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Opportunities and Anxieties for the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia

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The rise of China as the world’s second-largest economy and an increasingly assertive player in the global diplomatic arena has prompted endless scholarly and media scrutiny over the past decade. Most analyses focus on China as a nation-state and its shifting relationship with the international order. Little attention is given to another important external dimension: the role of the Chinese diaspora in China’s global ascendance, which in turn has shaped the diaspora’s identities in its host lands.

It is crucial to understand this transnational dynamic, not only because the diaspora has nearly 60 million members and commands considerable economic capital and technological know-how, but also because Chinese overseas have been historically and structurally embedded in China’s socioeconomic development. Sun Yat-sen, modern China’s founding father, lauded the diaspora as “the Mother of the Revolution” that overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and created a republic. Decades later, Communist leader Deng Xiaoping acknowledged in the early 1990s that a key factor in China’s rapid economic growth after it began reforming its economy and opening up to the world in the late 1970s was the diaspora, which accounted for more than 65 percent of China’s incoming foreign direct investment at that time.

Some of the most complex and dynamic relationships between China and its diaspora are found in Southeast Asia, which is home to more than 80 percent of the total population of ethnic Chinese living outside the core area comprising the mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

The position of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia has been shaped by China’s growing economic relations with the region. In 2009, China surpassed the United States and Japan to become the largest and most important external trade partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has been China’s third-largest trading partner since 2011. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, the world’s largest free trade zone in terms of population and third largest in terms of nominal GDP, was officially established in 2010.

While China’s growing engagement with Southeast Asia has presented opportunities for local Chinese communities, it has also led to socio-cultural discontents and new politico-economic realignments. Members of the Chinese diaspora (and local elites) have turned to both Sinicization—the reassertion of Chinese identity—and de-Sinicization as creative strategies to take advantage of China’s rise while coping with the anxieties it produces.

FALLEN LEAVES

Chinese emigration has a history that goes back at least two thousand years, but large-scale international migration started only after the mid-nineteenth century, when China was thrown into disarray by dynastic decline and Western imperialism. Up to the end of World War II, Chinese immigrants, who were mostly from the mainland’s southern provinces and concentrated in Southeast Asia, considered themselves *huaqiao* (Chinese sojourners). Their political loyalty and cultural orientation were directed toward China, whether in the form of a civilization, an ancestral hometown, or a nation-state. They were the *luoye guigen* (“fallen leaves return to their roots”) generation, meaning they stayed loyal to their native places and yearned (usually in vain) to return to them.

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They were often perceived as outsiders by colonial governments and indigenous people.

From the 1950s through the 1980s, new ethnic Chinese identities emerged as people began to emigrate for different reasons and in new ways. Increasing numbers of Chinese living overseas were born locally, and the flow of migrants virtually ceased after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 due to the government's restrictive policy on emigration. *Huaqiao* gradually became *huaren* (ethnic Chinese), who owed their political allegiance to their countries of residence. This generation was known as *luodi shenggen* ("falling to the ground and striking root"), referring to the new pattern of settling permanently abroad and renouncing Chinese citizenship, while privately preserving Chinese lifestyles and cultural values. Despite this shift, the "Chinese problem" became a liability for the PRC in its relations with neighboring nations during the Cold War era: Southeast Asians were suspicious of the diaspora's political loyalty and its disproportionate influence in many local economies, thanks in part to its long-standing and extensive transnational ethnic networks.

In the most recent period (1980 to the present), the Chinese diaspora possessed the capital, technological know-how, and business networks China needed in its reform and opening process. *Xin yimin* (new migrants) from the PRC began to make up a greater proportion of the overall overseas Chinese population. There are thought to be around nine million new migrants who have left China since 1980, and they are still on the move in large numbers—thanks in no small part to the growth of the middle class in China, whose members emigrate for various reasons such as seeking better living environments and greater educational opportunities for their children.

New Chinese immigrants differ from their earlier counterparts in major respects. They hail from all over China rather than just villages in traditional sending regions in the south. No longer overwhelmingly peasants and unskilled laborers, they include many well-educated professionals and entrepreneurs. Often they have previous experience of internal or international migration, or both—on arrival, they are no longer segregated or trapped in ethnic enclaves. And they leave behind a homeland that is no longer impoverished, but

on the contrary, a nation that is gaining economic power and political clout.

