

THE MOSAIC OF ASEAN IDENTITIES: ISSUES, CHALLENGES, AND PROSPECTS IN THE FORMATION OF ASEAN IDENTITY AMONG ETHNIC CHINESE IN INSULAR SOUTHEAST ASIA

LERMIE SHAYNE S. GARCIA

ABSTRACT

Do “peranakan” in Malaysia relate well with peranakan in Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei, or with “tsinoy” in the Philippines? Given the historical reality that they are relative newcomers in the nation-states, how do the peranakan view the concept of nationality? Do they see ASEAN more as a “home” rather than simply a country of residence? Does the presence of Chinese communities in most parts of SEA serve as a cultural thread toward ASEAN Identity? This study investigates the (non)formation of ASEAN Identity among ethnic Chinese in SEA based on various historical records from the

colonial era up to the present. At one point, the locals in each country tended to cooperate with the ethnic Chinese, but after Independence when the latter began to obtain more economic gains, the institutionalization of concepts such as “asli” and “bumiputra” took place, resulting in antagonism, domination, and later, resistance. The centuries-old struggle with adaptation and non-acceptance contributes to the delay in welcoming the idea of an ASEAN Identity among ethnic Chinese.

Keywords: *Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, Peranakan and Tsinoy, ASEAN Identity, ASEAN Regional Integration*

The mosaic of ASEAN Identities: Issues, challenges, and prospects in the formation of ASEAN Identity among ethnic Chinese in insular Southeast Asia

Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia

The most common feature that characterizes the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the diversity in cultures of its member states. This unity-in-diversity also serves as the guiding principle in the development and continuity of ASEAN as a regional organization (Acharya, 1999; Jones, 2004). The diversity is being further complicated by differences in religions within and among countries as well as varieties in ethnicities. Even the predominantly Catholic Philippines and Islamic Indonesia have a population of ethnic Chinese (EC).¹ As a result, it may be more difficult for ASEAN

to build the so called “ASEAN Identity,” one of the key components of ASEAN regional integration. The concept has been loosely defined as the “collective personality, norms, values, and beliefs as well as aspirations as one ASEAN community.”²

This study investigates the (non)formation of ASEAN Identity among EC in insular Southeast Asia (SEA). I speculate that with the exemption of Malaysia, EC are most assimilated in this part of SEA either because of the less strict rules of the governments here after the colonial era or because of the forced assimilation that had happened. Gungwu (1988) explains this as a result of the relatively smaller population in the countries wherein “Chinese identity was believed to be ultimately containable and . . . eventually be replaced by the new local national identity that was being offered” to them (p. 3). Today, approximately 23 million or about 80 percent of EC live in SEA (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 3, p. 89). More than half of this number lives in Insular SEA.

Table 1

Population of EC in insular SEA

	Population (in millions)	Percentage
Brunei	0.42	11-16%
Indonesia	2.8 – 5	1.2 - 2 %
Malaysia	5.5 - 6.24	22.04 - 24.8%
Singapore	4.1	74.3%
Philippines	1	1%
TOTAL	13.82 - 16.76	

Suryadinata, 2006; Suryadinata, 2007; Kang, 2015; www.bbc.com;
www.minorityrights.org; www.singstat.gov.sg

The study explores, first, the ambivalence of the EC experience as a result of external and internal forces. The first assumption is that EC in SEA are assimilated in the countries they live in because of the inhospitable economic, political, and cultural policies in China³ which either forced them to move to or remain in SEA. The accommodating roles of some colonizers, particularly the British, also led to this assimilation. On the other hand, the identity formation favorable to the new local identity may be hindered by what Benedict Anderson (2003) calls “Imagined Community” which describes a nation as an “imagined political community” by people who perceive themselves as part of that group. This means that even EC outside China may also imagine themselves as Chinese.

Second, the study posits that there are more similarities among SEA states aside from the experience of colonization. This is being taken for granted by some scholars who focus on the shared colonial experience as a point of convergence. Additionally, Jones (2004) argues that less attention has been given to address the diversity in culture and ethnicities in regional integration, and more towards economy and politics. The many centuries of migrations and intermarriages before and during the colonial era may have also contributed to the so-called early form of regionalization. The question however is if these historical relations have something to do with the present workings of ASEAN today. Do hybrid communities make the formation of ASEAN Identity easier? Do “peranakan”⁴ in

Malaysia relate well with *peranakan* in Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei or with the “*tsinoy*”⁵ in the Philippines, thus making the concept of ASEAN Identity more possible in the advent of ASEAN regional integration? Although it does not completely focus on this issue, this paper lays the ground for further studies on the topic.

