Charles Hirschman. 1988. "Chinese Identities in Southeast Asia: Alternative Perspectives." In Jennifer Cushman and Wang Gungwu (eds.) Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese Since World War II. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 23-31.

CHINESE IDENTITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Charles Hirschman

Wang Gungwu, as always, has presented a breathtaking panorama of new concepts, insights, empirical observations, and hypotheses for further elaboration and testing. In my brief comment, I attempt to examine critically his concepts and their application to the study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Then I sketch some alternative theoretical perspectives. My primary conclusion is that more attention to theory and to the study of plural societies in other contexts would offer promising directions for the study of Southeast Asian societies and the position of Chinese communities in the region.

WANG GUNGWU AND HIS CONCEPTS OF CHINESE IDENTITIES

The concepts of Chinese identity and multiple identities are at the heart of Wang's analysis of the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Awareness of being Chinese or a sense of 'Chineseness' represents the core element, in Wang's analysis, of Chinese ethnicity. While this is essentially a subjectivist approach (how a people define themselves and are seen by others), Wang does acknowledge close linkages between objective conditions and subjective identities. His formulation explicitly posits multiple identities: groups not only share several types of ethnic identities, but these coexist (overlap, reinforce, compete) with other social and economic identities. His essay provides a taxonomy of the major identities that have found a following among Southeast Asian Chinese. Among others, these include political and cultural dimensions of ethnicity. A review and partial reorganization of his concepts will illustrate the broad sweep of Wang's classification of Chinese identities.

Being a Chinese in Southeast Asia rests not only on an historical sense of a shared background, but on contemporary conditions, especially the interaction of Chinese minorities with indigenous populations and national governments. Given changes in these external conditions, there have been changes in the range and content of Chinese identities in Southeast Asia. Wang emphasizes this temporal dimension with his contrast between 'older' and 'modern' Chinese identities. The analytical problem is that these overlap each other, not only in the perceptions

(stereotypes) of non-Chinese, but also in the orientations of many Southeast Asian Chinese. For example, Wang notes that formerly many Chinese had a strong identification with nationalism in China (*Chinese nationalist identity*), but with the passage of time and the 'brutal policies of the Cultural Revolution' in China, they have gradually developed a *national (local) identity*. For many individuals, both identities may be present, although the former may be a fairly abstract and latent identity that has little or no effect on daily life or behaviour. The other dimension of political identity in Wang's typology is *communal identity*, which sees its fullest expression in Malaysian politics. Given their substantial share of the Malaysian population, Chinese see themselves as a political community with rights to protect. In other countries, communal identity is limited to Chinese organizations and associations.

The other key component of identities in Wang's conceptualization is culture — the set of beliefs, values, and customs that is transmitted from generation to generation. Here, there has also been a major change from *Chinese historical identity* (consciousness of traditional family values and symbols of a glorious Chinese past) to *cultural identity*, the modern version of the traditional Chinese identity. What is most significant about this category is that much of the cultural content of modern Chinese identity is not Chinese or Southeast Asian, but rather Western. Wang notes that what distinguishes Southeast Asian Chinese culture is its readiness to adapt to Western languages, education, and even religion. How and why this shift from traditional to modern Chinese culture occured are major questions to be addressed.

Wang also notes the possible cross-cutting concept of *class identity*. To the extent that Chinese develop identities based upon their economic positions as workers or capitalists, there is the possibility of transcending ethnic boundaries. This does not seem to have progressed very far, however. One explanation might be that ethnic ties are reinforced through the process of economic exchange and competition. This point is elaborated below in the discussion of the middleman minority theory.

Wang's concepts cover the spectrum of possible Chinese identities. There is little to add to his insightful and comprehensive classification. But I think there is value in the consideration of a broader definition of ethnicity beyond conscious identities. In the following section, I list some additional components or forms of ethnicity that could be included in the study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia. A limitation of Wang's article, in my opinion, is an insufficient focus on the causes of ethnic change. He does include a substantial discussion of 'norms' and external conditions (events and government policies) that shape Chinese identities, but the concept of norms implies a predisposition to behave or think in a certain fashion. It does not seem to make for a powerful explanatory framework. Also, external conditions are introduced in an *ad hoc* fashion that does not draw upon the comparative literature on ethnic relations. In the final

section of this paper, I suggest alternative explanatory frameworks that might guide research.

