

Being Chinese and Being Political in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Recent studies of the Chinese in Southeast Asia have tended to deconstruct the hybrid, transnational, diasporic, and de-territorialized attributes of ‘Chineseness’, and theorize the politics thereof. In contrast, earlier scholarship on the politics of Southeast Asia’s ethnic Chinese raised many questions over the positions, rights, and roles associated with being ‘overseas Chinese’. Hence, many analyses of Chinese politics, from suppressed quietude to militant contestation, tended to ask, ‘Why and how was that politics Chinese?’ This article asks, instead, ‘Why and how were the Chinese political?’ within the larger rubric of Southeast Asian politics. It argues that posing the first question helped officialdom, academia and media to determine who among the ‘overseas Chinese’ were friends or foes. Asking the second question, it is argued, involves a boundary-crossing shift that sees the immigrant Chinese engaged in a full spectrum of Southeast Asian politics under the impacts of colonialism and nationalism, and capitalism and anti-capitalism. After exploring the shift in perspective from ‘being Chinese’ to ‘being political’, the article suggests that politics beyond China-oriented positions, state-bound stances, or preoccupations of ethnic identity, particularly in Malaysia transformed Southeast Asia to the point of ‘creating’ a ‘largely Chinese’ state out of Singapore.

KEYWORDS: Southeast Asia, Malaysia, Chinese politics, ethnic minorities, post-colonial transformation

INTRODUCTION

RECENT STUDIES OF THE Chinese in Southeast Asia have tended to focus on their identities, cultures and networks, frequently deconstructing the hybrid, transnational, diasporic, and de-territorialized attributes of ‘Chineseness’, and theorizing its politics thereof.¹ In contrast to earlier scholarship, less attention has been paid to the politics *qua* politics in which Southeast Asia’s ethnic Chinese – primarily the descendants of colonial-era immigrants – have been engaged to different degrees and outcomes. The issue of ‘Chinese politics’ centres around questions over the positions, status, rights, and roles associated with being Chinese. These questions – arising mostly in the late colonial period but requiring post-colonial resolutions and remaining significant even

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¹For an informative and critical survey of the recent literature, see Hau (2008).

today – have been entangled in national and regional conflicts. Most analyses of the political stances the Chinese took, from suppressed quietude at one end to militant contestation for state power at the other, were premised with the question, ‘Why and how was such politics *Chinese*?’ Yet one could just as well turn the question on its head and ask, ‘Why and how were the Chinese *political*?’

This paper suggests that there is a significant difference between the two questions. Answers to the first question helped officialdom, academia and media to determine who among the *huaqiao* (‘Overseas Chinese’) were, so to speak, ‘friends or foes’ in an era of nation- and state-building. As it were, that question required one to be ‘looking for Chinese-ness’ by creating instructive typologies of the Chinese in different countries and the divided political stances they took as ethnic minorities, themes which are explored in the first part of this paper. Asking the second question, however, involves a ‘boundary-crossing’ shift that sees the immigrant Chinese helping to transform Southeast Asian politics under the impacts of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism/anti-capitalism, during China’s “melancholy century of decline between the Opium War and the onset of the Sino-Japanese War” (Anderson 1998). The second part of this paper examines this shift toward ‘seeing politics’ involve the overseas Chinese no less than other ethnic groups in a whole range of politics across the region. That their involvement could occupy a full spectrum of politics beyond just narrow China-oriented or state-bound stances, or the confining preoccupations of ethnic identity, can be clearly seen from Malaysian politics that crucially transformed Southeast Asia by ‘creating’ a ‘largely Chinese’ state out of Singapore, the history of which is discussed. This paper is not, properly speaking, a comparative study but it uses comparisons and contrasts to illustrate the different or changing circumstances of Chinese politics. It only modestly suggests that continuing research into new forms of Chinese political involvement should balance answers as to why and how Chinese politics remains Chinese with explanations of why and how the Chinese remain political in contemporary Southeast Asia.

LOOKING FOR CHINESE-NESS

Out of an academic literature too vast (even in the English language alone) for a proper review, suffice here to construct a bare outline of what approximates a standard account of ‘the Chinese in Southeast Asia’. Over centuries, the diverse region of Southeast Asia, the crossroads of many trade flows and hub of commercial networks, attracted Chinese merchants and traders, among others. Some of the Chinese settled in the territories to which they had ventured, married indigenous women and established assimilated communities known by different local names, such as *peranakan* in Indonesia and *baba* in Malaya. The situation of the Chinese communities changed by the mid-nineteenth

century when millions of emigrants were pushed out of China by its economic decay and political upheaval and pulled by labour policies and economic opportunity into the European colonies in South-East Asia as well as Thailand. The rise in immigrant numbers² and changes to their community profiles, after female immigration was encouraged to relocate and more of the Chinese were local-born, occurred under tumultuous conditions that counted, among its world historical events, two revolutions in China, two world wars, a Great Depression, and near-global decolonization. Within their respective territorial boundaries maintained by the colonial powers and later bequeathed to the independent states, the Chinese communities were drawn into politics that exposed many socio-cultural divisions among themselves as a single group, and between them and the indigenous populations. The range of their political activities tended to be demarcated at one end by the degree of their attachment to China, and, at the other end, by the extent of their commitment to their country of domicile. The 1949 Chinese revolution terminated what was already dwindling emigration to Southeast Asia and denied what was already improbable repatriation for most of Southeast Asia's Chinese to China. At the same time, decolonization and the intensification of indigenous nationalism rendered far more political what were once economic, social, or cultural differences between the Chinese minorities and the indigenous majorities. Faced with rapid processes and intense stresses of nation-building, state formation and economic development, the Chinese had to come to terms not only with the claims of 'others' and state curbs on their economically superior positions, but also the feasibility of retaining their cultural distinctiveness. From these experiences emerged varieties of Chinese politics that grappled with questions about Chinese loyalties towards two homelands, as it were, and the shades of cultural autonomy, integration or assimilation that they could secure or had to accept. All this created a milieu conducive to a politics of identity that associated stable Chinese identities with separate political dilemmas and commitments.