Most new migrants have gone to the industrialized West, though Southeast Asia is attracting a sizable number. More than 400,000 new Chinese migrants are thought to live and work in Singapore, which had a population of 5.6 million as of June 2016. Since the early 1990s, with the support of the Asian Development Bank, the Great Mekong Subregion countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and China have set up a program of economic cooperation. Dam-building projects and mining have attracted a new wave of Chinese labor migration to countries such as Cambodia and Laos, which historically had smaller Chinese communities because of their inland location.

This evolving migratory trajectory is a key to the complex role of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia in the twenty-first century. For one thing, there is a significant degree of heterogeneity among ethnic Chinese in the region. They are divided not only by subethnic markers such as differences in homeland regions and dialects, kinship, and class, but also by divergent cultural and national identities.

Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding prime minister,

spoke in 2009 about the differences between Singaporean Chinese and "China Chinese" (that is, new migrants from China), remarking, "We found that although we are Chinese and speak Mandarin, we are different in our work methods and mental makeup. We are Westernized in our system and working style. We do not depend on 'guanxi' or relationships. Our standards and attitudes to the rule of law are completely different."

SERVING THE COUNTRY

As an uninterrupted civilization (and, to a far lesser degree, nation-state) for millennia, China's fortunes have long influenced the migratory trajectories of its people. Throughout much of the past two centuries, this relationship was conditioned by a declining and humiliated China. Now, for the first time in modern history, a rising China is shaping the relationship, transforming the diaspora's identity and the region's diplomatic relations with China.

The emergence of China as a global player and its rapid and massive inroads into Southeast Asia

The past decade has seen rapid proliferation of Chinese-language schools in Southeast Asia.

have added a new dimension to the already complex intradiasporic and interethnic relationships in the region. In tandem with China's ascendance and increasingly assertive role in the region's affairs, the Chinese state has started engaging more actively with its diaspora.

In Beijing, this effort has two main components: institution building or enhancement and new policy initiatives. The system for "overseas Chinese affairs work" (*qiaowu gongzuo*) comprises five interrelated governmental and semi-governmental institutions, referred to as the "five overseas Chinese structures" (*wuqiao*). These institutions work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries to formulate and implement policies pertaining to the diaspora. The five institutions are the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council; the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress; the Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan Compatriots and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress; the China Zhigong Party; and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese.

These institutions are vertically structured from the central to the local (township) government level and horizontally connected to the Chinese Communist Party leadership and important state administrative organs. Diaspora engagement policies thus are part and parcel of China's bureaucratic system.

This institutional structure is intended to serve as the foundation for transnational governance of the Chinese diaspora through the intimate integration of domestic and international policies. In the 1990s, the official slogan of "returning to serve the country" (*hui guo fuwu*) was replaced by "serving the country" (*wei guo fuwu*), which meant that actually moving back to China was no longer a prerequisite of patriotism for the Chinese diaspora (especially new migrants).

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, national policy regarding the Chinese diaspora has shifted further, from seeking remittances and capital investment to attracting Chinese talent from abroad while nurturing homeland-diasporic relations. The policy also emphasizes helping overseas Chinese sink roots in their new homelands by becoming naturalized citizens and participating in the mainstream of their countries of residence.

BIG WORK

Like other key national policies in present-day China, diaspora policy has been greatly shaped by President Xi Jinping. In 1995, Xi, then the party secretary of Fuzhou—the capital of Fujian, a southeastern coastal province and major source of emigration to Southeast Asia—advocated a policy of "big overseas Chinese work" (*da qiaowu*), calling for "a new concept and a new train of thought." This would require broad and deep cooperation between China and the diaspora.

Two decades later, the concept has been implemented at the national and transnational levels. It constitutes an integral part of the "Chinese Dream," the central pillar of the current government's political ideology. The objective combines economic modernization, technological innovation, and cultural revival, which depends on attracting foreign (including diasporic Chinese) capital, knowledge, and talent. In a recent interview with the *People's Daily*, Qiu Yuanping, director-general of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, emphasized the importance of consolidating both domestic and international resources and going beyond the "narrow parameters of specific regions and institutions."