DIMENSIONS OF CHINESE ETHNICITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The literature on race and ethnic relations around the world is voluminous. Depending on the discipline (sociology, economics, geography, psychology, history, political science) and theoretical orientation (assimulationist, pluralist, Marxist, etc.) of the analyst, there is an almost infinite list of dimensions used to examine racial and ethnic patterns. A basic question, often ignored, is the definition of ethnic groups and the boundaries that divide them (this question is addressed in Barth, 1969 and in Hirschman, 1987). Assuming that ethnic groups can be defined on either objective or subjective criteria, then the general approach would be to measure differences between ethnic groups, and in particular to measure if these differences have narrowed or widened over time. The primary question is to select the list of relevant dimensions with which to compare groups. While the set of identities covered in Wang's analysis is a central part (perhaps the most important part) of ethnic patterns, there are many others. Without providing appropriate references to the literature or even providing adequate justification, I list some of the broad dimensions to be considered:

— *Socioeconomic Inequality*. This dimension should include interethnic differences in the distribution of valued resources and rewards. For example, indicators might be education, occupation, or income. More difficult to measure, but of equal importance under this rubric, are variations in power or prestige.

— *Cultural Differences*. This category would include subjective identities, but also ethnic variations in language, religion, values, and other beliefs that are transmitted by intergenerational socialization.

— *Structural Differentiation*. The basic concept is the degree of ethnic participation (integration or separateness) in the major social institutions and organizations of society. A major distinction is between institutions that tend to have secondary group contacts (non-intimate) versus those with primary group ties (affective and intimate). For example, schools, work sites and formal organizations bring people together for an objective purpose. Close personal ties may develop in such settings, but they are not inherent to the nature of social interaction in these organizations. On the other hand, intimate personal ties are a general basis of interaction in families, friendship groups, and neighbourhoods. Studies of ethnic

assimilation have emphasized the difference in these two dimensions (Gordon, 1964) and the implications for ethnic change.

There are many other elements of ethnic relationships that may be important, including interethnic attitudes and antagonism. The study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia is a complex task. Further study of these dimensions of interethnic differences, in addition to the question of Southeast Asian Chinese identities, is essential to the research agenda.

EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORKS

History, no less than physics, is oriented toward the goal of explanation. Styles of work differ considerably, but the promise of social science is to gather empirical evidence that confirms or refutes hypotheses about societies. Without a general theory of ethnic change, there is little agreement among researchers on the appropriate explanatory framework to use, much less on the reasons for ethnic divisions around the world.

Although Professor Wang's objective is to examine the concepts of identities for the Chinese in Southeast Asia, not to explain them, his essay does contain an implicit explanatory framework. With the hope that I have not oversimplified his argument, the core elements of his model are sketched below (Fig. 1).

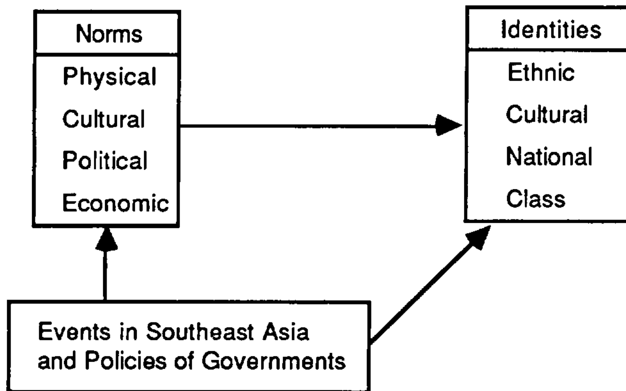

Fig. 1. Wang Gungwu's model of Chinese identities.

