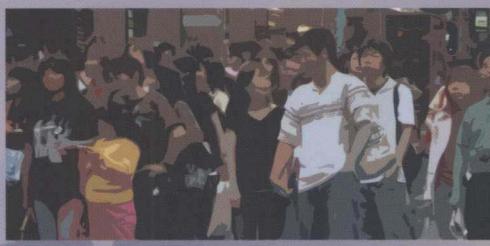
DEMARCATING ETHNICITY IN NEW NATIONS:

Cases of the Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia



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Singapore Society of Asian Studies

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Lee Guan Kin
September 2006

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Introduction

Ethnic Relations and Nation-Building: Three Models of the Ethnic Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia

Lee Guan Kin

Ethnic relations and nation-building are intimately related. It is understood that ethnic relations have a bearing on nation-building and national unity while the state's policy on ethnic relations may lead to either social breakup or integration. Such causal relations are particularly evident in the new independent and multiethnic states in Southeast Asia. If we are concerned with the status and development of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia after World War II, we need to pay attention to their involvement in the formation of these new nation-states and their relationships with the indigenous and other ethnic groups. Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, with varied percentages of Chinese in their populations, offer rich research materials with their three distinct models of how ethnicity has been demarcated.

After World War II, the people in Southeast Asia strove to liberate themselves from the colonial administrations and attempted to emulate Western countries in the construction of their new independent nations. Although sharing anti-colonial aspirations and experiences, they lacked a common language, religion, and historical memory, conditions which shaped nation-building in the West. The new nations also needed to deal with the colonial legacy of ethnic divisions and tensions. For Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, two more common features could be observed - multiethnic social environments and the co-existence of diverse cultures with long histories. While these two features might be considered rich resources for the new nations, they could also pose major obstruction to the process of nation-building. The decisive factors lay in whether the political leaders

were far-sighted enough and whether the dominant ethnic group was tolerant. Thus, while learning to participate in the construction of the new nations, the ethnic Chinese in these three countries also had to face the challenge of confronting difficult issues of belonging and cultural identity.

Ethnic relations involving the Chinese in the course of nation-building in Southeast Asia have always been a subject of interest for scholars. At the dawning of the 21st century, the Singapore Society of Asian Studies organized a bilingual (Chinese and English) international conference on "Ethnic/Race Relations and Nation-Building: The Case of the Ethnic Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia." Experts and scholars from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and China explored the subject from historical, political, social, cultural, and educational perspectives. After the conference, the papers presented in the English language were compiled in a volume edited by Leo Suryadinata.[1] Revised versions of six of the Chinese papers are collated into another book along with three papers on the same theme submitted separately by scholars based in China, Taiwan, and Singapore. This book is the English translation of the Chinese publication. It consists of ten chapters with the keynote speech by Professor Wang Gungwu at the conference included as the first chapter. Other chapters are arranged according to the countries studied: Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Like the Chinese version, it is published jointly by the Singapore Society of Asian Studies and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS).

In this book, the term, "ethnic groups" refers to both "linguistic groups" - people speaking different dialects or languages, and "races" - people of physical traits. For "ethnic relations," they include the relations among different dialect groups or among those of different education backgrounds within the Chinese communities, as well as the relations between the Chinese and other races. Examining ethnic relations from the Chinese perspective, some studies may concentrate on the disputes within the Chinese communities. For example, problems of ethnic relations in Taiwan are usually considered as by scholars "merely internal disagreements among the Han Chinese themselves."[2] Other studies tend to focus on the problems that the Chinese have with other races, such as those in Malaysia. These different emphases are due to the different historical backgrounds and conditions of different places. If we are to investigate "ethnic relations" under the framework of "nation-building" in Southeast Asia, we are bound to face a more complicated situation as it involves a variety of relationships, such as those relations between the Chinese and the colonial government, the Chinese and the Chinese-dominated government, and the Chinese and the indigenous regime.

In this book, "Chinese Ethnicity in New Southeast Asian Nations" by Wang Gungwu is an insightful chapter. Wang points out that an ethnic group is usually distinguished by its culture and its cultural awareness of the group. He maintains that ethnic groups follow their own historical and evolutionary paths, with each group possessing its own sense of cultural identity. Nation-building, however, is a modern invention with highly visible human deliberation. It is a great challenge for the culturally confident Chinese to work together in the nation-building process in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, with other ethnic groups who also have long cultural histories.

