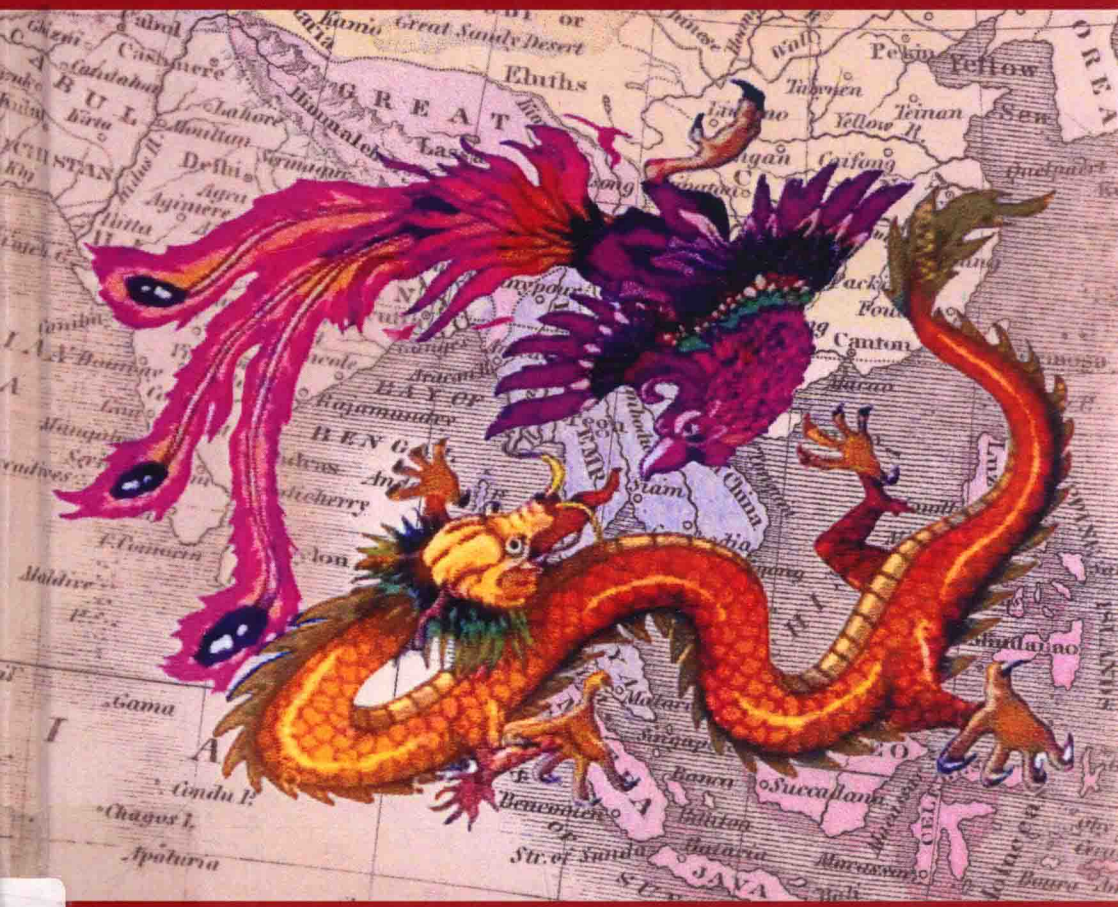
Golden Dragon and Purple Phoenix

The Chinese and Their Multi-Ethnic Descendants in Southeast Asia



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Foreword

The history of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia is an oft-told and well-documented narrative. The migratory flows and the subsequent settlement of large numbers of Chinese people in different parts of the world (including Southeast Asia) are now spoken of as the Chinese Diaspora. The Diaspora not only brought people of Chinese descent (sometimes called Overseas Chinese) to move to and settle in different parts of the world, it became the principal vehicle by which Chinese culture, customs and traditions were spread far beyond the Middle Kingdom.

Southeast Asia, or *Nanyang,* was a popular destination for Chinese migrants, especially from southern China, who were compelled to leave their hometowns and villages in search of work and fortune. Their stories of hardships, survival, adaptability, resilience and enterprise have informed many scholarly and popular histories of the Diaspora. But the story of the Chinese Diaspora is not simply one of migration and settlement. In the course of these movements and adaptations, the Chinese migrants assimilated, with varying degrees, into their host environments by sinking deep roots into local society and becoming integral elements of the indigenous social landscape.