Thus, Wang Gungwu, preeminent historian of the overseas Chinese, could write that "the Chinese throughout Southeast Asia have at all times manifested three distinctive political groupings based on their commitments to politics in China, to the politics of the respective overseas communities, and to local politics, whether indigenous, colonial or nationalist" (Wang 1970: 4). In Malaya, Wang's three groups were:

1. *Group A*, characterized by its links to China and its identification with the "destiny of China," was the "most obviously political" and yet the "most ineffective and frustrated."

²According to Reid (2010: 58) "a conventional nationalist view...that large and unassimilable Chinese minorities were foisted on Southeast Asia under colonial influence after 1870" was mistaken; the Chinese were "as large a proportion of the Southeast Asian population in the early 1800s as under colonial domination in the early 1900s, and considerably more influential."

2. *Group B*, comprising the “most hard-headed and realistic majority” and the “most modest in their aims,” was “more concerned with the low-posture and indirect politics of trade and community associations” and content to “calculate matters of influence and power within [established] hierarchies,” and;
3. *Group C*, a small mixed group “often uncertain of itself because it [was] uncertain of its own identity,” had members ranging from “Babas, British Straits Chinese and Malayan nationalists to others with motives of different degrees of dubiousness”³ (Wang 1970: 4–5).

Each group’s political inclinations were also shown by their stances *vis-à-vis* “Malay and Anglo-Malay elites and the goals of Malayan or Malaysian nationalism.” *Group A* dismissed Malay and other ethnic politics as irrelevant to their “political life” while *Group B* paid “some attention” when it affected their interests. Only *Group C* (or a small part of it) was informed about “Malay political power” and the “dynamics of contemporary nationalism” (Wang 1970: 5). Wang’s study captured the pressing personal questions that Malayan Chinese faced at a difficult conjuncture. The original aspirations of some (namely, the sojourner’s return to China) and certainties for others (a settled life as subjects of the British Empire) had been overturned by major historical events, while the prospects for all were being shaped by internal conflicts, some of them ethnic.

For the Chinese in Indonesia, Charles Coppel (1976) discerned six different patterns or styles of political activity that were seen over the periods of Dutch rule, Japanese military occupation, Sukarno’s Guided Democracy, and Suharto’s New Order. Coppel associated these patterns with particular groups thus:

1. the *traditional officers* had “wealth, business connections and acquaintance with Dutch officials” and were the “instruments of Dutch administration but were not properly part of it” but merely “servants of it – and servants without pay at that”; even so their role was partly political, not purely administrative (Coppel 1976: 23)
2. the *nationalists* who held that “Chinese in the Indies were aliens, whatever Dutch law might proclaim,” and engaged in pre-war anti-Japanese campaigns, organizing boycotts of Japanese goods and raising funds and volunteer forces for China (Coppel 1976: 27–28).
3. the *integrationists* were proud of being Chinese and had a sense of distinct communal interests but “unlike the nationalists ... were Indies-oriented and a part of Indies politics” (Coppel 1976: 31).
4. the *assimilationists*, “anti-communal, rejecting integrationist politics and urging socio-cultural assimilation,” received little support from pre-war

³One of the pre-independence multiethnic parties in Penang, Malaya, was the Radical Party. Its goal was not ‘extreme’: it wanted Malaysians to decide if they belonged to Malaya – the *root*, hence radical, question.

- Indonesian nationalist leaders whose nationalism was “not merely political but also cultural and often racial” (Coppel 1976: 36).
5. the *assimilated*, themselves “far from assimilated in the broader socio-cultural sense,” were “the occasional Chinese” who joined Indonesian political parties that were reluctant to accept them, while most Chinese would not join them (Coppel 1976: 37), and
 6. the *cukong* (Chinese businessmen) whose close contact with the New Order Indonesian power-holders permitted them occasional and informal political influence when the organizational network of the Chinese community had been destroyed and formal politics was closed to the Chinese (Coppel 1976: 65).

Coppel’s finely wrought distinctions among his six patterns were sensitive to overlaps, mobility, replication (chiefly of the traditional officer’s pattern) and, crucially, the intra-communal competition that had emerged (largely between integrationists and assimilationists). By the time Coppel’s essay appeared, Chinese politics in Indonesia had been reduced to its *cukong* style that would persist for the next three decades.

Wang’s three-group division and Coppel’s six-pattern categorization, which developed political types out of ethno-cultural identities,⁴ laid out a template for analysing Chinese politics in Southeast Asia. Wang (1991) extended his approach to divide Chinese migrants into different social types. Twenty-five years after Wang’s essay, Tan Liok Ee adapted it for an illuminating study of ‘descent and identity’ incarnate in three of Malaya’s most prominent Chinese figures – Tan Cheng Lock, Tan Kah Kee and Lim Lian Geok (Tan 1995). Even when identities were not assumed to be fixed and stable, a study of diaspora as “...a signifier of multiplicity, fluidity, wildness, hybridity, the dislocations of modernity, or the decentered textures of postmodernity and postcolonialism” (McKeown 1999: 308), acknowledged that its subdivision of the ‘Chinese diaspora’ into diasporic labour, diasporic networks, diasporic nationalism, and diasporic culture was “...in many ways a reformulation of the division of Chinese migration into the trader, coolie, sojourner, and descent patterns by Wang Gungwu” (McKeown 1999: 312). These were exemplary studies that highlighted what made Chinese politics *Chinese* within each of the states of Southeast Asia. However, if the subject of Chinese politics is to be approached from a regional perspective, perhaps the question has to be turned on its head: what made the Chinese *political* in the first place?

SEEING POLITICS

Maurice Freedman, another pioneer in the study of Southeast Asia’s Chinese, once remarked that, “We cannot fully comprehend a minority unless we know

⁴Noting Wang’s “similar kind of exercise,” Coppel (1976: 19–20) clarified that the former’s premise – “that the Chinese do want to remain culturally distinguishable” – did not hold for the Indonesian Chinese.

the society into which it fits.”⁵ Freedman’s remark, referring to the Chinese in Thailand, was more widely applicable: to comprehend Chinese politics in Southeast Asia, we need to know the region and how the Chinese ‘fit in’.