It was not easy for the ethnic Chinese, a culture-based community, to adopt a nation-based identity, especially when the concept of nation was still novel to the three countries. While lessons are learnt about the new concept of nation, the impact of globalization compels the ethnic Chinese to look beyond national boundaries and even eventually to return to cultural identity for anchorage. Although globalization may appear to work against nation-building, it also provides ethnic Chinese with the opportunity to address the unfair treatment they received in the nation-building process.

The Singaporean Model

Under the framework of "ethnic groups and nation-state" in this book, Singapore present a distinctive model with its predominantly ethnic Chinese population (over three-fourths of the population). In exploring ethnic relations in Singapore, many scholars inevitably touch on various types of relations, such as the relations among different dialect groups or among people with different education backgrounds in the Chinese communities, relations between ethnic Chinese and other ethnic groups, relations between ethnic Chinese and predominantly non-Chinese political regime, and relations between ethnic Chinese and a predominantly Chinese political regime. The three chapters on Singapore approach the above-mentioned aspects by focusing on three different subjects respectively - a Chinese language university in the 1950s, the ethnic Chinese theatre from the 1960s to the 1990s, and the Chinese clan associations from the 1980s to the present.

Lee Guan Kin and Zhou Zhao Cheng's "The Split of the Ethnic Chinese and Their Separate Goals of Nation-Building: Contest for the Establishment of Nanyang University" discusses the different views and conflicts that surfaced in reaction to the establishment of Nanyang University in the 1950s, on the eve of Singapore's independence, between the Chinese and the Malays, the Chinese-

speaking and English-speaking groups within the Chinese communities, and the Chinese-speaking groups and the colonial government. As different ethnic groups had different imaginations and interpretations of the nation-building process, the establishment of Nanyang University provided a platform for these various ethnic groups to thrash out their different views over the aims of nation-building. Amidst the contention, the British colonial government mobilized the opposing voices of other ethnic groups against the Chinese-speaking group. Later, in order to resist the expanding influence of communism, the government followed the advice of the United States and changed its policy. It abandoned its policy of "silent opposition" in favor of a policy of "tacit recognition." The presence of various competing ideologies deepened the existing ethnic conflicts. Established in such a complex environment, the Nanyang University was destined to carry this turbulent past into its future.

During the course of nation-building in Singapore, the local theatre and the government shared on the surface common national visions of ethnic harmony and multiculturalism, but their interpretations and expressions were different. Quah Sy Ren's "Forms as Ideology: Representing the Multicultural in Singapore Theatre" studies multicultural representations in the theatre. It describes the 1960s and 1970s as the age of collective imagination and common beliefs, and the 1980s and 1990s as the age of multiple narratives and the deconstruction of myths. Quah believes that, apart from the vibrancy and creativity in theatrical practice, activities pursued by the theatre in the first period basically were congruent with the official ideology in the government's discourse. During the second period, the official discourse proposed "pragmatism," avoided ideological discussion and even suppressed the potentially dangerous political ideological representations in the theatre. In response, the theatre shunned direct ideological debate but explored other forms of expression, such as multilingualism, to better present, reflect, and provide criticism to the multicultural realities.

Zeng Ling's "The Transformation and Readjustment of Chinese Clan Associations amidst the Social Changes in Singapore" places the development of the Chinese communities in Singapore against the background of the changes within and outside the country from the 1980s onwards. She explores the transformation and re-adjustment of the Chinese clan associations by focusing on their forms of identifications, organizational structures, modes of operation, and future development. From the perspective of ethnic relations and nation-building, the government had subjugated ethnic and cultural identities under national identity in the early years of nation-building to avoid Malay suspicion. This had in turn led to the marginalization of the clan associations. It was not

until the 1980s when the government re-adjusted its cultural policy in response to regional and global changes did the clan associations have the chance to develop. The clan associations had long identified with Singapore society and nation. With the green light from the state, they persisted to build a multiculturalism steeped in the Chinese culture. During the peaceful rise of China and globalization, the clan associations have relied on ancestral links and cultures they maintained to establish transnational networks with China and the ethnic Chinese in the rest of the world. In short, the clan associations, after undergoing a transformation of cultural and national identities, as mentioned by Wang Gungwu in his chapter, have discovered the window of opportunity in the era of globalization.

