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**Ethnic  
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as  
Southeast  
Asians**

The **Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)** was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional research centre for scholars and other specialists concerned with modern Southeast Asia, particularly the many-faceted problems of stability and security, economic development, and political and social change.

The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies Programme (RES) including ASEAN and APEC, Regional Strategic and Political Studies Programme (RSPS), Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme (RSCS), and the Indochina Programme (ICP).

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## **Preface**

Since the introduction of an open-door policy, many Chinese entrepreneurs outside China have begun to invest in mainland China. Attention has again turned to the Chinese in other parts of the world, including those in Southeast Asia, and writers, both in the West and Asia, have started to use the term “Overseas Chinese” and “Chinese overseas” to refer to these Chinese outside mainland China. This mainland China-centric view has confused the position and identity of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, with serious political implications as Southeast Asian Chinese are still considered to be “Chinese overseas” or “Overseas Chinese”, not Southeast Asians.

In the light of this new development, a workshop was held on the theme of “Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians” to discuss the perception of the Southeast Asian Chinese in terms of their position in the respective Southeast Asian countries, their relationship with China, their self-identity, as well as the perception of “indigenous” Southeast Asians towards the ethnic Chinese in their countries.

At this workshop, only six ASEAN states and Myanmar were covered. Paperwriters were requested to include the following aspects with regard to their studies on their respective countries:

1. The indigenous and ethnic Chinese notion of a nation (nation-state) and the position of the ethnic Chinese in such a nation. Is the nation racially or culturally defined or both?
2. The relationship between China and the ethnic Chinese overseas — is this a problem for the integration of the ethnic Chinese (or for nation-building)?
3. Is culture and the economic position of the ethnic Chinese a problem for the integration of the ethnic Chinese in their country of domicile? With the rise of ethnic consciousness world-wide, is there national disintegration rather than national integration in Southeast Asia? Does this trend affect the Chinese communities?
4. Prospects of the ethnic Chinese in national integration — are ethnic Chinese “Southeast Asians” or “Overseas Chinese”?

Two groups of scholars from Southeast Asia were invited. One group consisted of ethnic Chinese (or of Chinese descent) and the other group comprised “indigenous” or non-Chinese scholars. The interaction of these two groups of scholars have provided a more comprehensive picture about the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia.

In the past, most of the works (for example, Suryadinata’s work) were based mainly on one country. They were also not done in conjunction with both ethnic Chinese and indigenous scholars. Thus, this volume aims to be a major regional study incorporating a variety of regional perspectives on common themes relating to the question of the Chinese identity.

This volume consists of eight chapters. Each chapter is accompanied by a brief commentary by a discussant. The Appendix is based on the workshop discussion on the role of women in shaping ethnic Chinese identity. It is not a full-length paper but is included here with the hope that others may pursue this understudied topic.

It should be noted here that the title of the workshop was “Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians”. Southeast Asians here refer to people in the individual Southeast Asian states, and not a

collective regional identity. The editor is fully aware that a regional identity has not yet emerged, but identification with an individual country has been in existence.

The editor would like to take this opportunity to thank all the workshop participants, especially the paperwriters and discussants, for their contributions and co-operation. Special thanks also go to Professor Chan Heng Chee, then Director of ISEAS, and Professor Wang Gungwu, Chairman of the Institute of East Asian Political Economy (IEAPE), for their kind support. We have all benefited tremendously from their full participation in the two-day workshop.

Leo Suryadinata



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## Chapter 1

# **Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia: Overseas Chinese, Chinese Overseas or Southeast Asians?**

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*Leo Suryadinata*

The Chinese in Southeast Asia have gained some measure of acceptance in the local scene. However, in recent years, with dramatic events such as the end of the Cold War, the globalization process, the opening up of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and ethnic Chinese investments in their ancestral land, people have begun to question the identity of the Chinese again. Old and outdated terms, such as "Overseas Chinese" and "Chinese overseas" have resurfaced and again become popular,<sup>1</sup> creating the impression that the Chinese are no longer part of Southeast Asia but China.

This chapter examines the current position of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. Do they perceive themselves as Chinese overseas or Southeast Asians?<sup>2</sup> What are the perceptions of the local population towards the Chinese? Are the Chinese accepted as members of Southeast Asian nations? What have been the

respective state policies towards the Chinese? Have these policies achieved their objectives? What are the problems and prospects of the Chinese in this part of the world?

### **What is in a Name? Variety of Terms Used**

There are many terms used to refer to the Chinese. During the colonial period, those Chinese who were born in Southeast Asia were often considered colonial subjects. However, Imperial China declared the Chinese as its subjects/citizens. Both the local born and new immigrants were then regarded as Chinese nationals overseas. It is true that many new immigrants who left China at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often considered themselves as sojourners, and would eventually return to their ancestral land. In the eyes of the Chinese Government, these Chinese were in fact *Huaqiao* or Chinese nationals who resided overseas.<sup>3</sup>

Western writers consider the Chinese outside China as Overseas Chinese. In fact, the term "Overseas Chinese" became the English equivalent of *Huaqiao*. The English term was popularly used until the end of World War II. The situation began to change after the Southeast Asian countries gained independence and mainland China turned communist. The new migrants and their immediate descendants decided to remain in Southeast Asia and adopt local citizenship. In order to show their different national status and political loyalty, the Chinese began to coin other terms to refer to themselves. Those who were still well-versed in Chinese, especially in Malaya and Singapore, began to refer to themselves as *Huaren* (ethnic Chinese) or *Huayi* (Chinese descent). The term *Huaren* has been popularized to refer to the Chinese in Southeast Asia, who are mainly the citizens of their adopted land. However, those who are still Chinese nationals but Southeast Asian residents are often included in this category.