Third, the idea of being “pure” also contributes to the EC’s notion of identity. Many scholars have referred to this as “Chineseness.” In the Philippines, the tendency of EC to marry someone from their group or the so-called “great wall” is an example. Hau (2014) presents the idea of Chineseness by determining how the Chinese culture is embedded in the nation. Additionally, Gungwu (1988) posits that “the Chinese have never had a concept of identity, only a concept of Chineseness” (p.1). The implication of this is the belief that others can be more Chinese, and others, less. In Singapore for instance, there is a belief that the Chinese are not pure in either the Chinese or local sense. As Suryadinata (2007) argues, the Chinese in Singapore have “a sense of local character and are conscious of being Singaporeans” and in fact “do not see any conflict between their Singaporean nationality and their EC origins” (p. 21). Based on these, we can define *Chineseness* in this paper as the level of Chinese culture and tradition that an EC outside of China possesses.

Fourth, the research steps onto the idea that the issue of ethnicity is always a class issue. Focusing on ethnicity issues alone is taking the attention of observers from other issues and challenges that hinder

the formation of ASEAN identity/ies and cooperation. It is important to note that capitalism works as a parasite to racism which may even serve as a tactic for dividing the originally united whole. Hau (2014) earlier explains this using popular culture and determining how it “attempts to defuse the class tensions and nationalist resentment ignited by ‘Chineseness’ by turning deterritorialized ‘Chinese’ flows and connections into sources of Filipino self-advancement” (pp. 223-224). It should be noted that Mahathir Mohammad established the concept of “bumiputra” not because of ethnic hatred but because of economic gains that the EC are perceived to be acquiring in Malaysia. That is why EC can be socially or ethnically stratified or both. At some point in Insular SEA countries, EC became equated with the economically advantaged class. This economic success was attributed to the role of EC tycoons, taipans, or Confucian businessmen (Chu, 2015, p. 215). This became both a threat and an advantage to the EC. Additionally, the so-called “Bamboo Network” demonstrates how the concepts of *guanxi*, *kinship*, and *common origin* became bases for doing business. Interestingly, according to Weidenbaum (1998), most of the investment capital flowing into China does not come from the major powers such as Europe, Japan, or the United States, but from EC living in SEA. It is important to note that after Deng Xiao Ping’s economic liberalization campaign, EC in SEA were able to do business with Chinese in the Mainland. This interest in engaging in business according to Yen (1995) is

because EC are generally an urban class (p. 4). Rather than producing landlord and peasant classes, it produced largely merchant and worker classes.

Furthermore, in analyzing the possibility of an ASEAN Identity among EC in SEA, the internal policies of China across time periods also deserve an important role. For instance, EC in SEA may identify more with Chinese in Mainland China because of their economically developed status at present. However, the “Chinese Green Card” is said to be the world's most difficult to obtain (Zhang & Su, January 26, 2016). Even EC are not an exemption to these strict rules. Nowadays, the card's main goal is to attract foreign talent. For instance, an EC who holds a foreign citizenship and has a high educational qualification such as a PhD can apply for the Chinese green card (Kor Kian Beng, 2016).

Gungwu (1988) earlier laid out the importance of studying Chinese identity based on changing context and events. It is also important to see how the recent initiatives in the ASEAN have changed the way EC in the region view themselves. Later, Hirschman (1988) expounded the idea, arguing that contemporary conditions such as the interaction of Chinese minorities with indigenous populations and national governments also shape EC's identity of themselves. This article tries to assess the possibility of an ASEAN Identity through a review of their experiences during the colonial and post-colonial eras (issues and challenges) and the current status

of EC as well as the ongoing development in ASEAN as a region (prospects).

Migration, assimilation, and antagonization of EC in SEA

Southeast Asia and China have had contacts with each other through trade since the Han dynasty but mass migrations started only in the mid-nineteenth century (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 50).⁶ The original Chinese settlers in SEA came mainly from three provinces—Guangdong, Fujian, and the island of Hainan (Schmetzer, 2010, p. 12). As most scholars studying EC in SEA would say, they were mere “sojourners” rather than “settlers” (Gungwu, 2000; Suryadinata, 2001). Indicative of this is the fact that China claims that Chinese in SEA considered themselves as “overseas Chinese” and even intended to return to their homeland once economic agenda was fulfilled (Suryadinata, 2001, p. 55).⁷ However, the distinct trait of EC in SEA is their readiness to adapt to Western ways early on. As some authors would say, they are neither Chinese nor SEAns, but Western (Hirschman, 1988; Gungwu, 1988). This may have contributed to their assimilation despite the original plan of going back.