Although many things have happened in Southeast Asia since ‘Chinese politics’ acquired any significance, two dominant processes left deep and lasting impacts on the region, radically transforming its politics, economies and societies. These processes were colonialism and capitalism. Their history, development and impact are so well studied that only brief and highly filtered references are needed here. Colonialism created out of subdued or otherwise expropriated territories of the region the appendages of Western empires – American Philippines, British Burma, Borneo and Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and French Indochina. The colonial state implanted institutions of rule that altered or supplanted local and indigenous structures and balances of power. Capitalism transformed the economic systems, in each territory reordering economic sectors, reconfiguring trade and commercial circuits, and restructuring the social relations of production. Both processes were accompanied by social and cultural changes in the ethnic composition of the population, cultural identities, ethnic relations, relations between town and country, systems of education, and so on.

Colonial and capitalist consolidation was not unchallenged: there were many forms of resistance to colonial subjugation and capitalist penetration. However, to put it tersely, the respective antitheses of those two dominant processes were nationalism, manifest to different intensities, and anti-capitalism, most threateningly expressed in the form of twentieth century communism. Across the region, nationalist responses to colonial rule ranged from mild calls for gradual reform and self-rule to outright insurrection for full independence. The communist challenge to capitalism spread from localized labour struggles and peasant mobilization to nation-wide insurgency. Thus, colonialism and capitalism *and* nationalism and communism brought forth a host of antagonists whose aspirations and expectations, grievances and injuries, worldviews and ideologies, opposition and confrontation as well as compromises and alliances, were the very stuff of politics in Southeast Asia (as it was for other regions of the world that were colonized and incorporated into the world capitalist system). In short, many kinds of conservative and radical forces attended the re-making of the Southeast Asian region on a scale not encountered before, and within contexts – of intra-regional competition, inter-imperialist wars, external revolutions, new forms of mobilization, and emerging centres of industrial and political power, etc. – that had not hitherto been imagined.

Today, a decade into the twenty-first century, the outcomes of Southeast Asia’s epochal processes and transformation have clarified (although prospects

⁵The quote continues, “and this fact is of special importance in Thailand, where the line between Thai and Chinese has tended to sway with contrary movements of encouragement and repression, attraction and repulsion” (Freedman 1958: 301).

for the long term are a different matter, and beyond speculation here). Colonialism was defeated,⁶ and nationalism succeeded to varying degrees and forms. So was communism defeated,⁷ and capitalism extended and deepened. More than that, nationalism and capitalism have co-existed and collaborated to produce nationalist-capitalist projects⁸ that reached their height in the heyday of the ‘East Asian miracle’. There was not a monolithic character to the regimes that superintended these projects of development but they shared the characteristics of the authoritarian rule and dirigiste tendencies of the ‘East Asian model of capitalism’.

If this was Southeast Asia, where and how did the Chinese and their politics fit in? The short and not flippant answer is: they were everywhere.

Colonialism and capitalism were inextricably linked by the time of the influx of Chinese immigrants. For mid-nineteenth century Southeast Asia “of relatively sparse population, predominantly subsistence-oriented agriculture, and considerably limited domestic capital formation” (Sidel 2008: 130), it has been observed:

“Immigrants from densely populated and intensively commercialized southern China were far better placed than their local counterparts or forced earlier to assume leading roles in the intertwined processes of agricultural commercialization and urban growth, as wage labourers, compradors, commodity processors, and revenue farmers for the colonial states in the region.” (Sidel 2008: 130)

Indeed, Southeast Asia’s ‘modern’ development being “largely the story of the expansion of capitalism...[its Chinese served as the]...agents and translators of the terms by which the new system of production and exchange [was] organized” (Bardsley 2003: 41) – the “distinguishing feature” of Southeast Asia’s colonial incorporation into the world capitalist economy (Sidel 2008: 129–130). Even if they were the accidental “intermediaries between local societies, and larger markets” the Chinese were dealt the task of “reconciling capitalist and non-capitalist norms” (Bardsley 2003: 41). They bore the task so well that one of four definitive regional conditions for the rise of Southeast Asian capitalism at the end of the twentieth century was the concentration of ethnic Chinese “energies and ambitions in the private sphere” (Anderson 1998: 303–304), by a combination of chance, volition and compulsion.

Yet the famed Chinese economic dynamism was as much a bane for those in power who wanted to use *and* control it as it was for those of the indigenous population who were frustrated or overwhelmed by it. For example, royal and

⁶Including Indonesia’s colonization of East Timor from 1975 to 1999

⁷All the clearer in China and Vietnam where ‘communist’ regimes oversee capitalist economies.

⁸For a discussion of a national-capitalist project as a “nationalist project driven by capitalist impulses, or a capitalist project imbued with nationalist aspirations” in Malaysian political economy, see Khoo (2003: 5–7).

military regimes alike in Thailand “controlled and contained the immigrant Chinese and their Thai-born descendants politically while making use of their labour and entrepreneurship to develop Thai capitalism” (Kasian 2009: 263).⁹ In the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya, occupying a position below European companies and an indigenous aristocracy turned into a dependent native elite, Chinese business was ubiquitous in its shopkeeper’s form and, thereby, exposed. Dutch-dominated modern corporate capitalism stunted the rise of a ‘normal’ native middle class in early twentieth century Java, but the blame fell on the Chinese who fulfilled “...only some of the functions of the middle class, as shopkeepers and traders between the powerful, Dutch-dominated, corporate capitalist sector and the native agrarian classes” (Shiraishi 1997: 190). Hence, in Malaya, as a staunch opponent of ‘Chinese economic hegemony’ once derided, the Malays habitually called a shop *kedai Cina* (Chinese shop) “as if the shop had to be Chinese” (Khoo 1995: 102). Even a political economist who tried to dispel the ‘myth’ of Chinese economic domination of Malaya was moved to caution that European capital was a ‘vague entity’ for the Malays – since “Europeans very rarely have entered into exploiter-exploited relations with Malays as they have with Indian [rubber] tappers and Chinese workers” (Puthuchery 1962), while Chinese traders appeared as “the exploiters, the people who take away a large part of their meagre produce, who possess comparative wealth in the midst of their poverty” (Puthuchery 1962).