The Malaysian Model

The ethnic Chinese account for almost one fourth of the total population in Malaysia, a proportion far smaller than that of Singapore but greater than that in Indonesia. This makes Chinese Malaysians another model. Due to their significant numbers, the ethnic Chinese have refused to be culturally assimilated by the indigenous people. This has been one source of ethnic tension, apart from economic disparities. Above all, the long-term ethnic policy adopted by the government has been the root of the country's ethnic conflicts. In addition to interethnic tensions, disunity has been also obvious among people with different education backgrounds within the Chinese community. The three chapters on Malaysia explore ethnic relations and nation-building respectively in terms of spatial division and ethnic exclusion, the attitudes of the Chinese and Malay leaders towards the Chinese culture, and the national and ethnic consciousness among the Chinese language writers. They trace the important background leading to the ethnic barriers, present the key conflicts among different ethnic groups, and provide case studies to illustrate the struggles of the ethnic Chinese in shaping their identity.

Voon Phin Keong's "Spatial Division and Ethnic Exclusion: A Study of Ethnic Relations in Malaysia" is an examination on ethnic relations from the historical perspective of spatial division and ethnic exclusion arising from development policies. It shows how manipulations of social and spatial differences by the central authority contributed to the 'ethnic approach' in the treatment and management of ethnic relations. The colonial government, in enforcing its development policy, attempted to impose economic roles and spatial restrictions on different ethnic groups. Before and after the independence of Malaysia, some

government initiatives, such as the New Villages, land schemes, and the New Economic Policy, further reinforced the spatial segregation. Thus, due to different cultural backgrounds, economic roles, spatial division, and political goals, the ethnic relations deteriorated from division to exclusionary discrimination. The colonial government dealt with ethnic relations by adopting a policy of spatial segregation. After independence, the government's New Economic Policy added yet another layer of division. As a result, ethnic relations have never been addressed in a satisfactory manner.

Whether the development of Chinese culture obstructs the process of nation-building has been an issue of controversy among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. In "Chinese Culture in Malaysia: Attitudes of the Chinese and Malay Leaders," Hou Kok Chung describes Chinese culture as a subject of contention for the leaders of the two major ethnic groups – the Chinese and the Malays. The Chinese leaders believed that Chinese education must be developed as it is an important feature of their ethnic identity. On the other hand, the Malays regarded Malay culture as the mainstream of national culture, expecting other ethnic cultures to give way in the name of nation-building. Even within the Chinese communities, leaders with different education backgrounds were unable to bridge their differences over the issue of culture. The leaders of Dong Jiao Zong, a nationwide association of committees and teachers of Chinese schools, believed that cultural heritage should not be compromised, while the leaders of Malaysian Chinese Association maintained that national stability should be the utmost priority. The disagreement over the issue of culture further reinforced ethnic tension, which is considered one of the causes of the 13 May 1960 riot. Thus, the development of Chinese culture in Malaysia has experienced many ups and downs. The contention lasted through the 1970s-1980s. The situation only improved somewhat in the 1990s. However, at the turn of the century, the road ahead is still not free from obstacles.

During the process of nation-building, the Chinese language writers in Malaysia experienced a shift in national identification, and found themselves in a dilemma over the preservation of their ethnic culture. Yow Cheun Hoe's "Ethnicity and Nation: Malaysian Chinese Writers in the 20th Century" discusses the changing consciousness of the Malaysian Chinese writers with regard to their country and their ethnic group. In addition to their enthusiasm for literature, the Malaysian Chinese writers also possessed passions for their ethnic group and nation. In the first half of the 20th century, they were preoccupied with their devotion to China. From 1949 to 1969, their identification shifted to Malaysia. However, their enthusiasm was dampened by the ethnic riots in 1969. After the 1970s, they were troubled by how Chinese identity could be preserved amidst ethnic politics.