The massive mass migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was due to several factors such as political instability, overpopulation, and famine in China (Suryadinata, 2001, p. 58). In most cases, Chinese immigrants were composed of unaccompanied males (Tan, 1988; Lee, 2013; Wickerberg, 2015). With the lack of

Chinese women, Chinese men intermarried with local women and eventually settled down in SEA. Later on, the descendants lost the command of culture and language at various rates.⁸

In most parts of SEA after the 1900s, Chinese immigrants began to bring their wives with them (Tan, 1988, p. 182). When the Dutch allowed the migration of Chinese women to Java, the intermarriage between Chinese men and the locals stopped (Lee, 2013, p. 159). In Indonesia, local women had the advantage of being exempted from tax if they married Chinese immigrants. Thus, according to Lee (2013), whenever ships arrived with Chinese immigrants, the women would line up offering marriage to them (p. 159).

Treatment and perceptions of the EC differ from country to country. For instance, Suryadinata (2007) explains the difference between how Indonesians and Filipinos view the EC in their countries. In Indonesia, the nation is defined in racial rather than cultural terms while in the Philippines, the definition is more cultural rather than racial. As a result, “acculturation of the EC has progressed much more smoothly in the Philippines than in Indonesia” (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 19). Moreover, even locally born EC who speak Indonesian and other regional languages as their first language are not perceived as active participants in the formation of culture of “wayang purwa,” which for many serves as the pinnacle of Javanese culture (Pausacker, 2005, p. 185).

The table below may be too simplistic to completely explain the status of EC in SEA countries in the last century, but may help the reader in understanding their current conditions. The categories indicate whether the situation is favorable towards the EC or not. During the colonial period, being “favorable” means that the colonizers had been welcoming and accommodating to the EC economically and politically. During the Post-Independence and Contemporary period, “favorable” is determined not by the colonizer but by the locals themselves including the government.

Table 2

Status of EC in SEA

Colonizer	Country	Period		
		Colonial	Post-Independence	Contemporary
British	Brunei	favorable	Unfavorable	Unfavorable
	Malaysia	favorable	Unfavorable	Unfavorable
	Singapore	favorable	Favorable	Favorable
Spanish	Philippines	unfavorable	unfavorable, sometimes favorable	Favorable
Dutch	Indonesia	favorable	un/favorable	generally favorable

The colonizers,⁹ although not really in good terms among themselves, found one task in common: to use the Chinese in a divide-and-rule tactic against the locals. Since they were all incapable

of surpassing China's role in the economy, they later saw the Chinese community's promising roles in terms of trade and eventually used them as middlemen (Suryadinata, 2001, p. 57).

Responses from SEA governments varied after the colonial period. Most Insular SEA countries except Malaysia have attempted to assimilate the EC into the local population and either reduce their economic strength or share economic strength through economic coalition (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 18). As an ethnic minority group in the region, EC needed to help each other in order to survive in the new environments (Suyardinata, 2012). In non-Communist states in ASEAN during the Cold War, the EC were considered to be communistic (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 11). The institutionalization of the concepts *asli*, *totok*, and *bumiputra* also affected how Chinese were being treated in the region. In other countries, this was meant to delineate the group from the rest (Freedman, 2000, p. 26). The EC communities in Malaysia and Singapore that were strong, both in the sense of population size and of economic power, had developed a "powerful sense of communal identity to assert the community's right to share power in the country" (Gungwu, 1988, p. 4). After World War II, most EC slowly gave up their Chinese nationalist identities while acquiring a local national one (Gungwu, 1988, p. 10). In the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia where EC were a minority, they became actors towards nation-building. However, it was not always a smooth relationship for both sides. The threat

coming from the perceived economic gains of EC resulted in anti-Chinese concepts and laws. Eventually, these were either scrapped or modified favorably to the EC.

Deepening acculturation in most insular SEAn countries after World War II

In SEAn countries that adopted the market economy, the EC were able to achieve major financial gains and were able to emerge as big capitalists. This is contrary to socialist economies that have not been so accommodating to them because of their capitalist tendencies (Suryadinata, 2001, p. 70). More recently, EC in most SEAn states, with the exception of Malaysia, began to acknowledge their role as citizens even as they are perceived to be threats to the locals (Gungwu, 1988, p. 7). In reality, these EC are actually the new members of the elite class. EC communities only began to participate in politics through the mobilization efforts of community leaders when there are incentives to do so (Freedman, 2000, p. 14). This may be in the aspects of politics, as well as economic and social development.

The citizenship issue has deeply affected the relations between China and SEAn governments. When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, it continued to use the term "overseas Chinese" which led to the suspicions of SEAn governments towards EC (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 301). China was aware of this predicament, leading them to partner with SEAn governments by offering dual-

citizenship to the EC during the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung. Unfortunately, only Indonesia accepted (Suryadinata, 2007, pp. 301-302). Acculturation of EC came as an effort from SEAn governments to guard their suspicions as to EC's relations with the communists in China. As Suryadinata (2007) puts it, "by making the EC less Chinese, the SEA states would feel more secure" (p. 17). In 1980, China unilaterally issued the "nationality law" which recognizes only single citizenship (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 302). However, in countries like the Philippines, the mass naturalization was actually a way of advancing the national interest by making sure that the EC residing in the Philippines, for instance, would not have any opportunity to side with opponents. During the Cold War, the "Chinese Problem" became a highlight in many SEAn governments as they were seen as homogenous group that could not be integrated and assimilated into the new societies they belonged to (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 4). Below is more detailed information on the experiences of EC in Insular SEA.