Golden Dragon and Purple Phoenix deals with the migration, intermingling, assimilation and integration of the Chinese with the local communities in Southeast Asia. Drawing on his personal insights, careful research and observations based on his extensive experience as a journalist, ambassador and politician, Mr Lee Khoon Choy, a second generation Chinese who was born and raised in Malaya and Singapore, has written an important book to add yet

another layer to the rich and complex story of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Many readers will find his narratives on Malaysia and Singapore familiar, but will also enjoy the equally fascinating though less well-known stories of the Thai, Burmese, Filipino, Indo-Chinese, Indonesian and Bruneian experiences. I congratulate Mr Lee Khoon Choy for providing this very useful account of the evolution of the Chinese communities that is set in the context of the respective host country's social and political history.

Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam
President of the Republic of Singapore

Preface

The Chinese had started a mass migration to Southeast Asia since the Song (宋) dynasty, when the Mongolians (元) invaded China. This flow of immigrants continued during the Ming (明) and Qing (清) dynasty. During the Ming dynasty, when Admiral Zheng He (郑和), and his 63 treasure ships ventured into Southeast Asia, many of his crew members stayed behind in the countries they harboured. After the collapse of the Taiping Rebellion (太平天国爆乱) many supporters of Hung Siew Chuan (洪秀全) escaped to the Borneo territories, Philippines and Indochina. But the largest exodus of Chinese immigrants to the region began after the Opium War when Chinese coolies went to replace African slaves with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in December 1814, which obliged Great Britain and the US to stop the slave trade. They had to look for a replacement and they cast their eyes on the teeming millions of Chinese in the mysterious Orient. Others migrated through their own efforts.

Today, there are more than 60 million Chinese who have settled down in countries all over the world. About 33 million have settled down in Southeast Asia. There is a saying that "wherever there is water, there are Chinese". These Chinese who migrated to Southeast Asia brought with them their language, culture, customs and their lifestyles. Essentially, they were strong followers of Confucius (孔子) despite the fact that they were not well educated and were largely coolies. Some of them included scholars and teachers. They religiously followed the 2,000-year-old Confucian teachings of the creation of a heaven on earth instead of an unknown heaven; believing in filial piety, a sense of respect for the elders, a sense of hierarchy, work

ethics and the virtues of tolerance and perseverance. They worked very hard in order to make a living and were thrifty. Wherever they went, they brought with them their customs, religion and traditions, celebrations, culture and language. As the early Chinese immigrants did not bring their spouses, they married native women and produced mixed-blood offspring which in turn produced a new breed of people, part Chinese, part Southeast Asian. Many of them rose to become prominent members of their new land of birth, some rising through the ranks to become top political leaders.

This book is not about the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia but about the intermingling, assimilation and integration of the Chinese with local communities which shaped the socio-political landscape of Southeast Asia as we see it today. The book narrates the intricate history of intermarriages with natives, i.e. the intermingling of blood and the offspring from their union, the influence they yielded on the societies and the politics of nations they chose to live in. It is about how they rose to high positions and their contributions to their host societies. Some rose to become kings, king makers, others to become presidents, prime ministers, senior ministers and prominent business and religious leaders. Some openly declared their ancestry and are proud of their Chinese DNA, while others in their eagerness to prove their allegiance and loyalty to their country of birth have disassociated themselves from their heritage. In some countries like Singapore, mingling of blood is no longer widely prevalent, but the Chinese who came planted their roots and the *Babas* or assimilated citizens of Chinese heritage produced world-respected politicians and leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew (李光耀), Dr. Goh Keng Swee (吴慶瑞) and Dr. Toh Chin Chye (杜进才). They have become more westernised but they have not forgotten their ancestral heritage. The same is true of Malaysia, to a lesser or greater extent.

