

Book Reviews

Asia

Personal names in Asia: History, culture and identity

Edited by ZHENG YANGWEN and CHARLES J.-H. MACDONALD

Singapore: NUS Press, 2010. Pp. 339. Maps, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.
Rebuilding the ancestral village: Singaporeans in China

By KHUN ENG KUAH-PEARCE

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Both *Personal names in Asia: History, culture and identity* and *Rebuilding the ancestral village: Singaporeans in China* share a common theme of individuals and communities having to change with the times. *Personal names* examines individual and collective reactions to societal transformation through name changes; *Rebuilding the ancestral village* examines Chinese Singaporeans' collective memory of, and struggles to maintain ties with, such villages in China.

Personal names in Asia is clearly organised and readable. A very good introduction by Anthony Reid and Charles Macdonald points out the problems inherent in studying the subject. Asian names have changed over the last two centuries as a result of foreign influences or imperialism and Reid and Macdonald rightly point out the confusion that Westerners have in identifying surnames — when, as in the case of the Javanese, there may not be a family name at all, or additional Arabic or Western autonyms are assumed upon religious conversion. Names have been changed for political purposes too, as when the Chinese in Thailand and Indonesia were compelled by the state to adopt non-Chinese names in 1913 and 1961, respectively.

The book is divided into four sections, beginning with a historical perspective on naming. Anthony Reid begins with an overview of the development of Southeast Asian surnames. Francis Alvarez Gealogo (chapter 2) follows, showing how the Spanish colonial demand that Filipinos adopt surnames was not an attempt to Hispanicise them, but rather a record-keeping exercise. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Spanish governor-general of the Philippines Narciso Claveria enforced a law demanding the adoption of surnames by the indigenous population to standardise Catholic Church baptismal records. When the Americans took over in 1899, they too introduced new measures to standardise names. In chapter 3, Zheng Yangwen looks at how Chinese names evolved as a result of Confucian revivals, family and clan histories, and contemporary events. After the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 in China, for instance, characters such as 'san' (three) were added to indicate adherence to, and promotion of, the Three Principles of the People.

Charles Macdonald's transitional chapter provides a structure for the rest of the book by classifying Asian names into three classes — 'A' (those belonging to

simple egalitarian societies), 'B' (competitive societies) and 'C' (complex centralised societies).

The 'simple egalitarian societies' in the next three chapters classified as Class 'A' are not really 'simple', but there is a suggestion that their organisation had remained unchanged over a long period prior to the developments discussed. Chapter 5 by Kenneth Sillander looks at teknonymy and its influence on kinship among the Bentian, a Dayak group in Kalimantan. Ananda Rajah's interesting study in chapter 6 looks at teknonymy among the Polokhi Karen in Chiang Mai as well as the impact of religious conversion (particularly Christianity) on names and how this affected individual and collective identities. Magnus Fikesjö's chapter on how, since 1958, Chinese characters and surnames have been used by the Wa living along the border with China is not only an important ethnography; it also queries the impact of the People's Republic of China on Southeast Asian domestic affairs.

Part III consists of two kinds of study (Class B and A). The first three chapters (as exemplars of Class B) look at the impact of foreign influences on Asian naming systems. Chapter 8 by Joel Kuipers studies the political use of names in post-Suharto Indonesia, using 'Bloody Thursday' — a protest by the Wewewa in West Sumba outside the Regency Office on 29 October 1998, which precipitated a massacre — as a case study. The protestors' use of a 'hard' name for the Regent was taken as an insult, but the protestors were using a traditional Wewewa way of expressing frustration with the status quo. The chapter on Paiwan identity in Taiwan by Ku Kun-hui also sheds light on the plight of these Taiwanese aboriginals, who find themselves with six different names, including those given by the Japanese colonial authorities and the post-1949 Kuomintang. Finally, R.H. Barnes studies naming practices in Kedang in Eastern Indonesia, including the impact of the Indonesian government's regulation on the use of surnames.

The final part on 'complex centralised societies' completes the book. All three authors in this section have studied the change of personal names and/or addition of surnames as a result of government regulation. Mary Louise Nagata (chapter 11) looks at the impact of the practice of name-changing in Kyoto to reflect status, which was ended in the last years of the Tokugawa Shogunate as a marker of progress. M.W. Amarasiri de Silva (chapter 12) studies the changing of personal names to signify caste and class in Sri Lanka in the mid-1990s, especially among the Sinhalese. Finally, Hew Wai Weng (chapter 13) looks at how Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts changed their names in order to proclaim their new-found faith, but retain their identity through their Chinese surnames. Their new Arab–Muslim names are shaped by laws introduced by the Malaysian Government in 1981 and 1988. Adopted names such as 'Abdullah' and 'Mohammed' more than just separate converts from their non-Muslim family members when it comes to dietary and lifestyle matters; the naming conventions also illustrate racial politics in Malaysia.

Some communities have stopped using traditional names altogether: Zheng Yangwen asks what happened to the use of distinctly Manchu names after 1911. This is a significant question. Even the last Emperor of China is known simply as 'Puyi' rather than his full name — Aisin Gioro Puyi. Very few Manchus today understand their own language and the disappearance of Manchu names reveals the extent of their sinicisation.

