

## China's policy towards the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia

Continuity and change

### Abstract

This paper discusses China's changing policy towards the ethnic Chinese from the Qing dynasty to the present, with special reference to the policy after the re-emergence of Deng Xiaoping in 1977. In general, the paper will address the major characteristics of China's policy, the objectives of its policy, the means of achieving the policy, and the result of the policy. Responses of the ethnic Chinese during the pre-independence period and the Southeast Asian state governments during the post-independence period will be briefly discussed. In the concluding sections the paper will assess China's policy towards the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia.

### Introduction

Although the Chinese have migrated to Southeast Asia since the Tang dynasty, mass migration took place after the coming of Western colonialism to the region. Therefore, when we examine China's policy towards the ethnic Chinese,<sup>1</sup> it would be more useful if we start from the Qing dynasty, coinciding with the spread of Western colonialism in Southeast Asia.

Speaking of China's policy towards the

<sup>1</sup> The term 'ethnic Chinese' is used to refer to the Chinese outside China, regardless of their nationality. 'Overseas Chinese' is used to refer to nationals of China. 'Chinese overseas' is used to mean ethnic Chinese, but it reflects the perspective of China.

ethnic Chinese, three periods can then be discerned: the Qing Dynasty, the Republican Period and the PRC period. Each period can be subdivided into at least two or three sub-periods. However, due to the constraints of space, this paper will deal with the first two periods in more general terms, whereas a more detailed analysis will focus on the third period, because it affects us more. Nevertheless, a historical perspective is needed for comparative purposes and to throw light on the current policy.

### The Qing dynasty

The Qing dynasty policy towards ethnic Chinese can be divided into two periods.<sup>2</sup> Initially it was hostile towards the ethnic Chinese, but later it introduced the protection policy, expecting to gain ethnic Chinese support, both financially and politically. The hostility in the initial period was caused by the Qing perception of the ethnic Chinese. The government considered that these Chinese had fled overseas because they refused to be subjected to the Qing rule. One Chinese scholar argued that this was an integral part of the Qing closed-door policy. The Qing (Manchu) – with a population of only one million, compared to the hundreds of millions of culturally superior conquered Han – could only use centralization of power in order to maintain its rule. The closed-door policy was a means to achieve this end (Zhuang, 1989: 99-100).

It is therefore not surprising that there was a law, known as *hai jin* (literally 'prohibition from going to the sea'), that prohibited the Chinese from going overseas and re-entering China, and even banned maritime trade. In 1740, when the Dutch colonial army suppressed the local rebellions involving ethnic Chinese, resulting in the Chinese massacre of Batavia, Emperor Qian Long was quoted to

<sup>2</sup> There are a number of studies on the Qing dynasty policy towards the ethnic Chinese. Three recent studies are worth mentioning: Yen, 1985; Zhuang, 1989 and Yuan, 1994.

have replied that 'these people are deserters of [the] celestial empire, they deserted their ancestral tombs and sought benefits overseas. The Court is not interested in them'.<sup>3</sup>

The ban on going overseas was not very effective, especially towards the middle period when the Qing dynasty began to decline. The Chinese continued to go abroad. Some also managed to return although the number was not large. However, the removal of the ban was a result of Western imperialism. Western powers were interested in trading with the East, forcing China to open its doors. China's refusal resulted in wars and China was defeated each time. China could no longer close the door. The ban, which was part of the closed-door policy, was thus abolished following the treaties signed with the Western victorious powers. In fact, Western powers that colonized Southeast Asia needed cheap labour to explore their newly acquired colonies, causing an increase in the number of Chinese going overseas.

Having lost the wars to the West, the Qing government began to realize that to be strong, China should modernize itself. The wealth and modern skills of the Overseas Chinese became very attractive to the Qing court.

Apart from the economic motivation, political reasons were equally important in the Qing policy towards the ethnic Chinese. The Qing government discovered that the Overseas Chinese were a potential political force. In fact, the dissenters and rebels fled overseas and organized themselves to oppose the Qing government. It was in the interest of the Qing government to establish close links with the Chinese overseas to weaken the influence of the reformists and revolutionaries.

Not surprisingly the Qing government abandoned its early policy of hostility and non-protection for a policy of cultivation and protection of the Chinese overseas. However, many Chinese coolies were brought overseas

<sup>3</sup> There are different versions about this. One says that the statement was a reply to the memorial of the governor of Fujian (Yen, 1985: 22); the other says that it was a reply to the Dutch envoy (Yuan, 1994: 5).

against their free will and were ill-treated in the foreign land. Nevertheless, the Qing court was weak and unable to offer effective protection to the Overseas Chinese.