I write this book as a journalist and therefore it is not meant to be a historical record nor an academic treatise. I have been a journalist, politician and diplomat, and I write as a political observer and political analyst. Hence my personal experiences and anecdotes have been weaved into the narrative of how Southeast Asian countries have evolved in the context of the assimilation and integration

process with their Chinese immigrants. Some have succeeded while others struggle to find a common ground with their assimilated Chinese compatriots as well as new immigrants. The processes have been different, contributing to different results. Generally speaking, I noticed that Buddhism-centred Southeast Asian countries have been more successful in assimilating the Chinese compared to all the others. Of all countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand has been the most successful because of historical reasons and because the Thais are liberal, tolerant and open-minded. Thai citizens treat others as equal, irrespective of their race. In the Philippines, where Catholicism was widely practiced, the assimilation could be regarded as fairly successful. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, where the influence of Islam was strong, assimilation of Chinese had been far less successful. The Chinese who migrated were mainly the Fujianese (福建人), Teochius (潮州人), Hakkas (客家人), Hainanese (海南人) and Cantonese (廣东人) and a small number of Zhejiang Ren (浙江人), Shandung (山东人) and Hubei (湖北人). Most were from the coastal regions of China who migrated because of the following reasons:

1. Overpopulation in China drove them to look for new pastures.
2. Natural calamities caused frequently by drought, flood and earthquakes made life difficult.
3. The opium war drained off Chinese silver and upset the internal Chinese fiscal system.
4. Politically, there were many rebellions, e.g. The Taiping rebellion (太平爆乱). These rebellions disrupted economic activities, destroyed farms and drove many of the rural population to coastal cities, forcing those already there to look for new lands as life became difficult.
5. Various invasions by the Chinese minorities such as Mongols (蒙古人), the Manchus (滿洲人) and later by the Japanese accelerated the flow of migration from China.
6. Guomintang (国民党) retreat to Taiwan after Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) lost the war on the mainland forcing some to flee elsewhere.

7. Communist victory leading to the liquidation of capitalism and all pro-Guomindang elements, driving them away from their homeland.
8. The Chinese Cultural Revolution resulted in the purging of overseas Chinese, which lasted for 10 years. Those who wanted to return to China were no longer able to do so.

Conflicts

In this book, I had analysed the conflict of interest between Chinese immigrants and locals during the various stages of political history. In Indonesia, for example, there were conflicts of interest between the *totoks* [new Chinese immigrants who were called 'singkheks' (新客) belong to this group] and the *peranakans* (土生) who were already assimilated into the Indonesian society. Similarly, conflict also took place between the Babas and the singkheks in Malaysia and the mestizos and the Chinese in the Philippines. The colonial masters favoured those who were locally born, giving their leaders special privileges and better economic benefits because they were familiar with the tongue of their colonial masters. More importantly they were trusted by the colonial rulers. This contributed to the differing lifestyles of the assimilated Chinese and the singkheks or new Chinese immigrants.

When Chinese nationalism spread to these countries, the singkheks looked down on the locals because they could not speak and understand the Chinese language. On the other hand, they envied the privileges enjoyed by their assimilated predecessors and were inclined to develop associations with them and, or arrange for marriage tie-ups for mutual benefit. Conversely, the assimilated community despised the singkheks and saw them as low class with uncouth behaviour because they brought along with them gambling, opium smoking and prostitution. They were suspicious of the anti-social, boorish conduct of new immigrants. There was also conflict between pro-China singkheks and the local born over the question of political loyalty, and the share of the economic pie.

Nationalism and Their Impact on Overseas Chinese

The rise of nationalism in Southeast Asia has had a tremendous impact on the mentality of Chinese immigrants. Natives of host countries had suddenly become masters of the soil which required the migrant Chinese to necessarily adapt and take sides in the ongoing conflict, in order to survive. Some aligned with the colonial rulers, whilst others supported the revolution against colonial rule. Some remained pro-China and refused to be associated with the rising nationalism.

