Part I

CHINESE CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

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CHINESE CULTURES AND THEIR TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of this book is Chinese culture and its transformation in Southeast Asia. The term "Chinese culture" is used broadly, covering topics such as language, literature, performing arts, films, mass media, customs, religion and education, as outlined in Leo Suryadinata's preface. These are visible aspects of culture that one can perceive as Chinese. Culture always changes over time, but transformation also carries continuity unless a cultural aspect is completely lost. In the case of evolving Chinese culture, there is both cultural transformation and continuity or, shall we say, continuity in transformation. All chapters in this book demonstrate that both cultural continuity and cultural transformation exist. The analysis of cultural transformation is most fascinating as it shows how culture changes as a result of both local adaptation and response to modern and global influences. It highlights human agency and creativeness. In this afterword, I shall highlight some major points discussed in this book under the themes of local society and cultural adjustment, the role of the state and cultural identity.

LOCAL SOCIETY AND CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Migrants everywhere tend to acquire local characteristics as a result of cultural localization. Cultural localization refers to the process of adjusting to local conditions, which include physical environments, sociocultural environments (arising from interethnic interaction, responding to state

policies, etc.) and the acquisition of local knowledge, etc. (cf. Tan 2004, p. 23). The intensity of adjustment and change depend on both internal factors (relative population size, organizational mechanism, etc.) and external factors (population size of major ethnic groups and state policies, etc.). A small population of early migrants comprising mostly men was more likely to be highly acculturated by the local society, as was the case of early Chinese migrants who married local women and whose children grew up to speak the local language. As a result, highly localized Chinese communities emerged in Southeast Asia and in different parts of the world. Because of the need to communicate with the local people, especially the "majority" local people, migrants learned to speak one or more local lingua franca. On the other hand, one's mother tongue as an intimate family language tends to persist, though in some cases, a small population size, intermarriages, and the need to speak the dominant local language at home had led some early Chinese communities to lose their Chinese mother tongue, as was the case of the Malay-speaking Peranakan Chinese in Malaya (known as Baba in Malacca and Singapore) and Indonesia (especially those in Java).

State policies and the interaction with local people influence the cultural adjustment of Chinese overseas. In Malaysia and Singapore, where the Constitution guarantees the freedom of worship and the observation of cultural practices, the Chinese are generally free to practise their culture. In contrast, in Brunei Darussalam, where Malay Islamic Monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) has been adopted as its national philosophy since gaining independence in 1984, the Chinese minority community faces limited freedom in publicly expressing their religious and cultural celebrations, such as Chinese New Year lion dances. As Chang-yau Hoon and Zhao Kailu noted in their study of the Guangze Zunwang Temple (Teng Yun Temple) in Brunei, these activities are largely confined to temples and Chinese school halls. Although Chinese cultural and religious practices are shaped by various forces in their host countries and by influences from abroad, particularly from the broader Chinese cultural homeland, Chinese individuals remain active agents in bringing about localization and cultural transformation. Jack Meng-Tat Chia's chapter exemplifies this by how monks actively promote and relate Buddhism to Indonesia—particularly toward middle-class Chinese Indonesians through the creation of a contemporary form of Buddhist music inspired by Christian hymns. In particular, through the study of True Direction, a Buddhist organization, Jack points out that "Indonesian Buddhists are local geniuses in the selective adaptation of popular music to propagate the Dhamma in contemporary Indonesian society."

Chun Yi's description of the development of Chinese traditional music in Malaysia shows how local musical groups grow amidst many challenges. Besides professional musical groups, Chinese associations and schools also play important roles in preserving and promoting traditional Chinese music in Malaysia. Here, transformation is brought about not only by musical influences from the historical Chinese land, including Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also by local Chinese groups that brought about localization by incorporating Malay, Indian and other cultural elements.