Where indigenous nationalism was dominant but native capitalism lagging – Indonesia, Malaya,¹⁰ Philippines, South Vietnam, and Thailand – the state used laws and bureaucratic measures to check ‘Chinese economic domination’. Thailand enacted laws in the 1950s to bar ethnic Chinese from specified industries and occupations, and to compel them to transfer equity and share control in existing businesses with indigenous partners (Thomson 1993: 404). Indonesia’s ministerial rules excluded alien Chinese companies from importing large categories of goods, establishing new banks, insurance companies, and most types of factories, and owning rice mills and certain types of transport agencies while state agencies used their control of credit, licenses, and foreign exchange to favour indigenous Indonesians over non-indigenous citizens (Skinner 1959: 141). In the Philippines, “new nationalist laws and policies” passed in 1946 restricted retail trade (“the classic Chinese field”), basic food-grain business and even professions to citizens (Wickberg 1997: 168). South Vietnam had a 1956 decree barring Chinese nationals from eleven important categories of occupations but this measure so disrupted the Vietnamese economy that the government retreated from its enforcement (Skinner 1959: 141).

⁹This might be the place to clarify that Thailand also belongs to this narrative, its non-colonized status notwithstanding.

¹⁰Since 1970, Malaysia has been known for the most far-reaching interventionism to overturn this condition. In the first decade of Malaya’s independence, the state was the most tolerant of Chinese capital.

These putative forms of state interventionism were sometimes accompanied by pressures on the Chinese to ‘assimilate’ culturally as if economic inequalities could be levelled by manipulating identities.¹¹ But the problem was structural: built for “subordinate integration into the world economy” the colonial economy was “imperial rather than national [and] not designed to articulate a national polity” (Williamson 2002: 404). When national polities had to be fashioned following decolonization, their structures reflected varying balances of power among indigenous elites, foreign capital, and domiciled Chinese capital. For instance, by the early 1950s, state restrictions had compelled Chinese business to cooperate with the Thai ruling class whose prime objectives were to use “bureaucratic-business partnerships...to broaden the economic role of the ruling elite, to expand indigenous entrepreneurship, and to continue the vitality of the economy” (Thomson 1993: 400–401). Herein lay a Chinese political role that variously evolved into the attenuated Indonesian *cukong* influence suggested by Coppel (1976), or the substantial Malaysian Chinese Association’s power-sharing arrangement in all the regimes that have ruled Malaysia since 1957 (even after 1970 when the New Economic Policy was promulgated to restructure Malaysian political economy).

The Chinese link to capitalism, though, was not confined to being “middlemen, moneylenders, and revenue farmers” at the end of the nineteenth century (Sidel 2008: 130), and entrepreneurs, shopkeepers and traders at later points. Capitalism had labour which opened a different way to politics. A Chinese emigrant of that period was less likely to be a capitalist than a fresh recruit for Southeast Asia’s expanding working classes.¹² In fact, the history of Southeast Asia’s development can also be cast in terms of the procurement, deployment and control of Chinese labour¹³ – in free or bonded forms – by the state, labour agents and employers, for mines, plantations, urban services, and public works. The coolie trade which stood behind the ‘credit-ticket’ system was primarily controlled by British, German, Dutch, American, Spanish and Portuguese “foreign immigrant agencies” (Yen 2000: 2). Until they were suppressed in 1899, the famed Chinese secret societies in the Straits Settlements and the Malay states controlled Chinese labour and operated as the “*de facto* power structure among the Chinese” (Yen 2000: 5). State polices which reserved certain sectors (such as agriculture) for the indigenous population and labour market forces that drew immigrants into expanding sectors effectively ensured that a “part of a class structure...crystallized along ethnic lines” (Wheelwright 1965: 110). By 1940, Thailand already had an ethnic division of labour,

¹¹For examples in Indonesia under Suharto’s New Order, see Heryanto (1998: 98–99); for Thailand in 1938, see Kasian (2001: 41).

¹²In 1931 Chinese laborers formed “63 per cent of economically occupied population in the Malay States [while the] business class constituted no more than 1.5 per cent” (Leong 2000: 191)

¹³Naturally, not only Chinese labour, but, say, Indian labour as well, especially in Burma and Malaya.

entrepreneurship, and ownership of capital within which the Chinese constituted a commercial class, or labourers, mostly in the tertiary sector (Thomson 1993: 400). In Malaysia, this ethnic division of labour was more politically charged than the mere fact of a plural society because indigenous labour tended to remain in subsistence agriculture or low-paying rural occupations with few prospects for upward mobility. In contrast, while enduring harsh exploitation and poor working conditions, immigrant labour could take advantage of opportunities to improve its lot within the interstices of the modern economy.

