

Chee Kiong Tong

Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia

Racializing Chineseness



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Chee Kiong Tong
Department of Sociology
National University of Singapore
03-06 11 Arts Link
Singapore 117570
Singapore
soctck@nus.edu.sg

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Chapter 1

Racializing Chineseness

1.1 Introduction

At present, it is estimated that there are 18–20 million ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. In the context of the Chinese Diaspora, this constitutes about 80–85% of all Chinese found outside China. As such, any attempt to understand the Chinese Diaspora will benefit from an analysis of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, where the migrant Chinese find themselves co-existing in states with multiple different ethnic groups. The demographic profile and the position of the Chinese in these countries are quite different, providing a fascinating case study of ethnicity and ethnic relations. While Singapore has almost 80% of her population who are Chinese, Indonesia is home to over 300 ethnic groups with several hundred languages, and the Chinese constituting only 3% of the population. The sociological question is whether the different ethnic compositions and the different trajectory of the population result in different conceptions of Chinese identity. One of the main focus on this book, based on primary data collected in the various countries in Southeast Asia, relates to who and what is a Chinese. What are the markers of ethnic identity? How is ethnic identity presented? Are there similarities or differences on how ethnic identity is constructed in these different countries?¹

Southeast Asian host countries exhibit very different stances and strategies in relating to and dealing with ethnic and religious minority groups. For example, Thailand is dominated by the “Tai” people who have allegedly assimilated the Mons, Chan, Lao, and the Chinese into Thai society. One supposedly witnesses a similar scenario in the Philippines. Malaysia and Indonesia, on the other hand, are marked by ethnic conflicts and discrimination against their minorities. This book critically re-examines the major hypotheses regarding ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. What are the ethnic policies of the various countries on the minority Chinese? What are the social consequences of these policies? Using intensive case interviews and fieldwork in various Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam and the Philippines, the book examines the nature and processes of ethnic relations and interactions between the members of the host countries and the Chinese population in these countries.² Using a

comparative analysis, it will explore the causes and consequences of ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. How is the “other” conceptualized?

Given the cultural and ethnic diversities of Southeast Asia, it is not surprising that many ideas, images and concepts have been developed in an effort to understand the ethnic mosaic of Southeast Asia. One of the earliest was the idea of dual society. Boeke (1961), a Dutch scholar and colonial administrator, argued that economic growth and developments in trade and commerce created two separate sectors of society. One sector was impoverished and underdeveloped, centering in traditional rural areas, and the other, westernized, affluent and capital intensive, was located in the urban areas. Countries in Southeast Asia that supposedly exemplify this idea are Malaysia and Indonesia. Boeke’s model, however, seemed to have assumed that each sector of the economy is closed, clear cut, and mutually exclusive. Moreover, it failed take into account the interdependence of the rural and urban economies.

Furnivall (1956) suggested an alternative idea, that of plural society. He argued that Southeast Asia, towards the end of colonial rule, had “three social orders, the native, the Chinese and the Europeans, living side by side, but separately. . . save in the material and economic spheres.” To Furnivall, plural society “comprises two or more elements of social orders which live side by side, yet mingling in one political unit.” Promulgated in 1939, the plural society idea is still widely used today to explain ethnic relations in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as West Indian societies. Like that of Boeke, Furnivall’s model is too rigid, with strict compartmentalization of groups along ethnic and racial lines. Moreover, it does not account for relations of power, interracial marriages, or acculturation. There is too much emphasis on the polarization of ethnic groups living in a single society.

The deficiency of Furnivall’s model, at least to Skinner (1957a, 1963) is exemplified by the case of Thailand. Skinner argues that a majority of the descendants of Chinese immigrants in each generation merged with Thai society and have become indistinguishable from the indigenous population to the extent that fourth generation Chinese are practically non-existent. He suggests that the similarities of Thai and Chinese cultural inventory have many points in common, and as such, leads to the assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society.³ I suggest that Skinner himself has overemphasized the power of the forces of assimilation. This is evident in the anomalies that were found during the fieldwork with regard to the situation of the Chinese in Thailand today.

Writing in the 1960s, Purcell proposed an ethnic persistence approach. He attempted to evaluate the prospects of assimilation of the overseas Chinese, and noted that the Chinese in Malaya remained very much Chinese in their outlook, speech, religion and cultural traditions. Although they readily accepted a framework of the local government in Malaya, they stubbornly refuse to cease to act and think as Chinese and were very conscious of themselves as a race: “Even now in the world flux of ideas the Chinese of Malaya remain very much as they have always been. About a tenth, maybe are converted to European values; the rest cling resolutely to their language and their religion; they retain their ideographs and their

superstitions; they prefer their own way of eating and drinking; their old style doctor has not been destroyed in competition with his Western educated brother” (Purcell, 1967: 290).