The panel on Chinese Music and Opera in the Malay Archipelago exemplified this well by showing both the continuity and transformation of Chinese music and performing arts. Wang Chenwei and Chua Soo Pong, respectively, show the agency of local musicians and performers in bringing Southeast Asian elements into Chinese music and operas. The former stresses creativity founded on local understanding. Familiarity with a tradition in multiethnic Singapore allows a composer to bring about renovation and localization. Chua Soo Pong's discussion about children of different ethnic groups performing Chinese operas as a way to promote interethnic sharing and understanding is very impressive.

Cultural localization and transformation take place in a historical perspective. Wong Yoon Wah's discussion of the development of Malaysian Chinese literature reminds us of the need to take note of this historical perspective of ethnic Chinese taking roots in their respective Southeast Asian countries. The discussion shows how the Chinese established their local identity as reflected in the development of local Chinese literature. A significant development is multicultural expression in Malaysian Chinese writing, which gives rise to a very distinct local writing. Wong Yoon Wah shows that Malaysian Chinese writers have included the lives of other ethnic communities in their writing, thus localizing Malaysian Chinese literature. The use of Malaysian Mandarin also makes the local Chinese literature very distinct.

The formation and development of Malaysian Mandarin is well described by Khoo Kiak Uei. He periodizes the influences of Mandarin from the Chinese land as follows: from mainland China from 1919–60, from Taiwan from 1960–90 and from the *Putonghua* of mainland China since the 1980s. Malaysian Mandarin was formed and developed in the context of local linguistic interaction and reinforced and transformed by mainland China and Taiwan influences. Locally, it was influenced by the use of Minnan (Hokkien) and Cantonese loanwords as well as Malay and English loanwords, such as *basha* 巴刹 (from Malay *pasar* for wet market) and *baxian* 巴仙 (from the English word per cent), which are still

being used in Malaysian Mandarin today, while in *Putonghua* of China, "wet market" is *chai shichang* 菜市场 and "per cent" is rendered as *baifenbi* 百分比. Khoo Kiak Uei provides readers with many interesting examples of Malaysian Mandarin usages, including its differences with the usages in China and even with those in Singapore. For example, *jingjifan* 经济饭 for "economic rice meal" is called *zacaifan* 杂菜饭 in Singapore and *hefan* 盒饭 in China. As Khoo appropriately concludes, Malaysian Mandarin "nurtured from the multi-lingual and multi-dialectal environment of the local Chinese community" and underwent influences from mainstream Mandarin in different stages.

In the case of Chinese in Southeast Asia who read and write Chinese, their connection with the Chinese land or Greater China through writing is important. The influence in local Chinese literature in Malaysia and Singapore is well analysed by Tan Chee Lay, who discusses the influence of China and Taiwan on realism and modernism in Chinese literature in Malaysia and Singapore. The influence gives rise to debates about Chinese literature writing in Malaysia and Singapore, and subsequently influences the development of Chinese literature in Southeast Asia. Tan Chee Lay shows that in relating to national consciousness, "different artistic genres were blended and fused, gradually coming together to form a uniquely Singaporean literary identity." As Wong Yoon Wah puts it, good literature depends on good creative writing, whether realist or modernist.

The discussion of Shirley O. Lua, Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt, and Gritiya Rattanakantadilok are important contributions to this book, for they tell us about the nature of localization and identity issues in the Philippines and Thailand. As in Malaysia and Singapore, the local literature in the Philippines and Thailand was originally influenced by the literary movements in China, but has since developed into local versions of literature reflecting lives in the Philippines and Thailand. Shirley's analysis of "Words of Calamansi" appropriately shows the localization of the Chinese in the Philippines. The poems reflect the local Chinese sense of local identity and belonging to the ancestral homeland. Shirley also mentions Philippine Chinese literature in English, Filipino and the vernacular languages, as well as the significance of translating Chinese literary works into English and/or Filipino. This is very important in a country where only a very small percentage of people read Chinese. The significance of translation is discussed more fully in the chapter on Thailand by Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt and Gritiya Rattanakantadilok. They show the issue of belonging in Sino-Thai literature

in the Thai nation. The works reflect local identities and concern with local economic issues. Sino-Thai literature (Chinese literature by ethnic Chinese authors in Thailand) is useful for understanding the ethnic Chinese society in Thailand and the Thai society in general. However, in a country where Thai is the dominant language, translation into Thai allows Sino-Thai literary works to be read widely, and the author gives some good examples of such translated works. The authors well point out the significance of such translation, "Sinophone Thai literature in translations and adaptations speak to cultural interactions and intercultural communication, depicting cultures coming into contact and engaging in negotiation."

