

*Chinese Populations in Contemporary Southeast Asian Societies: Identities, Interdependence and International Influence.* Edited by M. Jocelyn Armstrong, R. Warwick Armstrong, and Kent Mulliner. Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001. 268 pp.

Certain negative mental images persist of the estimated 23 million ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, scattered unevenly across the region and having different degrees of acceptance and integration. One example is that of their being “economic animals” who focus on commerce at the expense of the common good; another is their inertia in local politics making it necessary for them to form alliances with the ruling élites and engage in corrupt practices to ensure their own security.

This book, comprising conference papers from various disciplines, deals with Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese identity, their contributions to regional interdependence and influence in the region between 1980 and 1999 against the backdrop of the rise of China. A recurring theme in this volume is that despite the preceding stereotypes the Chinese in Southeast Asia cannot be treated as a homogeneous group.

The book is broadly divided into four sections. The first is overviews of historical and contemporary economic context (Chapters 2 and 3), followed by case studies on business organizations as a dimension of Chinese identity (Chapters 4 and 5). The third section contains cases studies on religion, gender, and subethnicity in relation to evolving Chinese identities (Chapters 6 to 8) before the final section on the interplay of local, regional, global, and transnational identities and activities (Chapters 9 and 10).

Historian J. Norman Parmer undertakes a broad-brush periodization of the historical review of Chinese presence in Southeast Asia in his chapter. The long history of China’s political, ethnic, and cultural influence on Chinese communities outside China is complicated by the ambivalent treatment towards the Chinese by Western colonial authorities. Indigenous anxieties have come to the fore with the putative rise of China and its appeal to the Chinese overseas community for investments, trade, and cultural exchanges.

Leo Suryadinata examines the economic status and role of the Chi-

nese in Southeast Asia and highlights some of the commonly cited reasons for success: Confucian values and heritage; the discriminated minority's route to success via business activity; political connections with the indigenous political élites; and the Chinese ability to benefit from capitalism.

An interesting line of argument, proffered by Liu Hong's contribution, centres on the transnational and institutional dimensions of Chinese networking. Although the study is confined to the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI), he persuasively argues for an emphasis on social and business organizations in the study of modern Chinese transnationalism. Liu's thesis revolves around the horizontal and vertical dimensions of such organizations — the former linking the state and society in the pursuit of economic development while the latter links diverse individuals, communities, and nation-states across territorial boundaries. The resulting network is an "organizing logic" in the study of ethnic Chinese regional economic and social activities.

In examining the influential Federation of Filipino Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Theresa Chong Carino meticulously traces the close relationship between the Federation and the political élites against the backdrop of the evolving Philippines-Taiwan-China relations. Originally biased towards Taiwan's KMT, the Federation has since taken a more neutral approach towards China-Taiwan politics. This is a reflection of the pragmatic political economy approach towards the economic opportunities for Chinese-Filipinos as well as deeper integration of the Chinese-Filipino into Filipino society. Carino sensitively captures the nuances of the changes and analyses their long-term implications.

What one can discern from the two case studies are that the economic role of such umbrella Chinese organizations has gained precedence over the political role and that beyond the economics of ethnic ties, the significance of such organizations depends on their being relevant to their host societies. In Singapore, in addition to being a key player in the government's abiding belief in "ethnic capitalism", the Chinese clans and business organizations are now urged to play their part in maintaining the Chinese cultural ballast in a Chinese-majority

society which is fast becoming deculturalized. Despite the Filipinization of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, Carino anticipates the umbrella Chinese organizations' continued prominence "for the articulation of Chinese political and economic interests" in the foreseeable future. The Singapore experience similarly demonstrates that so long as Chinese interests remain distinguishable and perceived threats to their identity persist, umbrella Chinese organizations will maintain their relevance as repositories of collective interest representation.

Jean DeBernardi examines the strategies adopted by Chinese Christians in Singapore and Malaysia in participating in non-Christian rituals such as ancestral worship, funeral rites, and exorcistic rituals. She observes the attempt to contextualize and reclaim cultural authenticity for Christianity as an Asian religion through syncretizing (or indigenization or inculturation) the faith with Asian cultural norms. Yet the tension between the desire to demonstrate filial piety and family values and the fear of committing an "un-Christian act" is real. This tension is also apparent in the Chinese-Christians' attempt to juxtapose Christian and Chinese textual traditions not only to aid moral discourse but also to address the loss of cultural identity.

In another anthropological study, Judith Nagata examines the "conscious and creative choice and agency" available to women who convert to Buddhism and Christianity. Nagata comprehensively describes the influence of Chinese-Malaysian women in Buddhist temples and churches. While not an expression of feminist competition to male dominance, religious life is increasingly moving into the hands of the female laity. With this blending of the sacred with the secular, religion provides resources and opportunities for Chinese women to be active agents of their own lives.

Sharon Carstens details the changes affecting the Hakka community in Pulai, Kelantan and how such subethnic identities affect the conscious preservation of Chinese culture in one part of Malaysia's Malay heartland. She discusses the revival of interest in traditional Hakka culture aided by video recordings and travel to China. In a series of thought-provoking questions, Carstens considers how improving China-Malaysia relations and domestic politics impact on the development of the Chinese-Malaysian identity.

The last two chapters deal with the interplay of local, regional, global, and transnational identities and activities. Tan Chee Beng examines the relevance of “civilizational ethnicity” (the common identification with the Chinese civilization) to the Chinese world-wide with the caveat that there is no global Chinese community. Tan suggests that while there is an apparent rhetoric of association, which provides a platform for interaction, this in turn is dependent on linguistic factors. For the ethnic Chinese, the development of multiple identities is a reality. This must be analysed against the backdrop of the nagging themes of a hegemonic China and the ethnic Chinese outside China being fifth columns.

Donald Nonini’s wide-ranging and perceptive chapter on migration and travel, the Chinese diaspora’s transnationalism and Hong Kong and Taiwan as metropolises of alternative modernity, could very well be the volume’s epilogue. Nonini cautions us against the two essentialisms: first, that all Chinese engage in transnational practices and, second, that there is an essential cultural divide between Chinese and non-Chinese often found in scholarly discussion on Chinese transnationalism. Nonini argues persuasively that Chinese transnationalism defies the meta-theoretic assumption that ethnic group, territory, culture, and the nation-state go together. Instead, mobilities and movement — as manifestations of transnationalism — are more connected with the dynamics of globalization and its interface with the demands of flexible Asian capitalism (characterized by sub-contracting, labour migration, and the competition for talent). This makes the Southeast Asian Chinese no different from other ethnic groups experiencing the same processes.

The volume provides a useful overview on the state of the ethnic Chinese in contemporary Southeast Asia and explores their multi-faceted, interdependent identities and regional influence. However, the lack of a convincing and holistic treatment of the rationale for Chinese economic success remains a gaping hole in our expanding knowledge of Chinese populations. And for that the negative mental images of Southeast Asian Chinese may unjustifiably persist.

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