In 2013, Xi launched his signature foreign policy initiative, known as "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR), aimed at connecting China economically and strategically with neighboring and more distant countries through infrastructure projects, transport, trade, investment, and banking. "One Belt" corresponds roughly to the historic Silk Road across Eurasia, whereas "One Road" refers to the "twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road"—the sea route that connects China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The Official Action Plan for the OBOR, issued in 2015, underscored the need to "leverage the unique role of overseas Chinese . . . and encourage them to participate in and contribute to the Belt and Road Initiative." This national strategy has been substantially bolstered by an estimated investment of \$890 billion in state and private capital and new institutional mechanisms such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, a China-led multilateral institution headquartered in Beijing.

Chinese companies are involved in infrastructure projects worth more than \$50 billion in ASEAN

Many in the Chinese diaspora have been strengthening their collective identity as Southeast Asians.

member countries. Most of these companies are state-owned enterprises. They have actively taken part in this new “going-out strategy,” sometimes in partnership with well-established overseas Chinese business and social networks.

China’s engagement with Southeast Asia and the Chinese diaspora in the region is not confined to the economic arena; it also extends to the social and cultural spheres. Beijing’s policy emphasizes strengthening networks with immigrant organizations, fostering technological and cultural exchanges, and supporting the development of Chinese communities abroad as a means of improving China’s image and facilitating its “peaceful rise.”

An important part of this soft-power initiative is the proliferation of Confucius Institutes, which are set up in foreign countries by the Chinese government, often in collaboration with foreign educational entities, to promote Chinese language and culture. By the end of 2015, there were 30 Confucius Institutes and 20 Confucius Classrooms (which provide Chinese-language instruction in local schools with support from the Confucius Institutes) in Southeast Asia, accounting for 27 percent and 22 percent of their respective distributions in Asia. More than 150,000 people participate in related cultural activities. In the Southeast Asian context these centers have wide political and social influence. More and more students in the region are opting to study in China, helped by generous Chinese government scholarships earmarked for citizens of ASEAN countries (10,000 were to be awarded annually for 10 years starting in 2010).

THE DRAGON’S DESCENDANTS

China has clearly engaged with the Chinese diaspora on a substantial and extensive scale, across the economic, social, and cultural fronts. But how do ethnic Chinese communities in the region respond to these initiatives?

As the University of Kyoto’s Caroline Hau has explained, “Sinicization” is a term that has been applied to the revival of a hitherto devalued, occluded, or repressed “Chineseness,” and more generally to “the phenomenon of increasing visibility, acceptability, and self-assertiveness of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.” In other words, pride in being Chinese, the public celebration of Chinese rituals, and the establishment and reinforcement of socioeconomic and cultural connections with the (sometimes imagined) ancestral homeland are key symbols for the diaspora.

Indeed, Sinicization, or re-Sinicization, has become a major trend among the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia over the past two decades or so. This is a product of three processes: an easing of the institutional suppression of Chinese culture and identities, which lasted during much of the Cold War period; China’s efforts to reach out to the Southeast Asian Chinese communities; and the enormous opportunities presented by China’s economic rise, of which a re-Sinicized ethnic Chinese community possessing cultural and social capital would be best poised to take advantage.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who served as prime minister of Malaysia from 2003 to 2009, affirmed his Chinese ancestry after taking office. He said in 2004: “China is today a creator of prosperity of the highest order. Political and social linkages are bound to eventually follow suit. It is therefore important to use every opportunity and establish ties with China.” The Malaysian Chinese Association, which has more than 1.1 million members, echoed his view that the rise of China brought new opportunities, especially for the diaspora.

During the rule of the vehemently anticommunist Indonesian dictator Suharto (1967–98), Jakarta and Beijing were alienated from one another and the use of the Chinese language was prohibited in Indonesia. After Suharto stepped down, Indonesia took a new approach and set out to expand its economic, social, and cultural relations with China. A director of the Ministry of Education said in 2008 that the Indonesian people needed to learn Chinese because China is “a country with a high rate of economic growth.” Since the lifting of a ban in 2001 on Chinese newspapers, associations, and schools—dubbed the “three pillars of Chineseness”—more than 400 Chinese associations have been set up, together with more than a dozen Chinese-language newspapers and more than 50 Chinese schools. According to Indonesia’s 2000 census, only 2.4 million people, or 1.2 percent of the total population, indicated that their ethnic identity was Chinese. In the 2010 census, their share of the population increased to 3.7 percent, or 8.8 million people.