In good times, the flow of immigrants met the labour demands of states and employers. In bad times, the worst being periods of sharp commodity price declines, especially during the Depression years, some labour was repatriated. However, that way of managing the labour market was ineffective given the stabilising domicile of the Chinese communities. By the interwar years, despite the usual 'identity handicaps' of linguistic differences, clan- or community-based restraints, and state controls, Chinese labour had mobilized in trade unions and labour movements (Kaur 2004: 150–151). The levels, tenor and targets of labour activities were influenced by factors that can only be very simply listed here: prevailing economic conditions, terms of employment, the impact of the Depression, employers' attitudes during economic recovery, state restrictions, and the presence of political organisers. In British Malaya during the post-Depression recovery, "labour unrest...began with the craft workers in the towns, followed by building and factory labourers in Singapore and Johore, and culminating with the factory, mining, and estate labourers in Selangor" (Leong 2000: 171). Much of the labour action was "spontaneous reaction to rising prices, increasing production, and decreasing unemployment, static wages that lagged behind the price increases, and the cumulative effects of the Depression period on the labourers' standard of living" (Leong 2000: 172). Thus, in the years approaching the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia, Chinese labour had had considerable experience organising to protect or advance its interests, or to support wider political campaigns. This experience was carried into the post-World War Two period as labour disputes, nationalist mobilization and radical organization often merged. Even in Thailand, Japan's subordinate wartime ally, ethnic Chinese activists were organizing trade unions in the 1940s (Kasian 2001: 57) so that a few years later the regime regarded the expanding trade union movement to be dangerous for being "...communist, Chinese, and pro-Pridi" (Kasian 2001: 157). Cold War calculations would later let states tolerate non-political trade unions. Before that, colonialism and capitalism had produced an important conjunction that was noted in a postwar survey of labour conditions and movement:

"Nowhere in [Southeast Asia] has a labour movement developed without political implications and inspiration. Nationalism, in the embrace of socialism or communism, has been its guiding and dominating force.

Political leaders have worked upon labourers as the only have-not group in an area where the majority of the inhabitants are cultivators who possess, or aspire to possess, their own land.” (Thompson 1947: 14)¹⁴

Communism was a third and probably the most threatening way for many Chinese to be political. The establishment of communist parties in Southeast Asia went in tandem with the growth of the ranks of labour, triggering warnings by colonial authorities of the infiltration of communist agitators among workers. By the late 1930s, communist parties in Southeast Asia had had some success mobilising labour, sometimes in dramatic, sometimes in disastrous tests of strength against colonial state power. The communists of that era had anti-imperialist objectives and strategies as well, targeting Western colonialism and Japanese imperialism. One turning point came with China’s invasion by Japan after 1937. Anti-Japan trade boycotts, for example, had begun prior to this, but the invasion intensified the campaigns of the Southeast Asian Chinese communities. As a result of the boycott of Japanese goods, for instance, Malaya and Singapore’s import of Japanese goods declined by 67.9 per cent, from 71.3 million yen in 1937 to 22.9 million yen in 1938, and 10 million yen in 1941, while Japanese trade with the Philippines fell from 60.3 million yen in 1937 to 13.3 million in 1941 (Yen 2002: 380). These were community-driven, not class-based, campaigns led by different Chinese leaders¹⁵ and groups; but among them were communists. A second turning point was the swift Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia and military collapse of the colonial powers. Once the wars in China, Europe and the Pacific converged into a world war, nationalism *and* communism strengthened their connections. During the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia, communist parties organized and led underground and guerrilla resistance – just as communist parties led partisan forces in German – and Italian – occupied Europe. No doubt, some indigenous nationalist groups collaborated with the Japanese military with hopes of advancing their own nationalist goals. But there was not any ethnic aberration that led Chinese to active involvement in communist-led resistance: they, including non- or anti-communists, were simply more deeply involved for having to bear the brunt of the invasions of China and Southeast Asia. Similarly, Chinese were involved in the anti-colonial movements, “usually under the direct leadership, domination or strong influence of communist or radical leftist parties” (Kasian 2001: 67), that set Southeast Asia afire with insurrections and wars of independence when the Western powers reclaimed their colonies after the war. In the mid-1970s, young Sino Thais joined the unpredicted surge in Thai communism that arose from the country’s ‘non-

¹⁴Again, not just Chinese labour, nationalism or communism was involved; see Thompson (1947: 52–53) on Indian labour militancy in Burma.

¹⁵See Yong (1987) for a biography of the Singapore-based Tan Kah Kee, the icon of *huaqiao* patriotism. Capitalist and philanthropist, Tan was not a communist but made common cause with the communists in China even after the 1949 revolution. Also see Tan (1995).

Chinese' politics. Some Chinese, as Wang said of a 'small group' within his Group C Malayan Chinese, became radical "not because they [were] Chinese...[but]... because the problems of the adopted countries seem[ed] to require radical solutions" (Wang 1981: 267).

Any depiction of a critical conjunction of anti-colonialism and communism alone would be incomplete. An opposing conjunction of nationalism, capitalism and anti-communism also emerged as Southeast Asia was turned into one of the most violent theatres of the Cold War. Consequently, rival Chinese fought one another on every front: capital versus labour; associations of commerce against trade unions; conservatives against radicals; anti-communists against communists; police and military against militants; 'group' against 'group', and assimilationists against integrationists; and an array of pro-regime political parties against anti-regime parties. Many conflicts were not conducted in clear class terms or along definite ideological directions but were generated by processes and logics of 'nation-building' and state formation. Even in the "current deadly political divide" in Thailand, there are "*lookjin* [Thai-born Chinese] protagonists on both sides' (Kasian 2009: 279). Reasons of the state ensured that some conflicts would extend beyond national boundaries. To take a notable instance, had Sukarno's declaration of Confrontation in opposition to the formation of Malaysia led to outright war between the two nations, 'Indonesian Chinese' and 'Malaysian Chinese' would have been mobilized to fight each other. Being Chinese on a politically 'inert' or 'correct' side did not resolve one's problems satisfactorily: many of Southeast Asia's anti-communist states intensified their controls over their Chinese – capital *and* labour *and* communism *and* culture. In Indonesia, the members and supporters of the destroyed communist party were overwhelmingly *pribumi* (indigenous Indonesian), not Chinese. Yet, Suharto's regime maintained a "ghettoization of citizen-Chinese – political exclusion and economic privilege" (Anderson 1983: 490). This policy did not have "any obvious 'national' interest...[but made]...excellent sense" politically (Anderson 1983: 490): the state increased its economic resources without ceding political power, and used the 'pariah' Chinese to deflect popular anti-foreign sentiments from the multinational corporations. In Thailand, different regimes manipulated "an ethno-ideology of Thainess" (Kasian 2009: 263), to control and contain the Chinese politically and assimilate them culturally while using their labour and entrepreneurship to develop Thai capitalism. Hence, the regulation of Chinese identity, language and culture – *Chinese-ness*, in a word – became "part of a politics of ethnicity by which states, communities, and individuals attempt to construct or inculcate national and ethnic identities for different purposes and projects and within contexts of often asymmetrical power relations" (Hau 2008: 20). All that was part of the radically transforming dynamics of colonialism and capitalism, and the opposition to them, that made the Chinese *political*.