Therefore, some writers either opted for Taiwan or Mainland China, choosing to immerse in the Chinese culture of those two places. The others continued to work hard to strike a balance between their loyalty to Malaysia and their ethnicity. Only a change in the discriminatory policies against the Chinese culture will dissolve their doubts as to whether their loyalty in Malaysia has been misplaced. As for ethnic affinity, it underwent some changes as the Chinese increasingly become transnational and this impact continues to be felt in the Malaysian Chinese literary arena. In the meantime, the identification of Malaysian Chinese writers continues to have multiple dimensions.

The Indonesian Model

The Chinese constitute a minority in Indonesia. They account for 1.5 to 2.0 per cent of the total population, making Indonesia the third model. Its minuscule proportion in population means that in order to survive, the ethnic group has had little choice but to compromise and accept the policy of assimilation implemented by the government. Even then, when ethnic issues were politicized, their lives and properties were threatened. The last three chapters in this book investigate the situation of the Indonesian Chinese. The first two explore the subject from a macro perspective, focusing on the policies implemented by the government, while the third offers a micro study, concentrating on the social riots in the late stage of the New Order. The Chinese in Indonesia have treaded a noticeably difficult path in the nation-building process.

The issue of the Indonesian Chinese is a historical legacy, while the ethnic exclusionary movements in Indonesia are part of the ethnic relation problems in the world. Zhou Nanjing's "Racial Relations and Nation-building: A Case Study of Indonesian Chinese" begins with an account of the historical peaceful relations between Indonesian Chinese and the indigenous people. He then traces the Dutch policy of "divide and rule" and its adverse effects, the ethnic conflicts of the August Revolution and their implications, and the ethnic tensions created by the anti-Chinese policies of the Sukarno and Suharto governments. The creation of the ethnic problems and their development are thus delineated. The chapter also offers a discussion of several options in theory and practice proposed by different people as possible solutions to the ethnic Chinese's problems in Indonesia, including total assimilation, mass departure to China, re-migration and national integration. Zhou concludes that the solution to the problems lies in the corrective repositioning of all kinds of relationships in Indonesia's nation-building process.

The Indonesian leaders must realize that class relations are the root cause of all problems. The top priorities in Indonesia's program of social reform and democratization should be given to addressing disparities in wealth and the lack of civil rights.

Leo Suryadinata's "Ethnic Relations and State Policies: The Case of Contemporary Indonesian Chinese" focuses on discussing policies involving the Chinese during Suharto's years. He particularly concentrates on those implicating religious issues. When Suharto was in power, his government tried to create an Indonesian nation centered on the indigenous people. A policy of thorough assimilation through dissolution of Chinese language schools, Chinese organizations, and Chinese language press, was implemented. Even Confucianism was no longer recognized as one of Indonesia's religions. As a result, the number of Confucianist devotees declined drastically while the number of Buddhists and Christians increased. Christianity, especially, witnessed a sharp rise in its following. A number of Chinese, for their own reasons, chose to convert to Islam. However, the "Indonesianization" of the Chinese has not unified the Chinese and the indigenous people. In May 1998, Suharto had to step down amid public outcry for democratic reforms. The new government initiated comparatively more democratic policies, allowing the teaching of the Chinese language, the restoration of Chinese organizations and Chinese language press. Efforts have been made to reconfigure the Indonesian nation into one that conceptually includes the Chinese as part of it. However, consensus has been slow to come forth from the Indonesian indigenous people. There is still a long way to go for the formation of the Indonesian nation.

Yang Tsung Rong's "The Indonesian Chinese and the Ethnic Issue: A Case Study of the Social Riots in the Late Stage of the New Order (1994-1997)" investigates social conflicts, particularly problems involving the Chinese and ethnic relations, through a discussion of social riots that happened in the period mentioned in the chapter title. The chapter classifies the riots in this period into "anti-power" riots and "tribal" riots, discussing the nature of the violence in terms of locality, behavioral patterns, social relations, and symbolic intention. To examine the ethnic relations and anti-Chinese actions in the riots, the riots are classified into four types based on the causes and the degree of Chinese involvement. Yang argues that the riots cannot simply be understood as acts of anti-Chinese violence. The geographical location of a violent occurrence has to be taken into account. Moreover, most of the harassment to Chinese in the riots was sporadic and unplanned. The violence should also be interpreted as challenges against power, with the Chinese as unfortunate scapegoats. Even if a riot did directly involve the

Chinese, it should be treated as a local incident with specific time and spatial conditions leading up to it. During the late stage of New Order, there was widespread distrust of the state among the people, who often resorted to violence for self-preservation. Caught in the crossfire, the Chinese became casualties of the riots. This explains why the riots appeared to be an anti-Chinese phenomenon.