Brunei¹⁰

The Chinese migrated to Brunei during the British colonial period. In the early part of the twentieth century, there were only around 500 EC in the country (Brunei Times, April 30, 2012). The massive migration happened only after the discovery of oil in 1929 (Minority Rights, n.d.). Between 1931 and 1947, the EC population increased by more than 200 percent. These migrants were mainly

from Sarawak, Singapore, and Hong Kong (Minority Rights, n.d.). The employment opportunities continued to expand, leading to an increase in immigration until after World War II. The EC held British passports during this time but when they left, they became “stateless.” After independence in 1984, only about 9,000 EC were given full Brunei citizenship. From being “stateless,” they became “permanent residents.”

The fact that there are no localized terms in Brunei to refer to the EC means that they are almost non-existent and unrecognized, not only by the state but also by the people. Furthermore, it has been reported that it was easier for EC to obtain permanent residency if they converted to Islam. Even the required Malay language exam has been said to be very complicated for EC who wanted to acquire citizenship. The Minority Rights (n.d.) says that the detailed knowledge exam which requires terms for local plants and animals is discriminatory against non-native speakers, making it more difficult to obtain citizenship. Moreover, EC in Brunei cannot directly own land and are denied a number of rights such as subsidized medical care. This has become a more serious problem when the country’s national ideology, “Melayu Islam Beraja” or Malay Islamic Monarchy, was institutionalized in 1990. Despite this, EC in Brunei are also members of the middle class and dominate the ownership and management of non-energy businesses (Oxford Business Group, 2014).¹¹

Indonesia

When the EC arrived in Indonesia, they were soon separated by a clear distinction between the “peranakan” and “totok.” The totok were engaged in retail trade and had more contacts with lower-class indigenous peoples (Oetomo, 1988, p. 99). Concomitantly, they were not concerned with social stratification and had weaker Chinese identities (Oetomo, 1988, p. 99). Expectedly, the lower class was more indigenized while the upper class was closer to the Dutch. However, totok have an advantage over peranakan because of clan associations and knowledge of the Chinese language. Oetomo (1988) argues that during the colonial period, the use of Indonesian by an EC was a “marker” of his or her identity as an Indonesian national (p. 101). Lee (2013) posits that if the Dutch had not come to Indonesia, the EC would have been completely Javanized either through Islam or intermarriage (pp. 158-159). The Dutch treated the EC differently from the local Indonesians as they appointed EC businessmen as “capitan” to administer their own communities. These capitan helped the Dutch recruit many laborers from China to work in the rice and sugar plantations. Evidently, the Dutch were more concerned with commercial rather than religious gains in Indonesia. Unlike the Spanish who forced the EC to seek intermarriage in the Philippines, the Dutch had no plans of converting them (Lee, 2013, p. 160). At some point, the EC supported the Indonesians against the Dutch. The life of Liem Koen

Hian, who according to Suryadinata (1977) transformed himself from Chinese nationalist to an Indonesian nationalist, is an example.

Gungwu (1988) argues that after World War II, the strongly predominant Chineseness became a problem to the extent that indigenous political leaders found it alarming and it later resulted in institutionalized racism. When Indonesia gained Independence and created the 1945 Constitution which was based mainly on the principle of *Pancasila*, it deliberately used the word “ali” in referring to indigenous Indonesians. At the same time, Indonesians conceptualized the term “asli” (foreigner) which was originally in defense against the Dutch but later on, was extended to the EC (Coppel, 2005, p. 2). The Chinese were then required to change their names. For a time, they were prohibited from learning the Chinese language and celebrating Chinese festivals. Lindsey (2005) further identified several forms of discrimination against Chinese Indonesians such as higher fees, coded identity, and limited access to education. They were also required to obtain a certificate of citizenship for which they had to pay an unofficial fee ranging from US\$ 200 to \$700 (Jakarta Post, January 22, 2012).