FULL SPECTRUM IN MALAYSIA

So long as identity – *Chinese-ness* – was used to frame Chinese politics, the situation in Malaysia was unusual. Roughly equal in number to those of Indonesia and Thailand, Malaysia's Chinese formed a large proportion of its postwar population which (together with a substantial non-indigenous Indian population) made systematic cultural assimilation impracticable.¹⁶ Beyond that, it left a distinctive impact on the politics of Malaysia:

“The situation of the Chinese in Malaysia, even during times of ebbing political fortunes, differs fundamentally from the experience of other Chinese minority communities in South-East Asia. Caught between the repression of colonialism and the forces of local nationalism, these smaller and more vulnerable Chinese minorities were forced to search for less obtrusive public roles.” (Lee and Heng 2000: 195)

Effectively the proportionally large size of the Chinese population in Malaysia – Malaya and Singapore up to 1963, then Malaysia, merging Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak in 1963, and finally Malaysia without Singapore, as well as a separate, independent Singapore in 1965 – made Malaysia the site of a full spectrum of Chinese involvement in Southeast Asia's politics. In other words, Malaysia's ‘Chinese politics’ has not been just ethnic or minority politics confined to a national setting but part of a regional matrix of political struggles and transformation.

The record of Chinese politics in Malaysia is deep and extensive. Its full trajectory from colonial times to the present has been variously charted by historical survey (Lee and Heng 2000), the stances of prominent groups (Wang 1970), the careers of outstanding personalities (Tan 1995; Vasil 1987), salient issues such as the economy (Gale 1985) or education (Tan 1997), the fortunes of political parties (Heng 1988; Loh 1982; Vasil 1987; von Vorys 1975), and so on. However one tracks it, the trajectory will reveal not a marginal but a central contribution of the Chinese to the construction of the present political system.

There was Chinese participation in administration and government throughout different periods. As the British replaced the pre-colonial systems of rule in the Malay States by truncating the power of the Malay rulers and establishing colonial institutions, influential merchants and English-educated Chinese became members of Advisory Boards, Legislative Councils, and State Councils, albeit playing subordinate roles in colonial administration (Lee and Heng 2000: 194). When the first pre-independence elections were tried out in different settings, Chinese politicians contested, sometimes via multi-ethnic parties, but most critically via the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). The MCA joined the

¹⁶To their credit, the Malay elites did not try to assimilate the non-Malays, especially the Chinese.

Malay party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), to form the Alliance, the coalition that won the election of 1955 to lead Malaya to independence two years later. From then the Alliance ruled until 1969, when its losses in the May general election followed by ethnic violence in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, led to a reconstitution of the political system in which Malay political power was strengthened. The MCA had a strong role in the Alliance government, being typically responsible for economic and fiscal management. When the ruling coalition co-opted some of the opposition parties before the 1974 election, the Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan) helped to found a new, enlarged coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN, or 'National Front'). Gerakan was formed of several former MCA leaders, former oppositionists and trade unionists. But over the years, Gerakan increasingly acquired the character of a Chinese-based party. Its principal role was to lead the government in the Chinese-majority state of Penang which became Malaysia's centre of foreign investment-led export-oriented industrialization. Other parties in Sarawak and Sabah that had considerable ethnic Chinese leadership likewise joined the BN but their influence was less than that of the MCA or Gerakan. Chinese associations of industry and commerce have generally supported the ruling coalition since 1957. On occasion, they have been critical of particular policies or their implementation, especially of excessive state interventions, justified by the New Economic Policy (NEP), to create a Malay capitalist class by the use of ethnically determined economic restructuring quotas and targets. Even now, Chinese business, through its links to many types of Chinese community associations, can exert considerable political influence by supporting the BN earnestly or being indifferent to its electoral performance. Chinese capital was most supportive of the regime during the first decade of independence, a period of limited state economic intervention, and again in the 1990s when the NEP's strictures on non-Malay interests were considerably relaxed through privatization and deregulation.

On the other side of the political system, Chinese-majority opposition parties have been regularly active. When Gerakan won the state of Penang in 1969, it was an opposition party. However, the party split a few years later over the issue of joining BN: Gerakan's rump, formed of mostly the ex-MCA leaders, joined BN, while the breakaway leaders continued their opposition politics via other parties. One party that has been in opposition since 1964, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), is nominally and ideologically 'multi-ethnic' but in practice it has been the rallying point of ethnic Chinese voters' disenchantment with the different regimes. Subjected to harassment by the regime, DAP was regularly represented in Parliament, though with fluctuating fortunes. In 2008, however, DAP defeated the Gerakan-led government in Penang, and now governs the state in a second coalition of opposition parties. An important feature of 'Chinese' opposition politics has been the close cooperation of the opposition parties with the Chinese community organisations. Of the latter, the strongest

and most vocally representative of a politics of Chinese culture is the Chinese-language education movement best known by its name of Dongjiaozhong. Up to the general election of 1959, Dongjiaozhong supported the Alliance on the basis of policy compromises in education and language policies that have left Malaysia as the only country outside China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, to have a system of Chinese-language schools, part of which belongs with the national school system.¹⁷ However, in the 1960s, the relations between Dongjiaozhong and UMNO deteriorated into mistrust and hostility – over policies affecting the position of Chinese language and the Chinese schools – that remain to this day (Collins 2006; Kua 1985). Hence, Chinese politics – ‘pro-government’ and ‘pro-opposition’ – was integral to the construction and evolution of Malaysia’s political system whose ‘ethnicized’ forms of representation and power-sharing were not replicated elsewhere.¹⁸ It is a measure of the significance of Chinese politics that every successful and failed attempt to build a political coalition in Malaysia has had an important Chinese component party. However, Chinese influence over the formulation of national policies was stronger before than after 1969.

