CHINATOWNS
IN A GLOBALIZING SOUTHEAST ASIA

Photographs and Captions by **Zhuang Wubin** • Edited by **Leo Suryadinata** and **Ang Cher Kiat**
with An Introduction and Additional Text

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Cover: A television tuned to an episode of *sinetron* (Indonesian soap opera) for patients waiting to see the doctor at the free clinic housed in Vihara Tanda Bakti, formerly an ancestral temple of the Chen clan, along Jalan Kemenangan in Jakarta's Chinatown.

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Chinatowns in a globalizing Southeast Asia

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FOREWORD

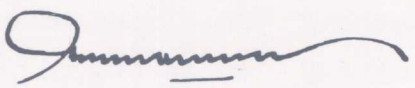
Established in Singapore in 1995, the Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC) is a cornerstone in the preservation of Chinese culture and an active contributor to cross-cultural exchanges. This new publication traces the unique history and interesting development of Chinatowns in the fast-changing and diverse Southeast Asian region.

To many visitors, Southeast Asia is a foreign destination with exotic cultures, interesting traditions and deep-rooted heritage. Its economic standing in the world is also growing in tandem with the pace of globalization. Across the entire region, migrant Chinese seeking opportunities made their homes in enclaves which later evolved into Chinatowns – the hub of all Chinese activities.

Regardless of location, government system and population size, Chinatowns in Southeast Asia, or across the world, for that matter, are the testing grounds for the adaptability and tenacity inherent in the Chinese Overseas. Such traits have shaped their way of life and slowly morphed into a unique culture and heritage. While one can easily be deluded by the homogeneity of Chinatowns owing to a common historical background, the integration of ethnic Chinese into the indigenous communities has also introduced diversity that is embraced by both sides.

This book takes its readers on a journey discovering the origins and transformation of the Chinatowns in Southeast Asia. The photographs vividly capture the essence of everyday life and evoke a sense of realism that makes one feel "at home in Chinatown".

I would like to commend the supporters and the team behind this project whose efforts have made this publication an invaluable record of overseas Chinese settled across a globalized Southeast Asia.



Kwek Leng Joo
Member, Board of Governors, Chinese Heritage Centre
Honorary President, Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry
Honorary Chairman, Photographic Society of Singapore

Chinatowns in a Globalizing Southeast Asia

AN INTRODUCTION

PRELUDE

Approximately 80 percent of the Chinese overseas live in Southeast Asia, constituting the largest Chinese population outside China. It is generally argued that when the Chinese arrived in Southeast Asia, they congregated in certain areas which later developed into "Chinatowns". This term was first used by the European colonial powers to refer to these Chinese enclaves which were then promoted as tourist destinations by the independent Southeast Asian nations. The popular Chinese term used to describe Chinatown is Tangrenjie (唐人街) or "street" of the Tang people; the Tang dynasty is generally regarded by the Chinese as the most glorious and prosperous dynasty. This emphasis on the "street" instead of the "town" reflects the importance of the main thoroughfare of the Chinatown. The local Chinese usually refer to the Chinatown by the name of the main street in the area e.g. Petaling Street (Malaysia), Thanon Yaowarat (Thailand) and Kreta Ayer (Singapore).

A wide spectrum of factors such as size, economic/political/social importance and length of settlement have contributed to, if not determined, the emergence of the Chinatowns. Their socio-economic importance – or the lack thereof – varies from country to country. The changes that Chinatowns have undergone also vary from country to country and from period to period. Old Chinatowns in some countries have disappeared while new ones have emerged. Some countries do not have clearly identifiable Chinatowns such as Brunei. Furthermore, Southeast Asia itself is a very diverse entity, with different religions and languages, and different systems of government. To discuss the Chinese communities of the region, let alone the Chinatowns, in sufficient depths and scopes within a limited space is an impossible task. What this study can offer is a sophisticated survey of the different Chinatowns in the region. A central theme of this book that will provide consistency for discussion of all the Chinatowns is the increasing rate of globalization. Another objective is to accentuate the human perspective of the most important element in these Chinatowns, viz. the inhabitants, and in so doing, inject a renewed interest in the often overlooked corners of Southeast Asia.