Thailand has witnessed a similar Sinicization trend. Before the 1990s, Chineseness and China connections were often seen as a liability in politics and society. They have now become an asset for politicians and business people. In recent years, several prime ministers and politicians have openly acknowledged having Chinese ancestry, seeking to enhance their domestic popularity by

suggesting that they will be able to open the door to China wider. “Every time we sit down with the Chinese [officials], all the Thais are always tracing their ancestry,” a Thai senator told American journalist Joshua Kurlantzick in 2005. After visiting the Dragon Descendants Museum built in 2008 by former Prime Minister Banhan Sinlapa-archa, whose Chinese heritage was critically scrutinized when he was in power in the mid-1990s, one local Thai-Chinese remarked: “I am proud to be one of the descendants of the dragon too.” This trend would have been unimaginable 25 years ago.

The Sinicization phenomenon has a cultural side as well. The past decade has seen a rapid spread of Chinese-language schools in Southeast Asia. Thailand has the largest number of Confucius Institutes in the region (14 out of 30); more than 12,000 volunteers from China have served in Thailand across all levels of education since 2003. In 2015 alone, there were more than 1,500 in Thailand, accounting for about 17 percent of all volunteer teachers the Confucius Institute’s headquarters dispatched worldwide that year. Along with professional teachers from China and local teachers in Thailand, they served more than 800,000 students. While many of these learners might not be ethnic Chinese (in fact, non-Chinese pupils now outnumber Chinese students in some of these schools in Malaysia), it is estimated that about 20–25 percent are members of the diaspora.

Chineseness does not just entail cultural values and ethnic pride; it can be strategically converted into economic capital. It has often been called an essential starting point for business networking in the Chinese-speaking world. At the Second World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention in 1993, Lee Kuan Yew said: “We would be foolish not to use the ethnic Chinese network to increase our reach and our grasp of these opportunities.” The convention, inaugurated two years earlier in Singapore, has since become an important transnational platform for business activities.

The Singapore case is by no means unique. The past two decades have witnessed a mushrooming of Chinese voluntary associations (based on the organizational principles of locality, kinship, and occupation) that hold their international gatherings in different corners of the world, especially Southeast Asia. China figures prominently on these occasions, as a central theme and a main participant. These cross-border associations, some of which were set up specifically to connect with

China’s Maritime Silk Road strategy, have become steadily more institutionalized.

Sinicization has become one of the defining characteristics of Southeast Asian Chinese communities at a time when China’s economic and cultural clout is growing. This phenomenon covers the spectrum of society, from the political and economic elite to the general public, and it extends to economic, social, and cultural arenas. There is no doubt that China’s extensive engagement with Southeast Asia and its diaspora communities is contributing to the resurgence of interest in Chinese culture and China. Nevertheless, Sinicization is driven primarily by the Southeast Asian Chinese communities as a strategy for responding to the opportunities presented by a rising China. The desire to revive Chinese culture and reclaim ethnic pride facilitates the process.

SUSPECT LOYALTIES

In multiracial and plural societies in which indigenous politicians have long been suspicious of minorities known for their trading networks, Sinicization is bound to encounter discontent and resistance, especially given China’s troubled historical relationship with the region. Current regional and global geopolitics add further complications: countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam are locked in disputes with China over competing territorial claims to the South China Sea, and since the United States’ strategic “pivot to Asia” began in 2011, the region has increasingly become an arena of Sino-American and Sino-Japanese competition for political, economic, and cultural influence.

Indigenous ethnic groups in Southeast Asian countries are worried about China’s growing and potential influence on the political allegiance of their ethnic Chinese populations. Meanwhile, desinicization is happening: many in the Chinese diaspora have been increasingly identifying with their compatriots, strengthening their collective identity as Southeast Asians.

In Indonesia in recent years, the relationship between ethnic-Chinese associations and China has become ever closer. In 2011 alone, 138 mainland delegations visited Indonesia. Mainstream Indonesian newspapers such as *Koran Tempo* have warned that China “is attempting to influence the vast majority of naturalized ethnic Chinese citizens of Indonesia in a centripetal direction,” and even suggested that “in the nation’s interest, we should disband and prohibit all Indonesian-Chinese associations.”

Suspensions of Chinese cultural influence have also been aired in Vietnam, one of the most Sinitized countries in the region. One senior government official told Radio Free Asia in 2009, “In the view of Vietnamese people, Confucius Institutes are nothing but a political organ or have a close association with politics. It is thought that when a Confucius Institute is established in Vietnam, it is synonymous with the Vietnamese government’s confirmation of subordination to China.”

