

THE OVERSEAS CHINESE



SOUTHEAST ASIA

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THE Overseas Chinese (*hua-chiao*) in southeast Asia have a long historical background. In fact, no one really knows how long those Chinese communities have existed.

Long before the discovery of America there were Chinese settlements in the *Nanyang*, or South Ocean—the Chinese name for southeast Asia. Why was

this so? Population pressure seems to provide the best answer. Over 90 percent of the Overseas Chinese come from the two southern Chinese provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung. Economic pressures forced the inhabitants of these overpopulated mountainous provinces to earn a living abroad; the *Nanyang* became their dreamland. Those underpopulated regions with their rich resources attracted the poor Chinese people like a powerful magnet.

Until the late 19th century the Chinese Government usually prohibited its people from going abroad, and migrants were often regarded by the authorities as *chien min*, or traitors; sometimes they were executed. The migrants, however, still continued to go abroad individually or in small groups.

Western Colonialism

There have been important enclaves of Chinese residents in southeast Asia since the 16th century, and, when the Europeans came to southeast Asia, the Chinese had already established themselves in that general area. Nevertheless, the advent of Western colonialism created an unprecedentedly favorable condition for the immigration of additional Chinese people.

The Westerners maintained law and order and brought security and opportunity for economic development. The exploitation of natural resources and the exportation of raw materials both required the contribution of Chinese labor. Under the protection of the colonial powers, the standards of living

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of the Overseas Chinese improved steadily; the latter finally gained control not only of most of the retail trade, but also of much of the international business.

Golden Age

Generally speaking, the period of Western colonialism may be considered as being the golden age of the Overseas Chinese. There was a substantial influx of Chinese immigrants throughout those years, a flow that kept increasing through the early part of the 20th century and then was virtually cut off by World War II. In the postwar period, almost without exception, the newly independent nations have restricted the immigration of Chinese people. Thus, there has been no significant flow of Chinese people to southeast Asia in recent years, although a trickle of illegal immigration has still continued.

Nobody knows for certain how many Chinese people live outside their fatherland. The highest estimate is 15 million; the lowest, 11 million. Certainly, the large majority of the Overseas Chinese—as much as 90 percent of the total number—live in southeast Asia.

Strictly speaking, the term Overseas Chinese possesses an ambiguous meaning, and the problem of the dual citizenship of those individuals has continually perplexed a number of the countries in southeast Asia, as well as other countries in the world. But if only those so-called "ethnic" or "legal" Chinese were to be counted—those who look like, act like, and think themselves as Chinese—a safe figure for the number of Overseas Chinese in southeast Asia would be 10 million. If those of mixed-blood were also counted, the number would be much greater.

Although the Overseas Chinese constitute only five to six percent of the total population in southeast Asia, the influence of the Chinese in this area is considerably out of proportion to their numbers. The Overseas Chinese possess great economic power throughout the whole region, and, because the distribution of the Chinese population

ure may be underestimated because there is little difference between many mixed-blood Thais and Chinese. In Vietnam the 900,000-odd Chinese occupy only a little over three percent of the total population, but most of them live in the southern part of that country.

In most of the other southeast Asian

CHINESE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

	Chinese	Total Population
Burma	350,000	23,735,000
Thailand	3,000,000	27,000,000
Laos	45,000	2,400,000
Cambodia	390,000	5,748,000
North Vietnam	60,000	15,900,000
South Vietnam	850,000	14,200,000
Malaya	2,760,000	7,490,000
Singapore	1,290,000	1,740,000
Indonesia	2,900,000	97,100,000
Sarawak	244,000	776,000
Brunei	20,000	85,000
North Borneo (Sabah)	104,000	454,000
Philippines	360,000	27,000,000

in southeast Asia is far from being even, this factor gives them relatively heavy weight in certain countries. Today, the main areas of concentration are the Federation of Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia (see chart).