Studies of Chinatowns in the United States and the West in general have defined these ethnic zones as "a partially autonomous enclave and economic structure constituting a distinct labor market" (Zhou 1992:4). However, unlike in the case of the alienated ethnic ghettos of American and European cities, the story of Southeast Asian Chinatowns is, to a certain extent, also the story of the urban cities in which they are situated. The fate of these modern Southeast Asian cities is, to some extent, intertwined with that of the Chinatowns, and in some instances, like Phnom Penh, and to a lesser extent, early Kuala Lumpur, the two were inseparable. The ethnic Chinese with their economic dominance were also the prime movers of the commercial hustle and bustle that are characteristic of the economic growth of the various cities.

Noticeably missing in most of the Chinatowns in Southeast Asia is a Chinese-style "friendship gate" at the entrance to the main street commonly found in Chinatowns in the West, Australia and Japan. However, in recent years, some of these gates have been installed by local tourism offices keen on bringing in growing numbers of tourists from China. In most cases, the boundaries of the Chinatowns are not immediately identifiable to the uninitiated. Chinatowns in Southeast Asia can be defined at two levels. There is a historical Chinatown where the earliest migrants settled upon arrival in a Southeast Asian city, in some instances "zoned" by colonial authorities in the past as a Chinese enclave. Then there is the utilitarian, often unglamorous, part where most ethnic Chinese inhabitants of the city live, work and carry out their social activities.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Chinatowns of Southeast Asia have been established in different periods in various historical contexts. Their diverse historical evolutions have also been shaped by the differing policies of colonial and post-colonial governments. All the Chinatowns have since the early days showcased the adaptability of the ethnic Chinese to the unique as well as common circumstances throughout Southeast Asia. The socio-economic status of the ethnic Chinese in different Southeast Asian societies can be glimpsed through the streets and alleys of the Chinatowns. Chinese schools, clan associations and temples serve as a barometer for the state of development of the ethnic Chinese in the respective countries. But perhaps more importantly, though subtly, they reflect the state of relationships between the ethnic Chinese and the indigenous populations.

In some instances, such as in Jakarta and Bangkok, there may have been large-scale relocations of the Chinese populations from their initial landing places. The Chinese were seen as a valuable source of labour and enterprising agents in a commerce-driven colonial society. But the Chinatowns that were formed during the early colonial period also saw the proliferation of three kinds of establishments: brothels, gambling houses and opium dens, and with these the entrenchment of interest groups divided by dialects with their respective clan associations and temples. Only with the arrival of female migrants at a later date and the enforcement of increased opium regulations did the situation improve. The emergence of a new generation of ethnic Chinese born in the colonial Southeast Asian cities led to the sprouting of other kinds of institutions such as schools and the Chinese press in the early 20th century.

Many colonial bureaucrats in Southeast Asia have left behind records testifying to the tenacity of the migrant Chinese labourers and entrepreneurs, many of whom playing a second-class, middleman role between the European colonial administrators (in the case of

Thailand, the royal family) and the indigenous populace that was seen as the lowest class. This situation would become untenable with the end of colonialism and the rise of nationalism amongst the different Southeast Asian states after World War Two.

As part of the Nationalization policies of many new Southeast Asian states, many Chinese were excluded from a number of the economic roles that had enabled them to accumulate great wealth, albeit through exercises often accompanied by an assimilative naturalization process for the individual Chinese. Manifestations of "Chineseness" such as the Chinese language and practices were disallowed and replaced by the use of indigenous languages and practices. Chinese store signs, the definitive representation of Chinatown, were prohibited in cities like Jakarta and Yangon, together with the closure of Chinese schools and the Chinese presses. At the same time, political developments in China had their repercussions on the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Both the Taiwan oriented Kuomintang members and leftist-leaning individuals came under increased suspicions; the latter were targeted by independent anti-communist Southeast Asian governments. Even the early socialist governments in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos were not sympathetic towards leftist Chinese as their policy of ethno-nationalism took priority.