On the initiative of the Qing government, however, Chinese Chambers of Commerce in Southeast Asia and other major cities in the United States and Europe were established. It hoped to undermine the revolutionary influence among the Overseas Chinese and mobilize Overseas Chinese resources for China's modernization (Yen, 1995: 133-160).

The ethnic Chinese were made to feel welcome to return to China and to contribute to China's modernization. Their remittances and investment were encouraged, and a school for the ethnic Chinese, *Jinan Xuetang*, was established to train ethnic Chinese children. Qing honorary titles were given and even sold to the overseas Chinese. To make sure that the Overseas Chinese would remain loyal to China, and to ensure that the Qing government had judicial power over them, in 1909 the Qing promulgated the Chinese Nationality Law, declaring all Chinese, both domestic and overseas, nationals of China.

Responding to this policy, in 1910 the Dutch government promulgated the Dutch Subjecthood Law (*Nederlands Onderdaanschap*) which regarded the Netherlands East Indies-born Chinese Dutch subjects. Many Chinese in the Indies thus had dual nationality. However, in the consular agreement signed between the Qing government and the Dutch, the former agreed that the Dutch had judicial power over the Chinese while they were in Dutch-controlled territory.<sup>4</sup>

When we assess the Qing policy towards the ethnic Chinese, one can come to the conclusion that it was not a complete failure. In the economic field, the Chinese overseas sent remittances to their relatives in China and invested rather heavily in various projects. In

<sup>4</sup> The essence of the treaty was that the Imperial Government of China acknowledged that the Indies-born Chinese in the Netherlands and its territory were subject to Dutch Law, but that they were free to choose their nationality when they left their territories (Suryadinata, 1981: 26).

the political field, despite the growing influence of the Chinese revolutionaries, there were some Chinese communities who were sympathetic towards the Qing and the reformists rather than the revolutionaries. A good example was in the setting up of the various Chinese Chambers of Commerce. Another example was the relative weakness of the revolutionary support of the Chinese in Java (Suryadinata, 1987: 108-124). The *peranakan* (local-born Indonesian-speaking Chinese) Chinese leaders were supporting the Qing government and only changed their attitude after the establishment of the Republic of China.

### The Republic of China

The Qing Dynasty ended in 1911 when the revolutionaries who were supported by the Overseas Chinese succeeded in overthrowing the Manchu government. But the struggle for power did not end after the downfall of the Qing. China was divided into a northern and southern region. The northern government, based in Beijing, was controlled by warlords, while the Guomintang led by Dr Sun Yatsen, and later Chiang Kai-shek, was based in Guangzhou. Both governments were aware of the value of the ethnic Chinese and continued the ethnic Chinese policy of the Qing. In 1923, the *Qiaowu Ju* (Overseas Chinese Bureau) was established in the south during the Second General Congress of the Guomintang. A similar bureau was also set up in the north (Nanyang Nianjian, 1951: J24-25).

When the Guomintang succeeded in defeating the warlords and in unifying China in 1928, 'the Overseas Chinese Bureau became an executive department of the new government at Nanking and official interest in protecting the Nanyang Chinese and mobilizing their resources began in earnest' (Wang, 1959: 34).

The Guomintang policy was to make the ethnic Chinese remain Chinese and loyal to China. It is not surprising that the 1929 Chinese nationality law is still based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* rather than *jus soli*.

Ethnic Chinese were considered as Chinese nationals and Chinese schools overseas were supervised, if not controlled, by the Guomintang government. Teachers and textbooks were supplied by China, and hence were China-oriented. The Overseas Chinese were urged to participate in China's politics, by sending their representatives to various national institutions, including Chinese parliament (*Huaqiao Zi*, 1961: 50). The Guomintang also had a section dealing with the Overseas Chinese and overseas Guomintang branches (*ibid.*). Guomintang cadres were sent to recruit and organize the Overseas Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