Singapore is really a Chinese city; in Malaya the Chinese constitute about 37 percent of the total population, only slightly outnumbered by the Malays. The Chinese population in the rest of Malaysia and Brunei has been estimated as numbering four million or more, two-fifths of the total population.

In Thailand the three million Chinese make up about 10 percent of the total population, but, in fact, this fig-

ures, the percentage of Overseas Chinese in the total population is small. The actual number of Chinese in Indonesia is rather large, but they constitute only three percent of the total population.

Although sharing a common Chinese culture, the Chinese communities in southeast Asia are far from being homogeneous. The communities are often divided into many subgroups which tend to preserve their peculiar dialects and distinctive customs, and much of the daily life of the individual is confined in the narrow sphere of his own community.

Except for the regions immediately adjacent to China's southern borders,

strong racial differences exist between the Chinese and the southeast Asians. For the most part, there are differences in religion, too. Islam, which prevails in much of southeast Asia, has always been a serious obstacle to the assimilation of the pork-eating Chinese.

The Chinese cling to their mother tongue and social customs firmly, are almost completely unassimilated, and always regard themselves as Chinese. Their loyalties are primarily toward their fatherland. Although there are many differences, even conflicts, among the subgroups in the Chinese communities, the Overseas Chinese have generally acted with some degree of unity in their relations with the native populations.

Political Life

Since the establishment of the newly independent nations throughout southeast Asia and the rise of a strong Communist power on the Chinese mainland, the peaceful and pleasant life of the Overseas Chinese has been changed drastically. Political power has passed to new groups of native Nationalists who do not desire the Overseas Chinese continuously dominating their national economic life and who wish to accelerate the assimilation of the alien minorities.

Although the Overseas Chinese in southeast Asia have traditionally avoided participating in local politics, this does not mean that the Overseas Chinese lack political life. On the contrary, they have a complex political life in their own communities. In fact, the Overseas Chinese are one of the most highly organized people in the world through their clan or family associations; provincial or district associations; benevolent associations; chambers of commerce and different

trade guilds; labor unions; and secret and fraternal societies. These Overseas Chinese organizations are all local in nature, and there is little relation, for example, between groups in Bangkok and their equivalents in Manila or Singapore.

The future political life of the Overseas Chinese in southeast Asia will be determined by several factors:

- Their percentage of the total population.
- The relative political ability of rival political national groups.
- The attitude and policies of the present regimes.
- The foreign relations of the various countries.

In Singapore the Chinese are in the vast majority, and in Malaya they also form a large proportion of the total population. Therefore, they will doubtlessly play an important role in deciding the political future of those areas. On the whole, the Overseas Chinese surely will be a major political force in the newly founded Federation of Malaysia. Facing the serious threat offered by Indonesia, the internal security of that Federation is more important than ever. Therefore, how to maintain the racial balance and how to secure the cooperation of the various ethnic groups will certainly be important tasks for its statesmen to accomplish.

External Relations

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the development of modern Chinese nationalism has had a strong influence on the Overseas Chinese and has strengthened the political links between them and their fatherland. They gave major financial support to Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement and later to the Nationalist Government, especially during the Sino-Jap-

anese War. After the 1911 revolution, representatives from the Overseas Chinese communities were included in the legislative bodies of the Republic of China. Both the Chinese Nationalists and the Chinese Communists still use this system.

Today, the Overseas Chinese have become trapped in the midst of a triangular power struggle. They are pushed and pulled by forces from three sides—from the southeast Asian countries, from Communist China, and from Nationalist China. They are not only an important factor in China's own political struggle, they also constitute an instrument through which China can influence political development in southeast Asia.

From the point of view of the south-

paid attention to the problem of the Overseas Chinese. Up to 1954 Communist China adopted a "hard" policy line, her statements often rendered in a threatening tone. Since then the Chinese Communists have shifted to a "soft" line, but their basic aim remains unchanged.