The ethnic Chinese, on their part, have continued to adapt and evolve in often trying circumstances, even as the mostly "localized" generations of Southeast Asian-born Chinese question the ostracism of the indigenous governments. More often than not the continuous prosperity of the ethnic Chinese in the Chinatowns of these countries is testimony to their ability to advance their economic status as citizens of their adopted countries and to make use of the opportunities in their immediate region whilst continuing to retain their cultural identity. This has allowed them to take the Chinatowns of some of these Southeast Asian cities to the forefront of a globalizing economy in the recent decades.

A GLOBALIZING SOUTHEAST ASIA

According to Anthony Giddens, the sociological definition of "Globalization" is "the increasing interdependence of world society" in which "the social, political and economic connections which cross-cut borders between countries decisively condition the fate of those living within each of them" (Giddens 1997: 63-64). This "increasing interdependence of world society" is not a new phenomenon but is happening at an unprecedented rate around the world today. This new era of increasing rate of globalization is the focus of the present project (even though the Chinatowns in Southeast Asia are products also of earlier globalization) partly because it is at this historical juncture that economists have directed their discourse at globalization and in fact, invented the word "globalization". This economic orientation of the phenomenon is borne out by Arjun Appadurai's definition of a "financescapes" of globalization in which "the speed and volume of global capital flows are both rapid and complex and national economics can no longer stand alone" (Appadurai 1990).

Southeast Asian countries have responded to this globalization especially in the economic sense. Regional economic cooperation has been fostered by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to achieve greater competitiveness on the global stage. This is a study of the Chinatowns in the ten ASEAN members.

There are three related issues in the discussion of this topic:1) the growing economic strength of China, 2) the perceived overseas Chinese economic networks or the "bamboo network" and 3) the new wave of Chinese migrations. The growing economic influence of China in Southeast Asia is an undeniable development, and the perceived existence of a "bamboo network" has been partly perpetuated by Southeast Asian Chinese. These developments have caused indigenous Southeast Asian governments to either view the ethnic Chinese with continued suspicion or attempt to exercise leverage over this network. In the past, the perceived Chinese economic networks outside China and the ethnic Chinese dominance in Southeast Asian economies had led to different kinds of response from newly independent indigenous governments in Southeast Asia, often benignly. However, with the economic rise of China, the business acumen and the networks of the ethnic Chinese citizens of these Southeast Asian countries have led to a significant shift in the evolution of Chinese business networks in many Southeast Asian countries. Inevitably, the acceptance of Chinese business networks due to the rise of the Chinese economy by different Southeast Asian nations and the direct impact that China's economic progress has had on these nations have brought about advantages as well as repercussions for the shaping of Chinatown. The third issue is also partly the result of China's increasing economic clout but has a direct impact on the demographics of some of Southeast Asia's Chinatowns.

THE ECONOMIC ASCENDANCY OF CHINA

The economic growth of China has brought about the rehabilitation of some of the previously ignored Chinatowns through direct investments by China's companies and the tourist dollar.

Since the opening and reform policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping which has resulted in the phenomenal rise in the economic influence of China in the region, many Southeast Asian nations have scrambled to conclude a Free-Trade Agreement with China. It has been an economic priority for the group of ASEAN+3 (China, South Korea and Japan) to achieve greater engagement with China which would have been politically sensitive for states such as Vietnam and Malaysia to attempt individually. Some of the Chinatowns of Southeast Asian cities such as Phnom Penh have seen new capital injection into the infrastructure and renewed economic vitality resulting from the direct investment of Chinese companies. There are even talks of the creation of a new Chinatown in the outskirts of Vientiane.