However, concepts such as assimilation, integration, and acculturation do not capture the complexities of ethnic identity and ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. One of the key aims of this book is to, based on the empirical data collected in the various countries in Southeast Asia, develop new conceptual models and to retheorize ideas of ethnic identity and ethnic relations in Southeast Asia.

1.2 Research Problematics

1.2.1 *Identity, Hybridity, and Multiple Chineseness*

Despite the voluminous literature devoted to the topic, a description of whom, or what, is a Chinese, and what constitutes Chineseness remains elusive. Wang (1999) notes that, “there is nothing absolute about being Chinese.” Goodman (1997: 18) described it as a “fragile identity (even) for the ethnic Chinese themselves.” Clearly, the terms “Chinese” or “Chineseness” remain problematic categories, embody many dimensions, and require further analysis. Moreover, given the Chinese Diaspora, would the conception of Chineseness be similar across different countries. For example, does a Chinese in Malaysia has the same conception of being Chinese as one who had migrated to and grew up in Thailand? Would a Chinese in Singapore share the same markers of Chineseness as one who lives in a village in China? If they are similar, then it is interesting to try to account for why this is so. If they are different, then, the question is what factors would account for the different conceptions of Chineseness. Is it historical and environmental factors? Is it due to the treatment of the Chinese migrants by the host population? Or is it the impact of the state policies of the host societies?

To understand Chinese ethnicity in Southeast Asia requires a nuanced grasp of the particular context framing the development of Chineseness across history and geography, as well as a critical recognition of the theoretical precedents in conceptualizing the Chinese. Central to such a discussion would be a revisitation of the theoretical debates surrounding the ethnic approaches of primordialism and situationalism, conceptions of assimilation, acculturation, integration and pluralism, and reconsideration of the role of the state in orchestrating the dynamics of ethnic relations in the light of how ethnic groups themselves determine their self identity and establish their boundaries in relations to other groups.

The book aims to recast the theoretical ideas surrounding the issues of ethnic identity of the Chinese based on primary data collected in the various countries of Southeast Asia. One of the key focus is to problematize the label, Chineseness. It will be suggested that Chineseness is a dynamic rather than a static concept, and that the Chinese do not constitute a homogenous group. In the same vein, the indigenous groups are also not homogenous. Labels such as “Thai,” “Indonesian,” “Burmese,”

“Filipino,” are treated as problematic, not given. The discourse of identity and ethnicity, how individuals or groups of individuals, make sense of and negotiate their identities in multi-cultural societies, is the main focus of this book. Analysis will center on the “symbols” and “languages” employed to unite and demarcate groups. Additionally, it examines how self-perception and others’ perception are juxtaposed and mediated. In the process, the ambiguities, overlaps, and varieties of ethnic identity will be uncovered.

In the literature on ethnic identity, the distinction between primordial and situational perspectives of ethnicity has been much debated and become highly polarized.⁴ Primordialism, as originally coined by Edward Shils, was most notably developed by Clifford Geertz as a means of accounting for the strength of ethnic ties. According to Shils (1957: 122), “the attachment to another member of one’s kinship group is not just a function of interaction. . . it is because a certain ineffable significance is attributed to the tie of blood”. Geertz (1963: 259) extended this proposition by arguing that “a primordial attachment is . . . one that stems from the ‘givens’. . . [T]hese congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves”. Like Geertz, Isaacs (1975: 30–31) believed that an ethnic group is composed of . . . “primordial affinities and attachments” . . . [that] a person . . . acquires at birth . . . [and] it is distinct from all other multiple and secondary identities [that] people acquire. Basic group identity therefore comprises a “ready-made set of endowments and identifications which every individual shares with others from the moment of birth . . . of which the physical characteristics that make up the body and the name are two important diacritical markers.” Ultimately, primordialists believe that what matters most is that these ties of blood, language, and religion “are *seen* by actors to be . . . obligatory; that they are *seen* as natural” (Jenkins, 1997: 45; emphases original).