The English equivalent of *Huaren* is "ethnic Chinese". Local Chinese who were sensitive to Southeast Asian nationalism also began to use this term in place of "Overseas Chinese" or "Chinese overseas". However, some ethnic Chinese writers continue to use the terms "Overseas Chinese" and "ethnic Chinese" interchangeably. The same can be said about Western writers. In recent years, the

term "Overseas Chinese" has gained new currency. Perhaps many still see the ethnic Chinese from mainland China's point of view, without realizing its implications. Others perhaps have done this on purpose to show that "once a Chinese, will always be a Chinese". They could never become Southeast Asians.

Many writers, both Asian and Western, often use the term "Overseas Chinese" to refer to the Chinese who live in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> This infers that they share a common identity with the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Strictly speaking, the former should not be called "Overseas Chinese" because the territories they reside in are politically and culturally part of China, quite different from the Southeast Asian countries. More importantly, the Chinese in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan regard themselves as Chinese or *Zhongguo ren* (the man from the central kingdom). In fact, these three areas form part of what is known as "Greater China".

Can the people in "Greater China" be considered ethnic Chinese or *Huaren*? The English term "ethnic Chinese" is commonly used to refer to the Chinese outside China. The Chinese term *Huaren* is also not used to refer to the Chinese in China. In general, the Chinese in China call themselves *Zhongguo ren*. But within the category of *Zhongguo ren*, there are various ethnic groups, namely Han, Man, Mong, Hui, Zang, and so forth. With regard to the Chinese in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, the Chinese Government and scholars call them *Gang-Ao-Tai tongbao* (compatriots from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan). But the Chinese in these three areas call themselves simply Chinese, or Hong Kong Chinese, Macao Chinese or Taiwanese if they want to emphasize their local identity. Only when they are in Southeast Asia, do they refer to themselves as *Huaren* or ethnic Chinese, to differentiate themselves from the local Chinese.

The Chinese Government and scholars are aware of the connotation of the various terms. They have accepted the term *Huaren* and its English equivalent "ethnic Chinese". Nevertheless, they also use *Huaqiao* or "Overseas Chinese" when referring to a specific period (when all Chinese overseas were still regarded as Chinese nationals) or to those Chinese who are still citizens of China.

As a matter of fact, the picture of the ethnic Chinese is more complex than what has been presented. Apart from the problem of nationality, they have different degrees of Southeast Asianization, or acculturation. The *peranakan* Chinese in Java and in Peninsular Malaysia, the Sino-Thai in Thailand and the Chinese mestizo in the Philippines have been highly acculturated. Can these people still be called ethnic Chinese as, culturally, they have a high degree of mixture? If ethnicity is defined solely in terms of "common ancestry",<sup>5</sup> these people are "ethnic Chinese". However, ethnicity is often used to refer to ethnic culture as well.<sup>6</sup> The Sino-Thai and Chinese mestizo may therefore not be suitably classified as "ethnic Chinese" but "of Chinese descent" (or *Huayi*). If this is the case, should we include the latter in our discussion of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia? I think it is important to include them if only for the purpose of showing that the "ethnic Chinese" are neither "unassimilable" nor constitute a homogeneous group. However, those of Chinese descent may have a different national identity compared to the newer migrants, or Chinese-speaking Chinese. This leads us to the question of the national identity of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

### **Concepts of Nation in Southeast Asia**

National identity is closely linked to the modern concept of nation. Nation is basically a Western concept which emerged in the last two centuries, first in Western Europe. In the past, the concepts of race, ethnic group and tribe were prevalent but the end of colonialism following World War II, saw the emergence of independent states in the Third World, when new "nations" came into being.

The term "nation" often means a political community, and is sometimes used interchangeably with "citizenship". However, "nation" is different from "citizenship" in the sense that "citizenship" is often used in a legal sense, while "nation" is both political and cultural. Some writers have even used the term "nation" in a psychological sense. However, for the purpose of our discussion, nation is used here to refer to a political and cultural entity which is larger than an ethnic group.



These so-called nations in Southeast Asia are in fact “nations-in-the-making”. They are state-nations rather than nation-states. This means that there is no nation but an ex-colonial state. The state is created first and a new nation is built based on the state-boundary. Thailand is the only state in Southeast Asia which was never colonized. However, one can argue that the present concept of the Thai nation is still quite recent because the Thai state boundary was drawn in the twentieth century in accordance with Western definitions. Accordingly, all Southeast Asian countries are not “nation-states” but “multi-national states”. For this chapter, I prefer to use “ethnic group” for a sub-national group within a state and reserve the term “nation” for a larger unit based on the state.

In other words, all Southeast Asian states are multi-ethnic states and their national identity is still weak and ethnic tension is often very high. Therefore, leaders of newly independent Southeast Asian countries make efforts to build a new nation based on colonial boundaries. It is generally believed that ethnic identity is a divisive force which may lead to political instability and eventually the disintegration of a state.

Nevertheless, the concept of “nation” or “state-nation” in Southeast Asia can be divided into at least two types: one is an immigrant state-nation and the other, an indigenous state-nation.

The immigrant nation does not have a fixed model. As the people of the state are made up of immigrants who are of different races, the components of the “nation” are those migrant races. It is true that there is an “indigenous” component (that is, the Malays) but the group is a minority and is weak in various aspects. The identity of this kind of “nation” is often not clear and it constantly looks for new balances in the international community. However, being in Southeast Asia, the identity needs to have some “neutral” (that is, Western) and local components (for example, Malay) in order to have racial harmony within the state and acceptance by the neighbouring states. There is only one such state in Southeast Asia: Singapore.

All other countries in Southeast Asia are indigenous state-nations. In other words, the nation is defined in indigenous group