Another effect of an economically strong China has been the draw of the tourist dollar. There are two different dynamics at work in bringing in tourists through the renewal and promotion of "Chinatown". The first is to attract the (newly rich) "mainland tourists" by showcasing the life-style of their fellow countrymen in their host countries in Southeast Asia. Another taps the renewed interest in China and Chinese culture brought about by the economic rise of China. To replace the old stereotypical image of a backward communist China, which has hijacked traditional Chinese culture with its revolutionaries rhetoric, a hip and perhaps mythically kitschy "oriental" attraction is conjured up for Western tourists who have come to Southeast Asian cities looking for an "eastern experience".

PERCEIVED OVERSEAS CHINESE NETWORK

Increasingly, more vibrancy can be seen in some of the Chinatowns in Southeast Asia as rules are relaxed over sign boards and the general outward display of Chinese-nesss. Institutions that used to be the cornerstone of Chinatown such as schools and the Chinese press have also been resurrected. The recognition of an efficient or a powerful Chinese business network has encouraged many indigenous governments to adopt a more relaxed attitude towards their own countries' ethnic Chinese populations and Chinese-owned businesses as they see the importance of attracting investment from the now economically strong China. This perception is evident when the then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad praised the participants of the 1996 Second Fujianese World Convention held in Kuala Lumpur for enhancing "the business and opportunities in Malaysia" (Liu 1998: 597). This perception is not unfounded as statistics from Phnom Penh have shown that more than half of its direct investments are made in joint ventures by locals with Khmer-Chinese as the preferred partners in the almost 70 per cent of investments coming from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. (National Institute of Statistics 2005: 327-328)

While the freedom for greater expression of one's culture is appreciated, some Southeast Asian Chinese are not keen to be seen as part of the "bamboo" network. Proud of their contributions and commitment towards their adopted countries, these individuals are caught in a paradox of patriotism. Some even feel that the progress they have made in assimilating into their adopted countries over many years are wasted as indigenous locals swarm to schools offering Chinese lessons in Chinatowns in cities such as Ho Chi Minh and Phnom Penh to enhance their employability in newly established corporations from China or Taiwan.

NEW WAVE OF CHINESE MIGRATION

The liberal emigration policy of the People's Republic of China has brought about a new wave of Chinese migration in recent decades. In the technologically connected world of today, these migrations are no longer a cause for concern about a brain drain from China. The vast economic opportunities available in China have also given the central government much confidence. Commentators and scholars have noted that with a wider range of migration destinations the new wave of new migrants consists of individuals with higher education and higher net worth (better skills and greater wealth), unlike the poor laborers and artisans in the earlier waves who mostly settled in Southeast Asia. Also, Chinatowns (especially in the United States) no longer play the exclusive role of absorbing these new migrants. However, it is also important to note that although the wider dispersal of the new migrant population to areas outside the traditional Chinatowns seems to hold true for some of the Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and the Philippines, and although they are also no longer just heading for the capital cities of Southeast Asian nations, these new migrants are still highly visible in the Chinatowns of cities with a low Chinese population such as Phnom Penh and Vientiane. The numbers of these new migrants quickly overtake those of the local Chinese or what remains of the long-time Chinese residents in Chinatowns.

There are still strict migration restrictions in many Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. However, it is not uncommon to see individuals from China selling merchandise, running makeshift eateries or even prostituting themselves in the Chinatowns of these countries. Many have arrived illegally or legally with a short-term tourist visa, revisiting these Southeast Asian cities after renewing their tourist visa, and travelling between China and these countries much like the earlier sojourners. Although their numbers are still small compared to the new migrants to many other Southeast Asian cities, they have definitely altered the landscape of the Chinatowns which they frequent. For many of these countries that already have an uneasy relationship with their ethnic Chinese populations, the presence of these new migrants or sojourners carries with it the hazard of bringing on an ethnic confrontation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Chinatowns in Southeast Asia have a long history. They used to be the centre of Chinese migrant activities during the colonial period. After the Southeast Asian countries attained independence, Chinatowns have been transformed. Since the late 20th century, Southeast Asian Chinatowns have faced new challenges of globalization. Some have declined and even disappeared while others have been revitalized. The Chinatowns of the colonial era are no longer in existence, but the shadows of the past are still around. Meanwhile, globalization has also left an imprint by drawing in new descendants of the dragon who have changed the dynamics of today's Chinatowns.