It is not clear whether or not the Guomintang ethnic Chinese policy achieved its objectives. In the field of education the policy, to a certain extent, achieved its goal. A significant number of ethnic Chinese children received Chinese education and were oriented towards China. However, many local-born Chinese went to either local or Western schools and became less nationalistic towards China. In the economic field, remittances, investment and donations for the Chinese cause were also significant (*Nanyang Nianjian*, 1951: J25-26). The Guomintang was unable to re-sinicise the ethnic Chinese who were already indigenized or Westernized. The Chinese in Southeast Asia were not homogeneous. Many *peranakan* in Indonesia, for instance, did not respond to Tan Kah Kee's appeal to support China in her anti-Japanese War efforts and refused to contribute money for China.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This practice was continued even after the Guomintang fled to Taiwan. See Yang, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> When the Sino-Japanese war broke out, a leading Chinese patriot, Tan Kah Kee (Chen Jiageng) of Singapore, called for a conference of Southeast Asian Chinese to support the Chinese government. The Semarang Chinese did not send a delegate to this, while Surabaya's delegate was not enthusiastic about raising funds for China. Only the Chinese in Batavia and Bandung donated a significant sum of money. Tan blamed the Indonesian Chinese leaders for their lack of support for the anti-Japanese campaign (Tan, 1950: 342).

It is also important to note that the unsympathetic attitude of the Dutch colonial government towards ethnic Chinese political participation in China also served as a deterrent factor.

## The People's Republic of China (PRC)

### 1. Early policy: from anti-integration to pro-integration

The communist victory in mainland China in 1949 did not bring a great change to China's ethnic Chinese policy. Between 1949 and 1954, Chinese communist policy was basically a continuation of that of the Guomindang, i.e. it was still based on *jus sanguinis* and its intention was to protect the legitimate rights of the Overseas Chinese. The policy also encouraged the ethnic Chinese to be politically loyal to Beijing and help in the construction of the PRC economically.<sup>7</sup>

However, after 1954, the PRC began to modify its policy in order to woo the countries in Southeast Asia – it was perceived as very important to be accepted by them and to isolate the United States and Taiwan. During the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung (Indonesia), Zhou Enlai, then the premier of China, made it clear that the PRC was willing to settle the issue of nationality of the ethnic Chinese with countries having friendly or diplomatic relations with the PRC. Once a communiqué or dual nationality treaty was signed, the ethnic Chinese who had voluntarily adopted local citizenship ceased to be Chinese nationals. Those who were Chinese nationals were urged to respect the customs and obey the laws of the host countries. The dual nationality treaty with Indonesia was the earliest manifestation of the change in Beijing's policy.

<sup>7</sup> Zhuang Guotu in his article made this point (Zhuang, 1993: 308-323). But Stephen Fitzgerald maintained that Beijing has rejected the concept of *jus sanguinis* on which the KMT nationality law was based (Fitzgerald, 1972: 78-79). My earlier study was in agreement with that of Zhuang (Suryadinata, 1985: 62).

Zhou also discussed the problem with David Marshall (then the first Chief Minister of Singapore), offering the same terms for the ethnic Chinese in Singapore. It was reported that in 1955 Hanoi and Beijing had reached an agreement regarding the ethnic Chinese in North Vietnam who were encouraged to become Vietnamese citizens on a voluntary basis. There was also an understanding reached on the future status of the ethnic Chinese in South Vietnam. But this agreement and understanding became an issue after North Vietnam won the war against the Americans in 1975.

However, the change in policy did not result in better relations between the PRC and most of the Southeast Asian states. This was due to a number of factors, including the PRC's early record of a militant communist policy, continuous support of communist activities in Southeast Asia, the atmosphere of the Cold War, and the PRC's appeal to the Overseas Chinese to continue to help China economically.

In addition, it also continued to offer protection over the rights of the Overseas Chinese. Even with Sukarno's Indonesia, the PRC finally came into direct confrontation when Jakarta introduced a ban on retail trade in the rural areas where a lot of ethnic Chinese were affected. This resulted in an exodus of ethnic Chinese from Indonesia to China which created a problem for China because it was difficult to absorb a large number of returnees. Nevertheless, the sudden departure of a large number of ethnic Chinese also de-stabilized Sukarno's Indonesia, giving rise to the Indonesian military's anti-PRC stance. Fear of losing a major ally, Beijing eventually accepted the discriminatory measures introduced by Jakarta. By doing so Beijing was able to maintain the anti-Western and anti-colonialist united front with Sukarno – but this was at the expense of the interests of the Overseas Chinese.<sup>8</sup>

It is also worth noting that Beijing and

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent study about Chinese-Indonesian relation during this period, see Mozingo, 1976: 157-191. See also Suryadinata, 1993: chapters 6 and 7.

Taiwan were competing for the support of the ethnic Chinese. As a result, the ethnic Chinese communities who were still culturally Chinese were divided into pro-Taiwan and pro-Beijing groups. In the countries where China had diplomatic ties, the pro-Beijing Chinese were strong, while in those countries where China had no relations, the Taiwan groups were leading.