On the right-hand side are the phenomena to be explained — the identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese. The primary determinants of the strength of identities are, in Wang's analysis, norms — the shared beliefs and understandings of a community. Both identities and norms are shaped

by external conditions, the events in Southeast Asia and policies of governments. In my opinion, the link between objective conditions and subjective perceptions is the weakest link in Wang's model. It is not that this linkage is unimportant — it is an essential element of any framework. But rather, there is too little information to think systematically about the relationships. With *post hoc* reasoning, events and policies can be introduced to explain why things happened (e.g., if a major outcome has happened, then we look for an important event that preceded it). Given that one objective is to explain similarities and differences in Chinese identities across Southeast Asia, it is important to posit how economic and political changes, in general, have shaped outcomes. Beginning with an explanatory framework — even one that is only loosely articulated—will clarify the tasks of gathering relevant data and comparing patterns across settings.

What other explanatory frameworks might be useful to study Chinese communities in Southeast Asia? There is no single theory or model that guides research in the field of race and ethnic relations. But there is a set of related hypotheses, sometimes labeled as the 'assimilation model' or the 'thesis of industrialization,' that is typically found in sociological analyses. Without any claim of originality, I have organized these ideas and put them together in the following diagram (Fig. 2).

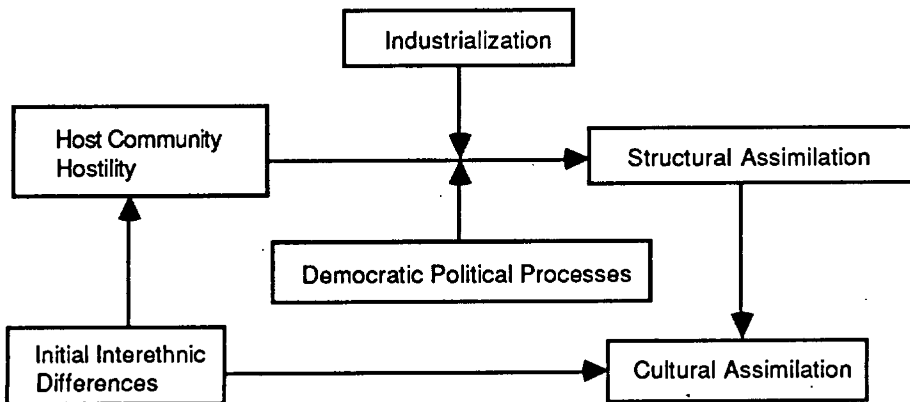

Fig. 2. Standard Western model of immigrant/minority assimilation.

On the right-hand side are the phenomena to be explained — structural and cultural assimilation, both of which were briefly discussed in the preceding section. Structural assimilation here refers primarily to integration in secondary and primary group institutions and

organizations. Cultural assimilation is dependent, in part, on the level of institutional separateness. Separate languages and traditional beliefs of a ethnic group are harder to maintain in a relatively open institutional environment. Most important in this model are the hypotheses about change. The factors on the left-hand side indicate the legacy of interethnic divisions from an earlier time (at the time of immigration or early settlement). Obviously, the initial degree of interethnic differences is important. Groups that share a common religion or history have fewer barriers to cultural assimilation. The other key component is the degree of hostility toward the minority from the majority population. Hostility might be expressed as discrimination that would keep the minority from entry into schools, industries, and neighbourhoods which would lead to structural assimilation.

The most important hypotheses in this model are the factors that influence the link between 'host community hostility' and 'structural assimilation.' These are industrialization and democratic political institutions. Both are components of social change that are hypothesized to weaken the fabric of ascriptive ties in a society. Industrialization creates a modern economy where family enterprises give way to larger bureaucratic employers which are less likely to select workers on the basis of ethnicity. Democratic politics, at least to the extent that elections force governments to be responsive to local populations, may also lead to greater political representation of minorities. This in turn may lead to a breakdown of barriers to structural assimilation.

As is evident, this model is based upon the Western experience, especially the North American one, where immigrants and other minorities have tried to move up from the lower ranks of the social and economic order. The historical experience of the Chinese in Southeast Asia is rather different. Perhaps a more appropriate model is the 'middleman minority hypothesis', proposed by Edna Bonacich (1973; also see Bonacich and Modell, 1980: Chap.2; Turner and Bonacich, 1980; van den Berghe, 1981: Chap.7). The theory was suggested to explain the intermediate position of ethnic minorities concentrated in the small business sector. The classic case is of the Jewish population in Europe and North America, but other examples exist throughout the world: the Chinese in Southeast Asia, Indians in East Africa, and Chinese and Japanese on the West Coast of North America. The situation of the Chinese in Southeast Asia has been discussed in terms similar to this perspective (Wertheim, 1964; Hirschman, 1984). The central ideas are illustrated in the following diagram (Fig. 3).

