnic identity arises when an immigrant population of one culture

confronts cross-cultural difficulties in its efforts to survive and prosper in a different host culture.

The struggle for survival engages humans in competition for scarce resources, a struggle that is made more efficient by the formation of groups. When relatively few human groups occupy a materially abundant environment there is little likelihood of intergroup competition and hostility arising. But as human populations multiply and resources become ever more scarce, conflict, increasingly violent, is likely to occur. Groups in competition and conflict are not always culturally distinct. But when they are distinct, ethnic identity (within the nation state) and nationalism (between nation states) arises.

As the Chinese emigrated overseas, they produced Chinese minority cultures in interaction with various host environments. Early waves of Chinese immigrants intermarried and merged with their majority peoples, for example in Thailand, the Philippines and Peru, renouncing their Chinese ethnicity as they incorporated into the national elite. Other intermarried Chinese produced culturally mixed groups, such as the Peranakans in Indonesia, the *luuk ciin* in Thailand, or the "Sinified mestizos" in the Philippines. Still other groups, like the Hakka Chinese in Calcutta and the Yunnanese Chinese in Thailand, maintained a cultural separation.

As we examine a variety of cases of Chinese communities around the world, we find almost any possible combination of Chinese and non-Chinese culture and almost any degree of cultural separation or assimilation.

According to Skinner (1968: 191-207), the Chinese diaspora excluded the mainland elite and was motivated solely by economic survival and the hope for wealth. The entrepreneurial ethic, so at odds with traditional Confucian values, became a dominant theme in all overseas Chinese communities. At the same time, many of the primordial elements of Chinese culture survived in radically differing overseas contexts. Organizing groups in terms of the familiar served to preserve the psychocultural orientations imbedded in traditional groups that on the mainland were narrowly based on the familial. The segmentary process served to subdivide groups as they became larger and thus to preserve the face-to-face, personal basis of community self-governance. Through groups based in the familiar, overseas Chinese are commonly found to monopolize specific occupational and enterprise niches. The emotional security that such groups offer is as much a practical tool for survival as

are its economic functions. Chinese values, especially the values of thrift and education, are clearly linked to socioeconomic mobility.

The overseas Chinese have achieved a well-deserved reputation for economic, educational and social success. In some nations they are the target of envy and hostility expressed by the majority culture. But in overseas contexts that offer social acceptance, Chinese readily assimilate and intermarry, even when this results in the attenuation or disappearance of many elements of Chinese culture. Those Chinese elements that are not likely to disappear are the ones that will insure continued prosperity and happiness.

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