### *2. The Cultural Revolution: the politics of hostility*

The moderate policy towards the ethnic Chinese did not last. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969) Beijing policy became more radical. The domestic Overseas Chinese were harassed and persecuted. Overseas connections were considered to be reactionary and therefore undesirable. Worse still, the revolutionary politics of the Red Guard were exported to Hong Kong and some Southeast Asian states, although it was short-lived. As a result, the policy antagonized a lot of ethnic Chinese. Both remittances and investment in China declined and ethnic Chinese no longer 'returned' to their ancestral land. Even domestic Overseas Chinese began to leave China in large numbers. The exodus of the domestic Overseas Chinese as well as indigenous Chinese intellectuals affected China's development programs. As soon as the Cultural Revolution came to an end and the Revisionist Deng Xiaoping regained power, a new policy towards the Overseas Chinese was introduced.

### *3. The post-1976 policy: between integration and ethnic ties*

Deng re-emerged in July 1977, first sharing power with Hua Guofeng, and eventually dominating the Chinese political scene. Deng introduced the Four Modernizations Program, involving agriculture, industry, technology and the military, in order to modernize China by the end of the 20th century. To implement such a program, China required trained people and capital. But the Chinese

educational system during and after the Cultural Revolution failed to produce sufficient numbers of highly skilled professionals who could help China modernize.

The Deng Xiaoping group considered the ethnic Chinese outside China as a source of both skilled professionals and capital. It is not surprising that once he was in power, he immediately announced the new 'Overseas Chinese Policy' which had at least four objectives:

1. Beijing wanted to reduce, if not stop, the departure of 'domestic Overseas Chinese' intellectuals;
2. It was also eager to attract ethnic Chinese professionals to participate in the modernization of China;
3. Beijing also wanted to secure more remittances and investments from the ethnic Chinese;
4. Lastly, Beijing hoped that ethnic Chinese would serve as a bridge in unifying mainland China and Taiwan.<sup>9</sup>

It appears that the policy met with limited success. Beijing was unable to stop the exodus of the domestic Chinese immediately, but over a longer period of time, it appears that those who wanted to leave China began to decline in number. However, the 1989 Tiananmen Affair had a serious impact on Deng Xiaoping's modernization program because many Chinese intellectuals who were educated in the West refused to return.<sup>10</sup>

However, with the end of the Cold War, the introduction of the open-door policy of China, and the improvement in the treatment of intellectuals and professionals, some Chinese intellectuals may have since been attracted to return to the PRC. There is no figure available as yet on the new returnees. It is possible that those who were unable to adapt to life outside China would have returned to China eventually. However, some observers have noted that more 'Overseas Chinese' felt that they

<sup>9</sup> For a study of the post-1976 policy up to early 1980s, see Suryadinata, 1985: 59-97.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the 'Overseas Chinese' intellectuals who remained in China, see Suryadinata, 1995.

would be treated better in China as foreigners than as 'returned Overseas Chinese'.<sup>11</sup>

Foreign investment in China was initially very limited. According to a survey, between 1979 and the end of 1991, direct investment in China amounted to US\$ 26,885 billion, of which US\$ 13,932 billion was capital from Hong Kong and Macao, accounting for 51.8 per cent of the total investment. Taiwan capital accounted for 9.3 per cent, and 'Overseas Chinese' capital, presumably from Southeast Asia and other areas, accounted for 5.6 per cent (Lin, 1993: 2-3). During the first quarter of 1992, there were 3,837 newly registered foreign companies in China, of which 2,560 were from Hong Kong, 480 from Taiwan and 113 from Macao (*ibid.*).

However, in the officially published Chinese statistics, there is no separation between the investments from Hong Kong and Macao and that from the so-called 'Overseas Chinese'. Therefore it is very difficult for us to know the percentage of ethnic Chinese investment, especially that of the ASEAN Chinese. Most of the work done has been based on educated guesses. Many of the studies assumed that Southeast Asian Chinese invested heavily in Hong Kong, moving into mainland China from there.

Nevertheless, the situation changed at the end of the 1980s, especially after the end of the Cold War. Many Chinese multi-national corporations (MNCs) from the ASEAN states began to invest in China. The amount of their investment may have increased quite remarkably but they still form a small portion of China's total investment.<sup>12</sup> It should also be noted that the Chinese tycoons who in-

<sup>11</sup> Mu Chang, for instance, observed that 'there are two kinds of overseas Chinese: the 'live ones' (*huo qiao*) who stayed abroad and became wealthy, and the 'dead ones' (*si qiao*), those who were once patriotic and returned to China. They were given very different status and received quite different treatment. See *Jing Bao* (Hong Kong), vol. 56 (March 1982), cited in Godley, 1989: 351.