De-Sinicization may be driven by the domestic agendas of Southeast Asian countries, sometimes inadvertently. Singapore took the lead in revitalizing Chinese culture while expanding its economic reach in mainland China, where the city-state, despite its tiny size, is the single largest foreign direct investor. Its low fertility rate has led to a massive influx of immigrants since the mid-1990s, many of whom are new migrants from the PRC. Contrary to expectations that they would be embraced by a country in which 75 percent of the population is ethnically Chinese, there is strong resentment of the new immigrants among locally-born Singaporean Chinese.

The influx of new immigrants leads to fierce competition over scarce resources, including jobs, schools, housing, and public transport. The new immigrants, who are mostly from north China, are socially and culturally different from most Singaporeans, whose ancestors came from South China and brought different subethnic traditions. Even if many new immigrants acquire Singaporean nationality, they tend to continue to identify politically with China.

Under the new circumstances in Singapore, ethnic differences between local Chinese and Malays (as well as Indians) have gradually blurred, thus strengthening the local identity of ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians. In June 2011, a Singaporean Chinese told *the Star*, a Malaysian newspaper: “I feel closer to my Malay and Indian Singaporean brothers whom I grew up with, whom I did national service with, than some mainland Chinese.” In other words, although new immigrants and Singaporean Chinese are of the same ethnicity and cultural heritage, their political and social backgrounds are quite divergent. (In a similar vein, the local-born Chinese in Laos see new Chinese migrants as “aggressive business competitors” who

have very limited contacts with the local community.)

Immigration became a hotly contested issue in Singapore’s 2011 general election and served as a rallying point around which opposition parties could organize popular discontent. The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) received 60 percent of the vote, its lowest share since independence in 1965, while the opposition parties made major gains. The government responded with a series of new policy initiatives, including stricter control of immigration and placing Singaporeans first in line for public services and welfare benefits. The PAP made a comeback in the 2015 election, taking 70 percent of the vote.

A key characteristic of de-Sinicization is the supremacy of national interest over ethnic commonality. On his first state visit to China in 2011, Benigno Aquino III, then the president of the Philippines, claimed that a side trip to his ancestral home in southern Fujian was the “best thing”

about his visit. However, his Chinese ancestry did not stop Aquino from confronting China over its territorial claims in the South China Sea and strengthening military ties with the United States. In 2013, his administration filed a case

at the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea, seeking arbitration of the maritime dispute. Beijing refused to participate in the hearings and dismissed the verdict when the tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines in July 2016.

However, since Rodrigo Duterte took over the Philippine presidency on June 30, he has signaled a policy of distancing Manila from Washington, downplaying the South China Sea dispute and the tribunal ruling. He also said publicly, “It’s China that has money, not America. America doesn’t have money.” A shift from diplomatic confrontation to economic cooperation with China may provide greater opportunities for the ethnic Chinese in the country, who have substantial influence in the local economy.

DELICATE DANCE

Wang Gungwu, the doyen of overseas Chinese studies, has reminded us that Chinese groups are not static communities; instead, they are “agents of change,” heterogeneous, mobile, and dynamic. In his classic study of Southeast Asian Chinese

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politics in the early twentieth century, Wang identified three major groups among the diaspora: one was mainly concerned with Chinese national politics and its international ramifications; the second with local community politics; and the third with the politics of non-Chinese hierarchies, whether indigenous, colonial, or nationalist.

In the twenty-first century, ethnic Chinese in the region continue to face difficult strategic choices. While increasing identification with and political allegiance to their Southeast Asian homelands has been a dominant trend, a rising China and its growing economic clout may also bolster the Sinitization process, which has already led to social and cultural realignments in these countries.

When a big power rises, the existing regional and international orders undergo inevitable changes, leading to power shifts. Apart from the dynamic geopolitics and diplomacy among nation-states, we must examine the changing relationship between diplomacy and diaspora, along with its larger ramifications. The Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia is in a delicate and complicated position, trying to balance ethnic and national interests in a highly volatile environment. The interplay of three key stakeholders—the nations of Southeast Asia, their ethnic Chinese communities, and China—will collectively shape the futures not only of the Chinese diaspora but of the region as a whole. ■