Emotional Attachment to Land of Ancestry

Although most of the Southeast Asian leaders with Chinese blood have forgotten their mother tongue and culture and have been assimilated into native societies, some retain emotional attachments to their land of ancestry. Many have gone back to pay homage. They may have become leaders in Southeast Asian countries but they are not ashamed or shy to admit that they have Chinese blood, yet at the same time declare their loyalty to the country of their birth where they live and lead. Having Chinese blood is not necessarily an advantage for them. In many cases, their own kind who rose to become leaders became antagonistic and took measures against them. The tide and turn of fortune for the immigrants from China changed from generation to generation, centuries to centuries but wherever history brought them, they proved to be a resilient stock. Rising from the ashes of destruction, a new generation would take over to face the challenges head on. For this reason, the Chinese and their assimilated influence will prevail in Southeast Asia, in any part of the world, as long as their spirit of preservation and adaptation remains.

I first trace the historical links between China and the countries of Southeast Asia, giving a glimpse of the history behind the Chinese migration, followed by the beginning of the intermarriage between the Chinese immigrants and their host countries, the impact of such mingling of blood in their societies, a biographical sketch of the important leaders of these places, their ancestral heritage and in some

cases, my acquaintance with them. Wherever possible, cultural characteristics of the various races against the background of the political history of these countries has been related to the process of how the migrant Chinese has been absorbed into their host cultures. The assimilation as described in this title describes the symbiotic influence of the Chinese language, culture and civilisation with the host countries, culture and lifestyle.

Summary

This book describes the impact of Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asian countries. The immediate impact was the intermarriage between the Chinese immigrants and the women in Southeast Asian countries. As there were no Chinese schools in the earlier days in Southeast Asia, their offspring gradually lost touch with their mother tongue (Chinese language) and culture. They became a new breed of mixed-blood Chinese who was accorded different names in the countries where they were born. For example, those born in Thailand were called *lokjins* and those in Malaysia *baba*. They speak Thai or Malay and can no more speak Mandarin or even their own dialects. They dress like *pribumi* and behave more like the indigenous people rather than Chinese, although in many cases they still celebrate Chinese New Year and other Chinese festivals. In other words, they are generally assimilated into local societies.

The assimilation process differs from country to country. Generally speaking, the Chinese immigrants in Buddhist countries such as Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos were easily assimilated compared to those in Malaysia and Brunei where the state religion was Islam. In the Philippines, where Christianity became dominant, the process was comparatively easier.

I was interested in this mixed-blood phenomenon when I was a journalist travelling to Southeast Asian countries. I discovered that the mixed-blood did not speak Mandarin and did not behave like the Chinese. Then, when I became Ambassador to Indonesia, I made an effort to study the Chinese *peranakans* in the country and discovered that 500 years ago, most of them were converted into Islam and this

had something to do with the arrival of Admiral Zheng He. It was then that I learnt about the nine *Wali Sogo,* eight of whom were Chinese and had helped to overthrow the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit.

This book traces the history of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia and the impact the Chinese have made on indigenous cultures, language, clothings and festivals. It also dealt with prominent Southeast Asian leaders who have mixed blood. To westerners, I have learnt that it is difficult for them to distinguish between a Chinese from China and Chinese with mixed blood in Southeast Asia. This book may shed light to those who want to understand the impact of the mixed-blood assimilation in Southeast Asia.

Many books have been written about Chinese in Southeast Asia. This book is different because it deals with the mixed-blood Chinese whose ancestry is from China. The title of the book captures the spirit of the sons of the Golden Dragon who migrated (a term that the Chinese emperors were often known by). The phoenix is a majestic bird that flies south and the legendary character of the phoenix is that, after being burnt to death, it will rise again from the ashes to become a new phoenix, stronger than before. The Chinese descendants of these southern countries have, through the centuries been subjected to persecution and destruction but despite these challenges, they have always been able to defy annihilation and triumphed. Purple is not a primary colour but a mixture of red and blue and allude to the mixed-blood Chinese in the various South East Asian countries. Today, they are the descendents of the Golden Dragon who have become the resilient Purple Phoenixes who will endure thousands of years hereafter.

Acknowledgements

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I would like to specially thank Paul Johnson, for spending so much of his time making the book ready for publication. I would like also to thank all those who had helped me one way or other in writing this book.

Former Deputy Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China, Madam Kuei Xian, presenting Life Achievement Award to the author Lee Khoon Choy as one of the 100 World Outstanding Chinese. The Ceremony was held in November 2011 in Shangrila Hotel, Hong Kong.

Former King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia and the Author Mr Lee Khoon Choy.

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