The Chinese Communist leaders undoubtedly regard the Overseas Chinese as a useful instrument in their grand strategy of world revolution. On the one hand, they attempt to use the Overseas Chinese as a weapon of infiltration and subversion; on the other, they use the dual-nationality problem as an important means to bargain for other advantages.

There is also an economic aspect to Communist China's policy. Emigrant



Chinese sampans in Hong Kong

east Asians, the threat offered by Communist China is much greater than that offered by Nationalist China. Since they came into power, the Chinese Communists have consistently

remittances have long been a vital factor in China's international balance of payments. Although those remittances—which amounted to 100 million dollars annually just prior to

World War II—are now well below that level, they still provide a substantial source of foreign exchange.

Communist China's Government has urged the Overseas Chinese to respect the laws and customs of the various countries in which they reside. It has also declared that "China has no intention whatsoever to subvert the governments of its neighboring countries."

Aggressive Policy

This is no guarantee, however, that Communist China has really given up an aggressive policy. Under the cover of normal relations, the Overseas Chinese, as vulnerable minorities, could easily become the prey of the strategy of the "united front." Although the majority of Overseas Chinese might not sacrifice their own economic interests in order to serve the Communist regime as an organized fifth column, some of them might be induced or compelled to play this role.

In peacetime, the Overseas Chinese may be manipulated by Communist agents to participate in local political activities and to infiltrate certain important organizations—political parties and labor unions. They may attempt to control those organizations from within, as well as to work hand in hand with the indigenous Communists.

If the opportunity appeared ripe, armed insurgency or guerrilla war could be considered as the next step. During World War II the Overseas Chinese were relatively active in anti-Japanese underground resistance, and they fought bravely both in Malaya and in the Philippines.

The Chinese Communists are consistently strengthening their propaganda and infiltration tactics throughout southeast Asia, but their efforts

still only reach a minority of the Overseas Chinese. The majority of the Overseas Chinese still try to avoid direct political involvement.

The minority that is reached, though, does include the leaders of the various Overseas Chinese communities. Through the latter's efforts, if they so desired and were so inclined, the majority of the Overseas Chinese could be swayed. It is well to remember, however, that the Overseas Chinese are highly opportunistic and would change their political positions quickly to adapt to a new environment. Furthermore, Communist China's recent domestic and foreign policies have caused much disaffection in the Overseas Chinese communities.

Important Rallying Point

Taiwan's influence, the influence that can still be exerted by the Chinese Nationalist Government, should not be underestimated. To many anti-Communist and non-Communist Overseas Chinese, Taiwan is still an important political and psychological rallying point, and the existence of a Chinese Government on that island provides a fatherland for those individuals. Together with Hong Kong, Taiwan is a repository of traditional Chinese culture and is an important center of higher education that can be enjoyed by Chinese youngsters from the overseas communities.

Without adverse intervention, the Overseas Chinese eventually will be integrated into the various nations of southeast Asia. Owing to the restrictions on further immigration, the total number of Overseas Chinese will be stabilized to a considerable extent. At the present time, nearly three-fourths of the Chinese people in southeast Asia are locally born; within the not too distant future, practically all

of the Overseas Chinese will have been born abroad. Admittedly, their full assimilation will require many more years.

In the foreseeable future, therefore, most of the Overseas Chinese will continue to maintain their Chinese attitudes and outlook on life and will maintain a close relationship with their fatherland—either with that part ruled by the Chinese Communists

or the part ruled by the Chinese Nationalists.

Their political outlook will remain a key factor in the future development of southeast Asia. Under proper handling, the problem presented by their presence can be solved smoothly and without great difficulty. If that problem is not properly attended to, a tiny spark of fire could burn down the whole forest.

In Asia, and elsewhere, the forces of the modern world are shaking old ways and uprooting ancient civilizations. There will be turbulence and struggle and even violence. Great social change—as we see in our own country—does not always come without conflict.

President Lyndon B. Johnson