Sociobiologists like van den Berghe (1978, 1995) have extended the primordialist position by arguing that ethnicity is “both primordial and sentimental”, hence attention should be paid to the biological markers of race, because ethnic and race relations are “extensions of the idiom of kinship” (1995: 359–368). Ethnicity (and race) is “[the] main genetic mechanism for animal sociality. . . to maximize inclusive fitness” (van den Berghe, 1978: 402).⁵

Thus, primordialism is based on the idea that ethnicity is very much “fixed, fundamental, and rooted in the unchangeable circumstances of birth” (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 48). It stresses the natural and fundamental characteristic of ethnicity to an individual or group and as such it has been viewed as a perspective that resists the potential for dynamism and movement between ethnicities, or even change and innovation within ethnicities. The primordial approach has been criticized for presenting a model of ethnicity that is static and essentialized and lacking in its explanatory powers. Brass (1991: 73) has argued that the primordial position is inadequate because “even when there is a persisting core culture, knowledge of its substance may not be of much use in predicting either the development or the form of ethnic movements on behalf of the cultural groups in question”. Vernon Reynolds (1980: 312) argues against a case for the sociobiologist-primordialist perspective

because he believes that van den Berghe's only evidence for primordialism is that it is "based on genetic kin selection, and that it is an extension of that old kinship sentiment which can be simply expressed as 'help your own kin, not outsiders'" which leaves "the theory. . . at this very nebulous level and no further evidence in its favor is offered . . . These statements are [thus] made a priori without supporting evidence".

Contrastingly opposed to the primordial model is that of situationalism (similarly known as circumstantialism or instrumentalism), which stresses instead the flexibility of ethnic ties over time, and views ethnicity as instrumental to an individual or group depending on the circumstance, and as established and maintained through the negotiation of ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1969). Ethnicity, in this case, has to therefore be considered in relation to other competing identities, values and interests, and as such, has to be recognized as socially constructed. This model of ethnicity emphasizes "a degree of plasticity in ethnic identification and in the composition of ethnic groups" (Jenkins, 1997: 44). As the term suggests, one of the central themes of the situational position is that individuals, or actors, are able to "break away" from their ethnic heritages and blend with another culture or even create their own individual or group identities (Bhabha, 1990). Thus, the "variability in the affirmation of ethnic identity may be dependent upon the immediate social situation" (Okamura, 1981: 452), so that an "individual's membership in a particular group in a particular situation is 'determined' by the values, interests, and motives that influence his behavior in that situation" (Gluckman, 1958, cited in Okamura, 1981: 453). Unlike the primordialists, situationalists believe in choice and proactivity in determining one's ethnic identity or ethnic group membership. Situational ethnicity is therefore "motivated[;] it comes into being for a purpose and its continued existence is tied to that purpose" (Banks, 1996: 39).⁶

With the emergence of situationalist approaches to ethnicity, there has been a marked decline in the use of primordial approaches in favor of the situationalist ones, especially upon further refinement of the situationalist perspective as not referring merely to the simplistic notion of individuals or groups choosing their ethnicities, but rather in recognizing that real differences in ethnic groups lie in potential identity markers that are "taken up and mobilized only where it suits the purposes of a particular encounter" (Wallman, 1979). However, there has also been a growing consensus that the sole adoption of either approach is limiting and flawed. The primordialists have been criticized for their static and naturalistic view of ethnicity (Eller and Coughlan, 1993), and the situationalists for defining ethnic interests in primarily material terms and in doing so "underplaying the affective dimensions of ethnicity" (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996: 9). This has led to attempts for a synthesis of the two, and considering how ethnicity may be shown to exhibit *both* primordial and situational attributes (van den Berghe, 1993: 360).

David Brown (1994: xviii) argues that this involves first challenging the antithetical conception of both perspectives, and then moving beyond simply taking a middle position between the two, to developing a distinct perspective. For him, ideology is proposed as a mediating concept which may be seen to feature in both primordial and situational perspectives of ethnicity. In primordialism, the rights

claim of the ethnic community rests upon the ideology employed, while in situationalism, ideology works for the ethnic community, which is conceived as an interest group that mobilizes group solidarity for political action (Brown, 1994: 6). Others such as Ratcliffe (2004: 30) have focused on broader forms of reconciliation, viewing ethnicity as multi-dimensional, layered and stratified, especially in line with contemporary global and transnational movements. Without necessarily reducing itself to post-structuralism, such a view recognizes how levels of primordialism and situationalism coexist, albeit on different planes, in a mutually complementary way. Such advances in reconciling the two allow for a theoretical movement beyond simply casting them as diametrical opposites.⁷

In revisiting this primordialist-situationalist debate, it is proposed that the arguments from both perspectives still remain relevant to studies of ethnicity today. While a theoretical synthesis of the two is demonstrably possible, the important question is in fact the extent to which these syntheses may be empirically helpful (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996: 9). The following chapters on the specific ethnic situation of the Chinese in their various countries demonstrate a strong empirical case for the salience of both perspectives in explaining the way in which ethnic identity is constructed, understood and maintained by the ethnic Chinese. In each case, primordialism remains central as the association with one's Chineseness rests foundationally on generational lineage as well as physical attributes. The book attempts to develop a model of ethnicity that synthesizes both approaches in a single framework that incorporates historical processes and local contexts.