What lay beyond the pale of mainstream politics was the strong Chinese presence in radical struggles against colonialism and capitalism. And the strongest presence was organized within the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). Founded in 1930, the CPM rose to prominence during the Japanese Occupation by organizing anti-Japanese activities, for a while with British cooperation. The CPM was not the only Chinese-majority group of partisans to fight the Japanese military, but the CPM, with its majority Chinese leadership, membership and support networks, organised the best known partisan movement, the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army. Between 1945 and 1948, the CPM tried to stake out a strategic position in the making of a postwar and hoped-for postcolonial state. But its scope of political activity was increasingly reduced by British strictures on CPM-mobilized labour movements and campaigns. In 1948, the CPM launched an insurrection, resorting to jungle-based guerrilla warfare. After fluctuating fortunes for both antagonists, the CPM was essentially defeated militarily by the early 1950s although the war – the ‘Emergency’ – was not officially declared ‘over’ until 1960. Before it took to guerrilla warfare, the CPM had used its strength in a radical labour movement to engage the state in widening political conflicts until the unions were suppressed before the Emergency began. Many of those ‘Chinese’ trade unions had been active during the interwar

¹⁷In 1995, more than 600,000 children, or about 21 per cent of the total student enrolment, attended state-supported Chinese primary schools (Tan 1997: 1).

¹⁸At the 1995 general election, 57 Chinese MPs were elected out of a total of 192. Around that time, six Cabinet Ministers, one Chief Minister, two Deputy Chief Ministers, and numerous representatives serving in state legislative and executive committees were Chinese (Lee and Heng 2000: 216).

years in British Malaya (including Singapore).¹⁹ After 1957, unions operating where Chinese labour was predominant, always suspected of having links to the CPM, regularly suffered state harassment by legislative, bureaucratic and police measures. By the end of the 1960s, the unions had been reduced to mere shells of their previous selves from which condition they never recovered. In the 1960s, one other radical adversary of the state was also defeated. This was the Labour Party which had a multi-ethnic leadership but predominantly Chinese membership. The original Labour Party leaders were mostly radical ‘Labourites’ with no connection to the CPM. However, the Labour Party was steadily squeezed out of existence by infiltration – by CPM activists resorting to ‘open front’ mobilization, and the Special Branch of the police. With many of its leaders and activists detained without trial under the Internal Security Act, the Labour Party went defunct just before the 1969 election.

Yet that final collapse of a ‘Chinese’ challenge to colonialism and capitalism did not come before the rise and suppression of the radical trade unions and student movements in the heavily Chinese-majority island of Singapore, one of three Straits Settlements (the others being Penang and Malacca) governed as part of British Malaya. In the approach to Malaya’s independence, however, Singapore was excluded from the Federation of Malaya for several reasons – the British retention of Singapore as a military base, the UMNO leaders’ reluctance to have Singapore tilt the ethnic balance against the Malays, and the presence of a strong leftwing movement. From the mid- to late 1950s, radical trade unions helped to make and unmake the ‘self-rule’ governments in Singapore before the People’s Action Party (PAP) regime broke their power by sweeping arbitrary arrests of their leaders and police harassment just before and just after Singapore ‘merged’ with Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak in forming Malaysia (Wade 2010). The politics of Singapore was paradoxically the most Chinese and the least Chinese, precisely because the Chinese formed an overwhelming majority in population, the economy and all areas of public life. A virtually ‘Chinese’ regime suppressed the virtually ‘Chinese’ unions and students. Yet, on both sides of the divide were prominent Indian, Malay and ‘Other’ nationalists, unionists and socialists. Here, the futility of using Chinese-ness to explain the politics was clear when some researchers insisted on dividing the antagonists between ‘Chinese-educated radicals’ and ‘English-educated moderates’. They overlooked that the PAP was first brought to power by the ‘Chinese-educated’ masses before a split in the party led the ‘English-educated’ rump to manoeuvre itself into power.²⁰

¹⁹See Leong (2000: 174–176) for an account of how “communist influence was significantly enhanced by...the formation of the Anti-Japanese National Salvation Movement in July 1937 when Chinese labour, especially in the urban centers, became more conscious through the formation of relief fund associations which eventually combined in them the function of trade unionism...[and]...the recurrence of economic recession in 1938 which saw many of the concessions won by the labourers in the 1937 strikes eroded by the employers.”

²⁰Even this division has to be qualified since a large number of the leaders who left PAP and were later detained were ‘English-educated’ but not all ethnic Chinese.

For the PAP, and the British, Malayan, and Australian governments who evaluated Singapore's prospects through Cold War lenses, crushing the leftwing was a precondition for Singapore's "merger" (Wade 2010). That was achieved via the police's 'Operation Cold Store' in February 1963, and the Federation of Malaysia came into being in September. During the two years of "merger," PAP's relations with the Alliance steadily deteriorated: the UMNO leadership would not tolerate the 'Chinese' ambitions of PAP and Lee Kuan Yew. At one point in raucous parliamentary debates, Mahathir Mohamad of UMNO, whom Lee Kuan Yew branded a 'Malay ultra', denounced the PAP for being "pro-Chinese" and "communist-orientated" and displaying the "most rabid form of communalism" (Khoo 1995: 19). In one of those rare non-violent breakups of nation-states, Singapore 'separated' from Malaysia and became an independent state in August 1965.

With that, Chinese politics in Malaysia had covered a full spectrum from indifferent participation to militant confrontation to power-sharing in government and to the creation of a new state. It was ironic that Chinese politics had culminated, so to speak, in an island 'settler state' the 'Chinese-dominated, English-educated' regime of which has vacillated between shaping a pronounced or a subdued Chinese cultural identity (Chua 2009).²¹ Beyond Malaysia's spatial and constitutional boundaries, however, Singapore's emergence had remade Southeast Asia in geopolitical terms.