Rather than a unidirectional causal system, the theory posits reciprocal influences among three factors: the ethnic economy (the enclave of small entrepreneurs), ethnic solidarity, and host community hostility. A concentration in the small business sector means there is a great reliance on family and kin labour in family-owned enterprises. This reinforces

solidarity within the community, including feelings of trust and traditional culture. In turn, strong ethnic solidarity reinforces 'success' in the ethnic economy. Family and ethnic loyalty promote hard work and acceptance of minimal wages that allow ethnic enterprises more competitiveness than firms in the general economy that must rely upon market level wages. Loyalty is rewarded in the long run because employees are sponsored with capital and contacts when they wish to start their own businesses.

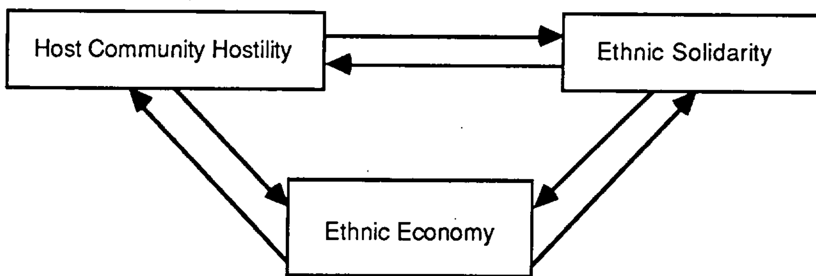

Fig. 3. Middleman Minority Theory (Edna Bonacich).

Small business concentration also inspires hostility from the local community. There are always petty conflicts between shopkeepers and customers. If this division is associated with ethnic boundaries, antagonism and stereotypes are reinforced. With hostility from the larger society, minority group members will experience difficulty in finding jobs outside the ethnic economy. Hostility will also reinforce ethnic group solidarity. Affective relationships within a group are strengthened if members feel that only co-ethnics can be trusted. This reinforces suspicions about the motives and potential discriminatory behavior of outsiders. This outlook and high within-group solidarity are likely to provide additional justifications (rationalizations) for prejudice and hostility from the majority population.

This system of mutually reinforcing conditions can lead to long-term perpetuation of ethnic isolation and antagonism, without any tendency for assimilation. In fact, periodic bouts of violence interspersed with periods of accommodation may be the expected pattern. I believe that further application of the middleman minority theory to the study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia would be very useful.

CONCLUSIONS

I think the Chinese in Southeast Asia can be better understood as minority groups who happen to be Chinese rather than as Chinese who happen to be living outside of China. This distinction is subtle, but of key importance for the framing of a research activity. Does a researcher begin with a focus on Chinese language, Chinese culture, and Chinese identity and work out to the larger society? Or should the first question be to look at the position (inequalities, interethnic conflict and accommodation, levels of integration) of Chinese minorities in Southeast Asian countries relative to other multiethnic societies? These are, of course, not mutually exclusive approaches. But by beginning with a comparative perspective, new questions and emphases will emerge. This shift in perspective is evident when one looks at the body of scholarship on the Chinese in Southeast Asia over the last twenty to thirty years.

During the 1950s and 1960s, there were a number of studies of Chinese populations in Southeast Asia. This wave of studies, largely undertaken by anthropologists and historians, assumed that Chinese culture and social organization were the primary reasons for divisions between the majority population and Chinese minorities. Moreover, the focus on ethnic continuity emphasized the similarities (historical and contemporary) between China and the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Within this tradition, processes of ethnic change — assimilation or conflict — were topics to be described but rarely explained.