Even in Malaysia and Singapore, where there is a much larger Chinese readership, translation allows non-Chinese and Chinese who do not read Chinese to appreciate Chinese literary work. This also allows the work to be read globally. A good example is the translation of Wong Yoon Wah's writings into English (Wong 2013).

The Role of the State

The state plays an important role in influencing cultural continuity and localization. As Leo Suryadinata points out in the preface, state policy "is crucial as it often shapes the culture of the Chinese overseas". It can promote the development of a cultural heritage and encourage localization, as in the case of Singapore, which was discussed by Chua Soo Pong. The Singapore government, through the efforts of local organizations and art specialists, promotes the production of traditional Chinese operas. At the same time, it welcomes the indigenization of Chinese performing art, including the production of Chinese operas that reflect Singapore's multiethnic environment and operas that are based on local history, even an opera that uses the popular Southeast Asian art form based on the Indian epic Ramayana. Singapore is undoubtedly the most important Southeast Asia region where Chinese opera is promoted and indigenized.

However, state policy in Southeast Asia can be non-supportive and even suppress Chinese heritage, as in the case of Indonesia under the Suharto regime. Yet, local Chinese organizations and individuals, as in the case of Indonesia, can resist and preserve their heritage by relating culture to the national ideology, as shown in Evi Lina Sutrisno's chapter on the development of the Confucian Religion in Indonesia. In fact, the cultural oppression of the Suharto regime led to the birth of a new form of Chinese religion. For Confucianism to be accepted as a religion, MATAKIN

(Indonesian Highest Council of Confucian Religion) reinterpreted Confucianism to relate to Pancasila, the Indonesian national ideology that defines a religion as believing in One and Omnipotent God. To this end, the Chinese concept of *Tian* (Thian as used in Indonesia) or "Heaven" is interpreted as the Chinese Almighty God, Confucius is portrayed as a prophet, and the Confucian classics are regarded as sacred tests. While there are a number of academic writings on the establishment of the Confucian Religion in Indonesia (cf. Suryadinata 2015), Evi Lina Sutrisno provides a detailed description of the process of how this unique form of Chinese religion came about.

Singapore is an example of a favourable national environment for the promotion and localization of Chinese cultural heritage while Indonesia under Suharto serves as an extreme example of an unfriendly environment for the continuity of Chinese heritage. The environments of the other Southeast Asian states lie between these two ends of a continuum. Whatever it may be, it is relevant to Chinese organizations and individuals that promote the continuity of Chinese heritage and its localization. Where there is no adverse cultural policy, localization takes its natural course in that, over time, some Chinese cultural forms become localized as a result of local adaptation. At the same time, there are individuals and organizations who see the value of localization that reflects the local society and actively promote indigenization. Hostile state policy also encourages localization, as seen in the case of Indonesia, where the local Chinese were forced to reinterpret certain of their cultural heritage for it to be officially recognized to publicly observe and preserve it (as in the case of Confucian Religion), albeit in a very transformed and localized form.

Cultural Identity

As seen in the discussion above, cultural continuity and localization give rise to different versions of Chinese cultural identity in different regions and countries. Ethnic Chinese use different cultural elements to stress both their "traditional" and localized Chinese identities. Chinese individuals and organizations can use language, literature and performing arts to express both components of identities. The presence of new Chinese immigrants, which Leo Suryadinata has paid considerable attention to in his chapter, gives rise to a less or non-localized Chinese identity compared to the local Chinese in Southeast Asia. As new arrivals, new Chinese migrants have not yet been exposed to a long period of local influence and cultural adjustment. Unlike