The policies of the Indonesian government on Chinese-language schools between 1957 and 1966 were instrumental in provoking an exodus to China by EC students (Bocquet-Siek, 1988, p. 111). It was during this time that EC in Indonesia had better grasp of Chinese culture and identity. That was why China was seen as an indirect

external threat due to subversive activities especially in pursuing the reemergence of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (Sukma, 1999, p. 48). Like the locals, the EC were targeted as victims of violence as had happened in Indonesia during the 1965-1966 communist purging in which close to 2,000 Chinese were killed (Sukma, 1999, p. 48). The violence escalated only two years following the killings wherein incidents like attacks on Chinese consulates in Makassar and Medan and expulsion of around 10,000 Chinese in Aceh were reported (Purdey, 2005, p. 14). Chinese remigration is interesting as it follows a certain trend in their current location and their country of origin, China. In Indonesia, for example, remigration happened in 1960 (following the banning of the retail trade in the rural areas), 1963 (anti-Chinese riot), 1965 (after the abortive coup), and 1998 (May 1998 riots) (Suyardinata, 2007, pp. 61-62).

Today, problems usually persist because of the citizenship certificate called Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia (SBKRI) which EC need to produce before making any deals with the government (Thung, 2012, p. 373). Although there were various initiatives towards democratization in the country after the fall of Suharto and although the EC community in Indonesia has so long demanded the abolition of policies like SBKRI, the latter is unlikely to happen because locals perceive many inevitable problems that may crop up once it is indeed abandoned. On the side of the EC, according to Thung (2012, p. 382), one thing that hinders the

naturalization process is the inability of some Chinese to speak Indonesian fluently, particularly in areas such as Medan, the Riau Islands, and West Kalimantan.

The situation of EC in Indonesia is much more complicated because of the fact that Indonesia is an archipelago which makes the country diverse in many aspects. For instance, the Jakartan Chinese are different from the Medan Chinese or the Jewan Chinese. Furthermore, there exist religious differences among, for instance, Catholic Chinese, Buddhist Chinese, Confucian Chinese, and even Muslim Chinese.¹² Because of this, the heterogeneity cannot be applied not only to ASEAN as a regional organization but within the country itself.

Today, Chinese in Indonesia make up 1.2 to two percent of the total population. This small percentage is even composed of EC from different social backgrounds. There are those who come from the middle to upper classes but there are also those who come from the lower class. One particular group that experiences perhaps the worse poverty among EC in Indonesia is the one in Singkawang, Kalimantan. Women of EC origin there face a serious problem of human trafficking as they are forced to become mail-order brides to get their families out of poverty (Braithwaite, Braithwaite, Cookson, & Dunn, 2010).

By the end of the 1990s, EC controlled 78 percent of the private capital and the country's trade (Schmetzer, 2010, p. 13). However, a

quick glimpse at the Forbes Top 10 list of richest persons in Indonesia would make one think that almost everyone there were locals. Surprisingly, seven out of ten are actually EC, two are Indonesians, and one is Indian. The seven are EC who changed their names into Indonesian-sounding names after World War II. According to Chua (2011), at least half of the billionaires in the country are Chinese. Observers say this number is much higher because many EC in some countries are still reluctant to admit they are of Chinese descent, fearing discrimination.

Malaysia

Malaysia's current rupture as a multi-ethnic society is actually a product of the colonial era when the British tried to define racially segregated roles for Malays and EC or "baba-nyonya" (Debernardi, 2004, p. 36). Debernardi (2014) posits that although there was a policy of religious pluralism in Malaysia during the postcolonial period, Islam is still central to Malay ethnicity (p. 11). The Chinese were able to reproduce their way of life in the Straits settlements. In Penang, Debernardi (2014) notes that most Chinese came as contract workers and were free to undertake other ventures after working for a year (pp. 20-21). Oftentimes, they became intermediaries in the Straits produce. Debernardi (2004, p. 35) claims that many elite Chinese used financial capital in order to increase their social capital. For instance, they donated sums of money to build various

communal institutions. Chinese education was not available in Malaysia until the twentieth century. Families who wanted their children to have a grasp of Confucian classics and Chinese culture had to either hire a private tutor or send their children to China (Debernardi, 2004, p. 23). The latter was more expensive, of course. This is probably one of the reasons why EC here have developed a distinct identity far from the Malays and from the Chinese in China.

From Independence until the late 1960s, Malaysian economy was dominated by foreign investment and EC capital (Leong, 2006, p. 193). Yen (2008) cites the government's New Economic Policy which aimed at "correcting" the economic imbalance as one of the observable features during this time. According to Leong (2006), this policy was responsible for increasing the equity of the bumiputra from four percent in 1970 to about 20 percent in 1997 (p. 194). It became a requirement for public institutions to take on Malay employees and 30 percent of the labor force in private companies had to be Malay (Yen, 2008, p. 27). In response to this policy, the EC business community strived to be more competitive through organizational restructuring and political alliance (Leong, 2006, p. 192). The wealthy Chinese faction of elite EC shifted from supporting collective Chinese to developing ties with patrons of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) (Nonini, 2015, p. 217). Although this was a prominent characteristic of EC in

Malaysia, this was also a visible practice among EC in other SEAN countries. On the other hand, the EC were also the ones who dominated the communist movement in the country despite attempts to recruit Malays and Indians (Gungwu, 2000, p. 32; Chea, 2009, p. 133).