Over the last twenty years, much has changed. Not only have there been considerable changes in the conditions and outlooks of the Southeast Asian Chinese, but the character of scholarship has also shifted. Most obviously, there have been fewer studies, at least by Western scholars, on the Southeast Asian Chinese. With the increasing sensitivity of Southeast Asian governments to the politically explosive issue of ethnic relationships, field studies of Chinese minorities are often discouraged. The lack of 'new data' has been a major obstacle to the development of new thinking and interpretations of the situation of Southeast Asian Chinese. But the recent studies and empirical data which are available — in this collection and in the two volumes by Gosling and Lim (1983) — suggest alternative perspectives. This research, much of it undertaken by Southeast Asian scholars, is focused on narrower questions — schools, politics, economic roles — and tends to evoke sociological or anthropological theory for direction. While each study may offer only a limited set of highly specific findings, there is the potential for a more cumulative understanding of the variations in the position and identities of Chinese minorities across Southeast Asia.

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LITERACY AND CULTURE

Introduction

Culture is the cornerstone of identity. This was particularly true for the Chinese who have revered a cultural heritage they regarded as superior to all others. It is a heritage which has moreover, unified disparate groups of Chinese both at home and abroad in the face of the divisions flowing from different dialects, places of origin and social levels. No single institution has been more effective in maintaining a sense of China's cultural heritage than have Chinese schools; their curricula and medium of instruction ensured that Chinese cultural values were transmitted to successive generations of young Chinese.

The medium of instruction used to educate Chinese youth in Southeast Asia has been regarded by Chinese and Southeast Asians alike as a tool for either inculcating a sense of commitment to their Southeast Asian home or reinforcing Chinese cultural values. The papers by Sally Borthwick, Tan Liok Ee, Christine Inglis and Margaret Boquet-Siek all address various aspects of the extent to which education, whether Chinese-, English-, Malay- or Indonesian-medium, has succeeded in 'localizing' Chinese students. Sally Borthwick concluded that in Singapore, the government's decision for political reasons to adopt English as the medium of instruction but to abandon the former British curriculum has allowed a cultural vacuum to grow. Even in the face of the government-sponsored campaign to instil Confucian ethics and other Chinese values, she finds no evidence of a cultural identity that is strongly Singaporean.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, education has been the principal tool used by government authorities to mould an identity that is becoming less Chinese and more Southeast Asian. While such policies appear to have succeeded, Tan Liok Ee indicates that an increasing proportion of Chinese students in Malaysia are being sent to privately funded Chinese-language schools to ensure some continuity with their cultural heritage.

The language of daily use has been another marker of Chinese cultural identity. Dede Oetomo looks at different levels of linguistic repertoires used by Chinese to express aspects of identity. The languages of intimacy, the public domain, solidarity and instruction vary significantly depending upon the communities within which Chinese Indonesians live. The multilingualism of Indonesia reflects the existence of multiple identities among its Chinese population.

Chinese who went overseas in the past were content, insofar as they thought about it at all, to accept that Chinese culture was appropriate in their foreign environment and did not seek to develop a new cultural milieu. All this changed in the twentieth century as Chinese became more aware of the

possibility that they would never return to their homeland. Some writers began to recognize the need to create a Chinese culture that incorporated elements of the societies in which they were living. In the paper presented by Claudine Salmon at the symposium, she quotes Chen Liangqing's manifesto of 1929: 'It is my ambition to build a new South-Sea culture. To do this, I must first advocate and build a South-Sea literature'.

The most prolific of these writers were the *peranakan* authors discussed extensively in the work of Claudine Salmon. Her numerous studies of the content of Chinese- and Malay-language literature show clearly how such themes as alienation, interethnic tensions, intraethnic exploitation and choices of political loyalty dominated the writings of Chinese in Southeast Asia after World War II. The absence of a substantive essay in this volume on Chinese literature is regrettable, especially as Salmon's paper offered insights about the development of a specifically Southeast Asian Chinese literature and the preoccupations of twentieth-century writers as they struggle to express a new identity for themselves and other Chinese. Her paper is to be revised at a later date and will be most welcome when it appears.

Sharon Carstens explores many of these same issues through the medium of non-fiction writings. Her particular emphasis is on the debates and discussions in journals and scholarly publications about the question of how a 'local' Chinese identity was to be created in Malaysia and Singapore. For various political reasons, both governments have opposed the publication of Chinese-language materials. The paradoxical result is that Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans have been forced to rely on the literary productions of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, thereby linking them more closely with the very groups from which their governments had hoped to separate them.