The use of names also reveals changing identities. The impact of Christianity is also felt around Asia. New converts take common Western names, or adopt names that mark them out as Christians: Watchman Nee (1920–72), born Ni Shuzu, converted as a teenager and adopted the name ‘Watchman’ (*tuosheng*) because he felt it his solemn duty to keep a watch for and alert humanity about the second coming. Chinese Catholics have also adopted the names of saints such as Augustine, Bonaventure, Felix and Nicholas in a public display of their faith.

Names reflect the impact of colonialism and socio-cultural change. The adding of surnames in the Philippines under Spanish imperialism and in Thailand in 1913 due to a nationalistic monarch, which included a demand that the overseas Chinese adopt ‘local sounding’ names (as in Indonesia in 1961) also indicate the intensity of anti-Chinese feelings in these countries. The enforced adoption of new names can still be felt in Thailand and Indonesia today as Chinese individuals such as Thaksin Shinawatra and Sudono Salim (Liem Sioe Liong) continue to use non-Chinese names. Interestingly, the book does not address people’s reactions (or even resistance, if any) to such assimilationist laws.

This is an important volume because it raises new questions about the ethnography, anthropology and history of Asia, although most of the papers (nine out of thirteen) are on Southeast Asia. The remaining four are on China, Taiwan, Japan and Sri Lanka. I do wonder if there had been similar changes in how people came to regard personal names in India, Korea and even the Middle East. This book, nonetheless, marks a good start to making sense of personal identities and the development of collective identities in Asia.

Rebuilding the ancestral village also touches on the theme of local/national identity amidst transnationalism. Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce adds to an understanding of why and how Chinese Singaporeans have been investing in the ‘moral economy’ of Anxi. The county, long known for its poverty, has relied heavily on overseas Chinese investment in its local economy.

The introduction explains Kuah-Pearce’s reasons for writing the book and Chinese Singaporeans’ search for their cultural roots. The important point here is the role these Singaporeans play in the ‘moral economy’ of Anxi, which uses its status as the home village for many overseas Chinese to entice them to return ‘home’ and invest. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the formation of a Singapore Chinese identity, followed by a chapter on the system of ancestral villages in Anxi County. Chapter 4 explains how Singapore Chinese remember their ancestral villages and the role their memories and experiences play in the rebuilding of villages in Anxi. Chapter 5 is the crux of the book, an examination of how Communist Party cadres in Anxi try to persuade Chinese Singaporeans to make donations for village reconstruction, while the latter bargain in return for concessions in cultural reproduction. Chapters 6 and 7 study the religious links between the two groups. The next two chapters look at how both the Chinese in Anxi and the Chinese Singaporeans re-established their links through the use of updated genealogies, and Chinese lineage as a cultural network rather than as a social institution. The book concludes with a discussion of possible future directions for Chinese overseas communities.

Kuah-Pearce raises interesting questions about transnationalism and identity, specifically, the dilemma faced by Chinese Singaporeans. Since 1959, the People’s

Action Party (PAP) government has reminded its citizens of the need to stay loyal to their nation. To build a Singaporean identity, the island's Chinese population has been exhorted to look inwards and build bonds with the non-Chinese. China was (and had to be regarded as) a faraway country because of the 'dangers' of communism and Chinese chauvinism. Since the opening up of China, the attitude of the Singapore government has shifted. Now Chinese Singaporeans are still reminded of their identity as citizens of the nation-state, but also that they should not forget their transnational cultural roots. It is no wonder that, as Kuah-Pearce points out, younger Singaporeans suffer from a sense of confusion as to who they really are. (My personal view is that younger Singaporeans should be helping other less well-off Singaporeans and not send money to reconstruct an 'ancestral home' they have never known.)

From the 1950s to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, communication between the overseas Chinese (including those born in China and who had emigrated before 1949) and their families in China was effectively cut off. A whole generation of Chinese Singaporeans had grown up with 'China' as a foreign country. And China itself had suffered devastating cultural and intellectual losses during the Cultural Revolution. Hence, the Chinese Singaporean who visited China after 1978 was not discovering his/her original culture, but learning new 'cultural roots' as defined by the Communist Party. The photographs in Kuah-Pearce's book show Anxi County in continual reconstruction, with schools, bridges and new homes being built since Republican times (1911–49). However, as an impoverished county with little access to state resources, it is not surprising that Anxi has been heavily dependent on its overseas Chinese networks for financial support.

There are two sides to the relationship between the people of an 'emigrant village' (*qiaoxiang*) and their distant relatives. Kuah-Pearce has portrayed Chinese Singaporeans who felt compelled under Confucian notions of filial piety to do something for their 'ancestral villages'; at the same time, she also notes the disdain felt by some Anxi villagers towards Chinese Singaporeans who refuse to help financially. I once worked with a colleague whose father had sent money continuously to his family in China from the 1950s to the late 1980s, until he became gravely ill. The moment the family in China heard of his illness, all communication ceased. Since my colleague's father was no longer a source of funds, the family in China saw no need to stay in touch.

Few Chinese Singaporeans actually return to their ancestral home villages to help, however. Although Kuah-Pearce appears not to have referred to these sources, the Singapore Ann Kway Association (*Xinjiapo Anxi Huiguan*)'s souvenir publications and other records held at the National Archives of Singapore contain few references to any major visit by their members to help in village reconstruction after 1978. Most of the Association's activities remain centred in Singapore (and perhaps Malaysia); an 'Ann Kway Convention' in Singapore in 2002 brought together members from the worldwide Anxi associations. Beyond that, there remains little practical connection between Anxi and Chinese Singaporeans.

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