Because of political discrimination, economic restrictions, and unequal educational and cultural treatment, some EC in Malaysia left the country for developed countries such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Singapore (Kang, 2015). This migration contributed to the “brain drain” in Malaysia as more than a million EC with higher education and skills had emigrated abroad (Kang, 2015, p. 322). Furthermore, the bumiputra population is anticipated to increase from 19.2 million in 2015 to 26 million by 2040, and the Indian population from two to 2.3 million. Despite this, Forbes data says that the richest nationals in Malaysia are still the EC. Among the top 10 richest men in the country, only three are not of Chinese origin: they are Malay, Thai, and Sri Lankan Tamil.

Philippines

According to Hau (2014), the struggle of EC in the Philippines is a product of “economic nationalism, political disenfranchisement, and racial discrimination” (p. 209). Their relationship with the locals has had varying degrees over time. During Spanish colonization, EC in

the Philippines took pragmatic advantage of the colonial masters who were providing benefits to the converts to ensure their loyalty (Chu, 2015, p. 220). However, they continued to observe the rituals and religious practices of their ancestors (Guerrero, 2015, p. 66). Interestingly, the Spanish wanted to separate the EC from the locals to prevent them from cooperating with each other. However, they eventually saw the negative effects of this on economic gains due to the EC's role as traders and middlemen. Because the EC monopolized the trade between Manila and China and established themselves near Spanish settlements, the Spanish began to think that they were indispensable (Wickerberg, 2015, p. 177).

During the 1896 revolution, the Chinese in the Philippines participated in the struggle for freedom against the Spanish. Chinese schools closed down during the Japanese occupation and in effect, Chinese children entered Philippine schools where they interacted more with Filipino children (Tan, 1988, p. 187). The Hua Zhi (Philippine-Chinese Anti-Japanese Guerilla Forces) contributed to the liberation movement of the Philippines and has always been identified with the national democratic movement in the country (Hau, 2014, pp. 173-174). Hau (2014) also posits that the participation of EC in the Philippine leftist movement is an integral aspect of the country's revolutionary experience (p. 174).

Tan (1988) provides a very interesting analysis on how the EC began to embrace Filipino culture and identity. The first-generation

Chinese realized that they were already isolated from China through space and time and even gave up the idea that they would soon return to China. The second generation who were born in the Philippines saw the country as home and acculturated better than their parents. The third generation's outlook, attitudes, and values are now more local than those of their grandparents and parents. In addition to what Tan has mentioned, the third-generation Chinese are more oriented to the outside world through the schools and can better decide on their own. They can grow up knowing less and less about Chinese culture and more and more about the local cultures.

Due to the EC's economic gains, the government institutionalized several anti-EC measures in the country. In 1948, EC were banned from operating stalls in the public markets. This was followed by the Retail Trade Naturalization Law of 1954 where non-Filipino citizens, specifically Chinese citizens, were barred from the retail industry. Of course, the Filipino First Policy in 1961 also contributed to this. As a result of these anti-Chinese laws, the EC took the stringent, tedious, and expensive process of naturalization (Tan, 1988, p. 185). Today, the EC's economic power in the Philippines is remarkable: they make up only one to two percent of the population but their share of market capital is between 50 to 55 percent (Hodder, 2015, p. 437). Forbes data says that among the top 10 richest people in the Philippines, eight are EC and two are Spanish-Filipinos.

Singapore

The EC arrived in Singapore as soon as the British colonizers established the port in 1819. They became “useful” to the British when they acted as agents in the trafficking of coolies who were in great demand by the colonial rulers (Lee, 2013, pp. 466-467). Because of their knowledge in the English language, they also became intermediaries for large British companies (Peranakan Museum). As in the countries mentioned earlier, there existed a division between EC in Singapore based on their work and cultural background: the Babas and the Sinkheks. While the first group was more westernized since its members were engaged in shipping, banking, and tin mining which required knowledge in the English language, the second group remained loyal to China and was involved in trading and the local production of pepper, gambir, rubber, and others (Lee, 2013, p. 468). This dichotomy between the two kinds of EC in Singapore actually led to their diverging fortunes. While most authors focus on the economic gains of EC in Singapore, Warren (2009) offers a different view, focusing on the discrimination inflicted by the British against the EC in Singapore. For instance, in his book he demonstrates how rickshaw pullers were forced to live in dire conditions with little salary. In most cases, the perpetrators were fellow EC who went there first and established themselves before them.

Consistent with the practice in other countries, the women were not part of the migrant Chinese society until the 1860s when the

Chinese were already allowed to bring their wives with them. The absence of family, a Confucian vital element, was according to Warren (2008) a very important factor in the experience of newcomers as they tried to institutionalize their lives in Singapore (p. 155). The consequent formation of voluntary organizations was of big help to them. In the nineteenth century, the earlier EC who went there usually led Singapore's Chinese communities.