Three Models of Historical and Spatial Transformations: Interaction and Segregation

From the colonial era to the period of independence, the three models have undergone changes in terms of time and space.

From the historical perspective, the Chinese in Southeast Asia in colonial era were Chinese nationals or *huaqiao*, who maintained close familial, economic, political and educational ties with China. They often responded to the political developments and cultural activities in China. On the other hand, they established their own organizations, developed Chinese language education, and published Chinese language newspapers and magazines to preserve their Chinese identity and culture. After World War II, with the founding of the People's Republic of China and the independence of Southeast Asian countries, the relationship between the Chinese in Southeast Asia and China became weakened. These Chinese were no longer Chinese nationals, but ethnic Chinese in their adopted lands. However, they soon found out that it was not enough to just pledge loyalty to the countries where they lived. Their ethnic identity had to be diluted and culture compromised in order to survive. In other words, the ethnicity had to be redrawn. The Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia were trapped in a paradoxical situation; as the Chinese took part actively in the construction of their own countries, they no longer had the liberty to develop their ethnic communities, education and culture as they did in the colonial era.

The national policies pursued by the governments in the three countries demanded the Chinese to water down their ethnic consciousness and cultural identity. This has affected the relations between the Chinese and other ethnic groups, and also the relations among the different language groups within the Chinese communities. Although the Chinese dominated the population in Singapore, the political leaders of the country had to take into account many considerations after independence. The ethnic identity of the Chinese, the Chinese language education, and the development of multiculturalism encountered great restrictions.

In turn, this created disputes among different ethnic and language groups in the country. In Malaysia, the mainstream Malay ethnic group was wary of the fact that the Chinese constituted a significant minority. The Chinese's persistence in preserving their own culture was often interpreted as efforts running counter to the aims and principles of nation-building. This became another source of tension apart from economic disparities. As for Indonesia, since the Chinese only accounted for a minuscule proportion of the population, the survival of the ethnic group was considered more important than the preservation of the Chinese culture. The development of Chinese religions, education, and culture had to depend on the goodwill of the government. Comparatively, the Malaysian model, with its medium-sized Chinese population, seems to fare better at preserving Chinese ethnic and cultural identity.

From the spatial perspective, the Chinese in Southeast Asia in the colonial period maintained rather close ties among themselves, with their common affinity with China binding them together. The Chinese government managed to evoke strong emotions for the ancestral land through certain organizations and activities in the region. Many of the political developments and cultural activities in China triggered enthusiastic reactions from the Chinese in the three countries. Such region-wide responses were a result of mutual influence among the Chinese in Southeast Asia. For example, in October 1899, when the news of the Empress Dowager intending to dethrone an apparently ill Emperor Guang Xu, about 500 Chinese businessmen in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Makasar, Riau, and Rangoon jointly sent a petition to Beijing to convey both well-wishes to the emperor and request for the Empress Dowager to surrender her powers.[3] In the same year, the Chinese in Southeast Asia, inspired by Kang Youwei's call for the revival of Confucianism, responded with the construction of Confucian temples and schools in Paloh, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca of Malaysia, Makasar, Batavia, and Surabaya of Indonesia, and Rangoon in Burma and Singapore.[4] No matter whether it was Kang Youwei's Reform Movement or Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary cause or China's anti-Japanese war, the Chinese in Southeast Asia influenced one another in their collective response.

The Chinese in these three countries began to distance themselves from one another after Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia gained independence. The China factor which once bonded them faded out as each new nation spelt out what was demanded of its new citizens. During the early years of independence, the Chinese found themselves in a strange and difficult predicament, faced with the Cold War on the international stage as well as problems of communism and racism in the region. In Singapore where the Chinese made up the majority of the population,