CHINESE BURDENS

The Chinese immigrants who entered Southeast Asia were scripted the roles of merchants and coolies serving colonialism and capitalism. They and their descendants who have remained in the region played those parts to near perfection, realising many Chinese and non-Chinese dreams of profiting by the 'Chinese' qualities of industry, endurance, thrift and "sophistication in the handling of money."²² However, immersed in Southeast Asia's profound transformation, some Chinese also set themselves the task of opposing colonialism and

²¹Along the way, the regime closed the community-supported system of Chinese schools, as well as Southeast Asia's only Chinese-language university – Nanyang University – by merging the latter with the English-language National University of Singapore. See Chua (2009) for a discussion of the problems that 'Chineseness' has set for the PAP regime.

²²In Southeast Asia, Freedman (1959: 64–65) wrote, "the will and ability of Chinese to work hard could not have been the sufficient cause of their progress in the amassing of riches. They accumulated wealth because, in comparison with the people among whom they came to live, they were highly sophisticated in the handling of money. At the outset they knew not only how to work themselves but how to make their money work." A rather different interpretation argued that those "values of mercantile culture, not exclusive to Confucianism." (Cheah 2006: 126) did not constitute a "preexisting Chinese ethos that engenders mercantile capitalism" (Cheah 2006: 130), and that Chinese commerce was mercantile capitalism that became 'Chinese' by "the historical conflation of the overseas Chinese with mercantile capital" (Cheah 2006: 128) and "a fictive ethnic category of the colonial census" (Cheah 2006: 130).

capitalism. Or, as the CPM's leader, Chin Peng, said simply, "every generation shapes its dreams....My generation dreamed of doing away with British colonialism in Malaya" (Chin 2003: 9).

As a by-product of the socio-political ferment that led to the triumphs of nationalism over colonialism and capitalism over communism in Southeast Asia, "almost all the major studies of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia from the 1880s to the 1970s...[were]...strongly coloured, if not dominated by, the politicization of the *huaqiao* 'problem'" (Wang 1993: 7). The politicization of the 'problem' began with "questions about the loyalty of the Chinese abroad during the 20th century", continued in the inter-war period as "great fears... about the power of a nationalistic China appealing to the patriotism of the Overseas Chinese..." and follow the Chinese revolution of 1949, grew into "...even greater fears of Chinese expansion through the *huaqiao*" (Wang 1993: 6–7). To colonial officials, anthropologists, historians, and others researching the 'politicized problem', the chief points of interest were the ethno-cultural identities of the overseas Chinese that were assumed to define their socio-political attitudes towards a 'homeland', colonial authority and indigenous elites. Much of the research sought or served to distinguish between *huaqiao* sub-groups – from assimilated *peranakan* and *baba* to unmelttable *totok* and *sinkeh*,²³ from proud subjects of imperial rule to indifferent sojourners, and from reliable allies to subversive adversaries – in the making of postcolonial political systems.

The preoccupation with identities cast the Chinese as ethnic minorities, objects and targets of state policies. Now treated worse in one state, now better in another, the Chinese, as it were, had to bear or needed to escape what Reid (2009) termed "the burdens of Chineseness". Recently, it appeared that 'escape' might lie in new concepts that no longer fixed stable Chinese identities in relation to nations and states. Rather, Chinese identities were hybridized, layered and otherwise destabilized, just as Chinese communities were de-territorialized into diasporas and transnational networks. All this marked "a paradigm shift from modernization to globalization discourse in the study of the overseas Chinese" (Hau 2008: 9) – a discursive shift grounded in geopolitical changes, including the Soviet Union's collapse, China's 'opening', and Southeast Asia's share in the 'East Asian miracle'.

Looking for new forms by which Chinese politics remains Chinese must be balanced by explaining why the Chinese become political. For example, Benedict Anderson's essays, *Cacique Democracy in the Philippines* (1988) and *Murder and Progress in Modern Siam* (1990), gave many insights into the roles of the Chinese in the democratization of Thailand and the Philippines respectively in the late 1980s – and those were not 'ethnic' roles as such. Sidel (2008), following Barrington Moore's reflection on the social origins of dictatorship and democracy, has offered a socio-historical exploration that places Chinese capital at the centre

²³Terms used to refer respectively to China-born migrants in Indonesia and 'new arrivals' in Malaya.

of the development, or (the mostly failed development) of democracy in Southeast Asia. With their balance – allowing for ‘being Chinese’ and ‘being political’ – one can better see how Southeast Asia’s 1997 financial crisis exposed the failure of Suharto’s imposed cultural assimilation of the Chinese (Purdey 2003: 423) and the stagnation of Mahathir’s multicultural nationalist-capitalist project (Khoo 2003: 188–199). For that matter, one can better understand why the “burning question for the Thai nation as it enter[ed] the next millennium” was whether the “Thai *lookjin* middle class,” having breached the Thai ethno-cultural barrier, would “hold the opening wide enough for long enough to let in other, less affluent, disadvantaged ethnic groups – be they Thais, Laos, Malays, or others – to join the new imagined community” (Kasian 1997: 88). Extending that understanding beyond Thailand, Indonesia, or Malaysia might inform research further than the boundaries of identity, as new waves of immigrants (not necessarily Chinese) enter or move within Southeast Asia again, and beyond the boundaries of space – as Southeast Asia’s ‘Chinese question’ goes global.²⁴

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²⁴No one can look lightly on possible replays of Southeast Asia’s indigenous resentments at ‘Chinese economic domination’ in other regions. For a report on indigenous Senegalese merchants’ worries about being overwhelmed by the commercial success of immigrant Chinese, see Brent Huffman and Xiaoli Zhou, see the *Aljazeera* ‘Witness’ news report, ‘The Colony’. Available at: <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/witness/2010/09/20109784210335575.html> (accessed on 22 September 2010).

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