The culture among EC in Singapore is practically an admixture of Chinese culture, the multi-ethnic Singaporean culture, and western culture, owing to the fact that Singapore is a "melting pot of cultures." Suryadinata (2007) presents a very interesting analysis of Singaporean Chinese. According to him, Chinese in Singapore maintain cultural relations with Taiwan and Hong Kong for ideological reasons (Suryadinata, 2007, p. 21). Expectedly, seven out of ten EC are listed by Forbes as the wealthiest persons in Singapore. The others are Indian, Brazilian, and New Zealander.

Analysis: towards the (im)possibility of ASEAN Identity among EC in insular SEA

This study presents a still inconclusive analysis on the (im)possibility of ASEAN Identity among EC in SEA.

Problematising the identity of EC in ASEAN is twofold. As Chinese who migrated in various parts of SEA, these people embraced a fusion of Chinese civilization and local cultures with

their own unique identities (see Lee, 2013). The convergence of external and internal factors had resulted in the uniqueness of identification and assimilation in each SEAn country. Among these are the varying degrees of accommodation the colonizers offered them as well as the diversified hospitality of the local governments. The result was a distinct identity separate from the “Chineseness” of people in China and at the same time, different from the local cultures. This became highly visible in the case of the baba-nyonyas of Malaysia.

To some extent, this preliminary research supports Suryadinata (2007) and Hau’s (2014) studies that claim that EC in SEA is heterogenous in nature; thus, we cannot assume that all EC share this culture. The experiences of EC in the region are different. Even the language used by the EC has its own politics. This study shows how language has become a political weapon for and against the EC. The knowledge of Chinese, English, and/or the local languages has contributed to both their individual and collective histories. This has also defined their social classes which became bases for assimilation and antagonism coming from both the colonizers and the locals. This has been obvious in the cases of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

For some countries, historical processes have contributed to the EC’s identification rather than alienation while for some, these produced a coping mechanism. Moreover, the unavailability of

Chinese schools also forced the EC to identify more with the locals. This “forced interaction” became obvious in the cases of Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Those who could not fathom this chose to remigrate to other countries instead.

Additionally, since EC are collective among themselves,¹³ members usually help each other out in business interests. This, according to Suyardinata (2007), is a product of their history of survival as immigrants (p. 68). Hirschman (1988) further explains this in saying that the concentration in the small business sector produced great reliance on family and kin labor (pp. 28-29). This continues to the present time although the current situation may have a different characteristic. This and the fact that there are many more EC organizations make them more predisposed to collectivity (see Yen, 1995). Although the EC have frequently been stereotyped as being parochial and too inclined to relate only with their own community (see Pausacker, 2005), the EC in SEA have also experienced discrimination and have become victims of exclusivity. Oftentimes, this is a product of EC being collectively hardworking and quite familiar with the pragmatic dynamics of colonial governments. They eventually learned to cope with the conditions at the local level. Consequently, the governments became more accommodating to them in varying degrees. As a result, the EC now hold economic power. In the country studies with the exemption of

Brunei, EC occupy at least seven places in the Top 10 richest persons list in their respective countries.

The issue of EC wanting to acquire a Chinese nationality is not quite a big issue in SEA nowadays even though China is now the world's second largest economy. Suryadinata (2007) argues that the issue has resurfaced only as Chinese in China became alarmed (p. 302). Since the Chinese are perceived as very pragmatic people and in fact have had histories of acting as middlemen between Asia and Europe, they may adopt some practices that remain beneficial to them even without having to acquire Chinese nationality. Regardless of their economic achievements at present, being Chinese is not the sole basis for doing business. Instead, both Chinese in China and in SEA have been eventually narrowed down to captive markets. However, towards the resinification of EC, Hau (2014) mentions that the "Chineseness" of Chinese-Filipino grants them access to the social capital coming from the region (p. 219).

Nonetheless, it is likewise important to note that EC in SEA have also participated in the nationalist struggles for independence in some insular SEA countries. As Gungwu (2000) mentions, one of the key developments of EC in SEA is their willingness to involve themselves with politics (p. 25). This has been obvious in the cases of the Philippines and Indonesia in their struggle for independence against the Spanish and the Dutch. In Malaysia, the EC used to dominate the communist movement. This contradicts the idea that

EC are only concerned with their own economic gains. With the exemption of Singapore, and in varying degrees, EC were excluded in the nation-building processes after World War II. However, when the nation-states eventually realized their importance, EC were allowed to join in the local affairs.