old migrants, most new migrants are professionals and businesspeople who are economically well-established. Modern globalization and digital technology allow them to travel easily to and fro and have frequent contact with their motherland, China, which has become a world economic power that is strong economically, militarily and technologically. Unlike the old migrants, the new migrants are culturally more confident and resilient against forces of localization, although given time their descendants will no doubt also acquire certain local characteristics. At the same time, with local Chinese (and even many non-Chinese) learning Chinese and increasingly conforming their local Mandarin (*Huayu*) to *Putonghua* (Mandarin in China), as well as increasing cultural influences from Greater China, there is not just divergence but also convergence in identities and cultural interests between new Chinese migrants and long-settled local Chinese.

Of the new Chinese migrants, Hui Chinese Muslims who mainly came to Malaysia since the 1980s, when compared to the local Chinese Muslims, show interesting articulation of religion and Chinese identities, as seen in Hew Wai Weng's chapter. While there are cultural differences between the Hui Muslims and local Chinese Muslims, the presence of the former in Malaysia helps to show that Chinese Muslims can be Muslims while keeping their Chinese cultural identity. The Hui mosques in China inspired the building of Chinese-style mosques in Malaysia, with the Jubli Perak Sultan Ismail Petra Mosque being the first one built in 2009. It is known by the locals as the Beijing Mosque since its architectural design is based on the famous Niujie (Ox Street) Mosque in Beijing. Some Chinese Muslim groups conduct Mandarin classes and organize Chinese New Year dinners in mosques. These Chinese Muslims are of the view that it is best to disseminate Islamic messages to the local Chinese through Chinese cultural activities. This is despite the fact that there are Chinese Muslim leaders who oppose incorporating Chinese elements in their faith and preaching. The Chinese Muslims and the local Chinese Muslims manifest different identities of being Chinese and Muslims, but they both contribute to changing the local perception that Chinese can be Muslim and at the same time keep their Chineseness in their respective ways.

Conclusion

Perhaps we need more discussion on the roles of Chinese media (such as TV news and TV dramas from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan), increasing contacts between the Chinese from Southeast

Asia and those from China, as well as the increasing presence of Chinese new immigrants in Southeast Asia. Overall, the presentations in this volume show cultural continuity and localization that give rise to local characteristics and local Chinese identities. The development of Chinese culture in Southeast Asia is shaped by cultural influences from China and the local process of development in the multicultural environment. It is in this context that localization takes place. In many cases, as in music and operas, the transformation involves creation and recreation. Such a transformation enriches local cultures.

The workshop, which gave rise to this book, was concerned with another issue: how does the rise of China influence local Chinese culture? Will there be increasing "resinification"? "Resinification" is a very imprecise term, especially in generalizing about cultural influences from China and confusing cultural transformation with political orientation towards China. Perhaps the concern is whether there will be China-ization in the sense of *zhongguohua* (中国化). Well, culture is always changing. The discussion about religion, music and performing arts shows that there is always a local process of creation and transformation. As to the Chinese learning to speak better Mandarin that converges to the PRC usage, perhaps we can see this as part of a development of local Mandarin exposed to external and local influences. Whatever the impacts of a culturally and economically influential China, the Chinese in Southeast Asia, new migrants included, will continue to adjust to the changing local and global situations, nation-building included. Thus, Chinese culture in Southeast Asia is always continuing and transforming at the same time.

It is appropriate to end this with a discussion of civilizational identity, local Chinese identity and national identity. Localization after migration gives rise to local Chinese cultural identities worldwide, and their identification with their respective country gives them their distinct Chinese identities. At the same time, as Chinese, they identify with the Chinese civilization, which may be interpreted differently by different Chinese individuals. Identifying with a Chinese civilization is not identifying with the state of China or its government. The Chinese in Southeast Asia, for instance, while proud of their national identity as Malaysians or Singaporeans, for example, does not hinder them from identifying with their Chinese culture and Chinese civilization. China is always relevant to the Chinese overseas, and Chinese cultures in Southeast Asia will continue to thrive and localize as well as be influenced by the changing Chinese cultures from the Chinese lands, namely mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

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