Bandar Seri Begawan
"Chinatown"


OLKIAH
HASANAL BOLKIAH
HASANAL BOLKIAH

In the early 1900s, most people lived in the water village or Kampung Ayer along the banks of the Brunei River. It was only in 1909 that Chinese shopkeepers began to settle ashore following the building of a new palace on land by Sultan Muhammad Jamalul Alam II and became some of the first inhabitants of Brunei Town.

Bandar Brunei (Brunei Town) was renamed Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) in 1970, after the reigning sultan's father who had abdicated his throne earlier. On 1 August 2007, the capital of the Sultanate of Brunei was expanded from 12.87 square kilometres to 100.36 square kilometres encompassing more kampungs and sub-districts. Although there is not a distinct Chinatown, businesses in the city centre are mostly controlled by the Chinese. The Chinese Water Village was once located off the coast along Jalan Pretty in the city centre. After a massive fire ravaged the area in 1991, the houses on stilts were never rebuilt. Opposite this village was the main commercial centre of BSB. Chinese shophouses can be seen along Jalan Roberts, Jalan MacArthur and Jalan Sultan in this area. A street away from Jalan Sultan, at the junction of Jalan Elizabeth Dua and Jalan Sungai Kianggeh, stands the important Tengyun Temple (腾云殿) built by Hokkiens from Jinmen (金门).

In 1996, the Yayasan Complex built on the refilled site of the earlier Chinese Water Village opened its doors to the Bruneians. One of the major tenants in the complex is the Hua Ho Department Store (华和百货商场), which is part of the supermarket chain owned by local entrepreneur Pehin Lau Gim Kok (丕显甲必丹刘锦国). In Brunei, *Pehin* is the highest title bestowed on a commoner for his contribution to the country. In Pehin Lau's case, it is for

◀ Located along Jalan Sungai Kianggeh, the Hassanal Bolkiah Cinema (栢嘉戏院) is the only cinema in the city centre that still holds screenings. In existence for over 50 years, the cinema was once the draw of BSB. It is now a shadow of its former self, much like the BSB city centre. At one point, the Chinese controlled 90 per cent of the businesses in the city centre.

his contribution to the economic prosperity of the sultanate. Despite the small size of the Chinese population, such decorations are not rare among those in this ethnic group. Chinese make up one-fifth of the population in Brunei with about 64 per cent (2002) living in the Brunei and Muara region. However, only about a quarter of the 37,600 Chinese in Brunei are citizens, most of them holding work permits.

Despite the economic success of many Chinese businesses, the city has been slow to recover from the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. The expansion of the city has led to de-centralization as many Chinese have settled in suburbs like Gadong. Legislation limiting the use of Chinese signboards was passed about 10 years ago; this despite a goodwill gesture by the sultan to allow the publication of a Chinese newspaper in 1999. There is also a single radio station, Pilihan FM95.9, that broadcasts five hours of Chinese programmes every day. The sultanate is aware of the eventual exhaustion of its oil and natural gas supplies which are the lynchpin of Brunei's wealth; its effort to diversify its economy has elicited enthusiastic support from the Chinese business community.

The historical Bruneian Chinese commercial centre has to reinvent itself as a vibrant commercial hub in preparation for a greater role in this era of globalization. Ironically it can do so by looking into the past when it prospered as an important market in Southeast Asia for the Ming junk trade.

► During the boom years from 1960s to 1980s, every unit in Kiaw Lian Building (侨联大厦) was taken up by businesses. Fifteen years ago business started to go downhill with the Asian Financial Crisis delivering a final blow. Five years back, Jonathan Kho (许和顺) took over two floors of the building and started the K. H. Soon Budget Rest House (和顺廉价旅社). Apart from the youth hostel, this is the cheapest place in BSB to look for a bed. As such, it is popular with sex workers from China and backpackers.