It is also interesting that in these countries, there was a division between elite and lower-class EC which started during the colonial era. In each country, there also developed different terms in referring to EC. In some ways, these are meant to delineate one social class from the other. A comprehensive discussion of this was earlier made by Suryadinata in his 1987 article, "EC in SEA: Problems and Prospects," in which he elaborates that the heterogeneity of Chinese in countries was based on the distinctions made by the language used by these Chinese, their economic status, or their political orientation. Especially in the cases of Indonesia and Malaysia, we see how the lower classes were more indigenized than their higher class counterparts.

Furthermore, because of the challenges they experience in their new adopted countries and the historic alienation they feel towards China, EC will feel more affinities with people of the same group within a country, further strengthening the idea of distinctiveness which was laid out earlier. Debernardi (2004) posits that it is actually culture that links the EC outside China with the form and content of Chinese civilization (p. 130). In case of regional organizations among

EC, it is noticeable that most organizations have ties not with the organizations in SEA but in China and Taiwan.¹⁴ That is why connections among EC in SEA are still very few or lacking.

I am inclined to say that I share the same idea with Suryadinata (2007) that when EC are asked with whom they associate themselves better (especially for later-generation Chinese), it would be the country where they grew up or their adopted country. Southeast Asia serves as their home, not as a region per se but as a geographical location where their adopted countries are located.

With the initial historical review of literature that this paper has gathered, I believe that EC's conception of an ASEAN Identity is still very little if not non-existent. Moreover, people in the ASEAN still compete with each other. For instance, some nationalities do not want to be associated with the others because of certain stereotypes. Furthermore, the integration in economy has not yet resulted in cultural integration and appreciation. However, the distinctness in the identities that the EC have developed might give way towards the possibility of an ASEAN Identity. After all, regardless of our ethnicities, we still share common problems as nations and peoples which might be bases for solidarity. That is why appreciating the differences and diversity among member states is a key to identifying ASEAN Identity/ies.

However, unlike the earlier generations of EC who returned to China after gaining their economic agenda in SEA, the present

generation of EC is now more assimilated into the local cultures. They were slowly disintegrated from the Chinese culture in China through unfamiliarity in transitory cultures and languages. Thus, there is an increasingly thinning connection between EC in SEA with Chinese in China. Although the former were able to learn Chinese culture and history remotely,¹⁵ they also learned SEAn culture and history at the same time. With the presence of the Internet, an ASEAN Identity/ies might be more possible as EC in SEA begin to realize their similarities collectively. In their attempt to build the nation after independence, the EC were forgotten by governments and the communities reduced them into a source of economic gains. In the future, their presence might be a factor in strengthening the multicultural concept of ASEAN Identity/ies which is primarily “unity-in-diversity.”

Notes

1. I will use the term “ethnic Chinese” instead of “overseas Chinese” to emphasize that the perspective is not coming from China but from SEA—that the Chinese here have Chinese origins but eventually chose to settle in this part of the world. This is contrary to “overseas Chinese” which highlights that these people are Chinese and are living overseas (see Suryadinata 2001 & 2007).

2. In the earlier years of ASEAN as a region, there was really no document that spoke of ASEAN Identity. The latter was first mentioned in the ASEAN Vision 2020 (signed on 15 December 1997): “We envision the entire SEA to be, by 2020, an ASEAN community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage and bound by a common regional identity.”
3. “China,” “Mainland China,” and “People’s Republic of China” will be used interchangeably in this paper.
4. The term refers to the offspring of foreigner-local union, usually of ethnic Chinese and Malay origin (Lee, 2008, p. 161).
5. This usually refers to the second-, third-, and fourth-generation Filipino-Chinese (see Hau, 2014, p. 141).
6. This is different from what Suryadinata (2007, pp. 58-60) refers as the “New Chinese Migration” wherein the target countries for migration is the “developed” West (which includes the United States, Canada, and Australia) as first choice. Singapore and Malaysia serve only as the second choice while Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China are the third choice. This followed Deng Xiao Ping’s introduction of the open-door policy in the late 1970s.
7. They were called “returned overseas Chinese.”

8. Even the type of Chinese taught in Chinese schools was different from the one widely used in China (Suryadinata 2001, 57).
9. Dutch in Indonesia; the Spanish in the Philippines; the British in Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei.
10. It should be noted that the lack of information on EC in Brunei is due to the dearth of research about them both in the country and even outside.
11. These are sectors in which non-Bruneians are allowed to own.
12. This was part of Prof. Dr. Irianto's comments during the 9th NGGW held at Kyoto University on 26 - 27 September 2016.
13. Traditional Chinese societies usually have four or five generations living together in one *siheyuan* or compound.
14. Although there are trade delegations happening between ASEAN countries in China (see Leong, 2016; See & Go Bon Juan, 2006), these are more loose umbrella organizations and most are related only to trade.
15. Some are being sent to China for a short time but this is not enough to be acculturated into their traditions.

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