A recurrent statement made by informants across Southeast Asia on their ethnic identity is that of one being born a Chinese, and that being a fact that cannot be altered regardless of circumstance. Physical attributes of Chineseness, despite its problematic use, also continues to remain a predominant discourse in one's identification with Chineseness. This suggests that ethnicity is much more resilient than the situationist argue. Although external circumstances, as the various chapters in the book will show, may affect and shape identities, there is evidence that primordial and racial attachments remains very strong and central. Furthermore, this identity "provides an affective dimension to...ethnic solidarity...As long as ethnicity is *felt*, then, the concept of primordial sentiments is essential to our understanding of this experience" (Scott, 1990: 167; emphasis in original).

At the same time, however, the situationalist perspective proves to be equally useful and accurate in explaining Chinese ethnicity in the region, by casting light on what may be considered the other side of ethnicity that is fluid and flexible. The Indonesian case, for example, shows how ethnicity for some become instrumental, one that is flaunted when beneficial and discarded when it becomes dangerous, threatening or inconvenient to be Chinese. Clearly, both perspectives offer different insights into Chinese ethnicity in the region, and both must be considered together for a fair and complete depiction of what it means to be a Chinese in Southeast Asia.

That Chinese ethnicity is best understood in both primordial and situationalist terms suggest that a homogenous conception of Chineseness is not only self-limiting, but also inaccurate. Instead, the notion of multiple Chineseness captures most realistically the complexity and layered density of the relation

between the Chinese in the region and their ethnic identities. The case of the Chinese in Singapore provides a particularly appropriate example, where the many facets of Chineseness may be most aptly described as its many masks that may be adorned, yet always having one face. In addition, the Chinese residing within the geo-political boundaries of any particular nation-state cannot be seen as one unified and necessarily distinguishable group. The case of the Indonesian Chinese bears testament to this, where Chinese identities vary across regions within Indonesia itself. Similarly, in the case of Thailand, the levels of cultural assimilation through intermarriage further problematize the view of the Chinese as one homogenous entity. Taken from the point of view of a regional whole, Chinese ethnicity cannot be isolated by any particular identity marker or ethnic boundary, but rather manifests itself through the complex phenomenon of multiple Chineseness.

In the process of linking a primordial identity with the notion of multiple Chinese, the book suggests that ethnic identity should be conceptualized in a model as *center-periphery identity*. At the center or core, Chinese ethnic identity is viewed in primordial terms, that is, it is “deeply rooted, given at birth, and largely unchangeable” (van den Berghe, 1978: 401). By using physiological (fair skinned, dark hair, slanted eyes), genotypical (blood) and descent (born Chinese) traits, it suggests that Chinese identity is irreducible and ascribed, natural and a given. Not only is it primordial, at the center, identity takes on a more expressive nature, rather than being instrumental. Drawing from De Vos and Romannuci-Ross (1982), it can be argued that at the center, in such private places as home, community halls, clan associations and social get togethers, ethnicity is manifested expressively to meet personal social and emotional needs. Here, identity not only operates at the personal level, but at the same time is utilized at the group level for group cohesion (see Tong and Chan, 1998).

In contrast, at the periphery or on the fringe, as opposed to the center, ethnic identity is more instrumental rather than expressive. As opposed to the private nature of ethnicity at the core, at the fringes, in public places and where there are transactions and negotiations with other ethnic groups, particularly members of the host society, we observe a more situationist view of ethnic identity. Here, we find multiple Chineseness; ethnic identity becomes changeable, culturally and ecologically defined, and situationally sensitive. Ethnic identification becomes a “strategic” choice by individuals who, in other circumstances, would choose other forms of group membership as a means of gaining some power and privilege (Bell, 1975: 17). Thus, identity at the periphery is achieved, rather than ascribed. Depending on the social context, the Chinese present certain aspects of their ethnic identity to deal with the host population, and the business of living an everyday life as a migrant minority in a new host society. In the strategic use of ethnic identity, ethnicity becomes more fluid and more plastic.

Thus, for the Chinese in Southeast Asia, there is a core primary identity, best expressed and nurtured in private. This is, in a sense, a master identity. The Chinese individual also has a secondary identity, one that displays different facets of its self in different social situations. Once the primary birth principle of classification at the center is satisfied, the secondary principle or plural conceptions of identity is often