<sup>12</sup> Lin Jinzhi argued that the investment from the 'Overseas Chinese' constitutes about 3-5 per cent of China's total investment. Interview with Prof Lin.

vested in China were mainly the first or second generation Chinese who were still culturally Chinese. Those who have lost active command of the Chinese language appeared to stay out of China (Suryadinata, 1994: 200-205). Although the amount of the investment was small, direct investment from ethnic Chinese was very important because China needs the capital badly. More important is perhaps various skills (including management skills) which are being transferred by the ethnic Chinese to China. Both capital and skills are contributing significantly to China's modernization programs.

With regard to the ethnic Chinese role as a bridge between Taiwan and mainland China, it could not be done by ordinary Chinese. The closest example was the Singapore government's role in hosting the semi-official contact between Taiwan and mainland officers in April 1993 (Chang, 1994: 159-161).

#### 4. *China's protection of the ethnic Chinese*

After the re-emergence of Deng Xiaoping, there was no doubt that China wanted to use ethnic Chinese links to promote its economic interest. Some ethnic Chinese responded to the appeal due largely to the economic opportunities available in China. Some indigenous-dominated governments in Southeast Asia are suspicious of the PRC, fearing that the ethnic Chinese may be utilized by Beijing to serve its national interests at the expense of their adopted motherland.

The PRC government was aware of this and wanted to gain the co-operation of the Southeast Asian states. In 1980 the PRC promulgated the new nationality law – the first nationality law ever issued by Beijing after its establishment. Unlike the Guomindang law, this new law recognizes the rights of ethnic Chinese to choose foreign citizenship freely. Any ethnic Chinese outside China will automatically cease to be a national of China once he or she has a foreign citizenship. In other words, with the promulgation of the new nationality law, the national status of ethnic Chinese has become clear.

Nevertheless, foreign citizenship does not

necessarily mean that ethnic Chinese will sever their links with China completely. As shown in the above examples, China has still used ethnic links to promote China's economic development. However, the response of the ethnic Chinese varied from group to group. So did the response of the various ASEAN governments. Some ethnic Chinese responded favorably but others attempted to stay away from the PRC (Suryadinata, 1995: 199-205). Nevertheless, many felt that there was nothing wrong in using ethnic links provided that it would be for mutual economic benefit. It seems that ethnic Chinese links with China are not a problem during times of peace. However, what happens if relations between China and one ASEAN state turn sour? Will ethnic Chinese be suspect, even victimized again?

There is no guarantee that China will not exploit ethnic links to promote its political interest. However, while some Southeast Asian leaders are confident that ethnic Chinese in the ASEAN states have been Southeast-Asianized and the majority will not be willing to be used by China, others do not share that view.<sup>13</sup> The problem is complicated by the presence of the ethnic Chinese who are also citizens of the PRC.

According to the PRC constitution, China has the authority to protect the just rights of the Overseas Chinese. Will China protect them at all costs? In recent years, there were at least three examples which show that Beijing did not protect the Overseas Chinese when their interests came into conflict with the higher priority of China's national interest (Suryadinata, 1985: 26-34).

The first example which was cited earlier is the 1959 retail trade ban in Indonesia. China accepted the discriminatory measures introduced by Jakarta in order to save the anti-colonialist united front.

The second example is the Pol Pot mas-

<sup>13</sup> It seems that Thailand and Singapore are very confident about their ethnic Chinese population, while Indonesia still has a lingering suspicion. For a detailed discussion of the three cases, see Suryadinata, 1985: 26-34.

sacre of Cambodian Chinese. The Chinese asked for protection from the PRC embassy but the request was denied as Beijing was cultivating Kampuchea to counterbalance Vietnam which was perceived as a Soviet proxy (Suryadinata, 1985: 53-58).

The third example is the Chinese in Vietnam before and after the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1978. During the war, Beijing closed the friendship-gate as she was no longer able to accommodate Chinese refugees. The objective of the war was not to protect the Overseas Chinese as generally assumed. In fact, more ethnic Chinese fled the countries after the war as there was ethnic antagonism in Vietnam and it was more difficult for the Chinese to live there.

It is worth noting that although the PRC constitution of 1982 states that Beijing intends to protect the rights of the Overseas Chinese, it no longer has a clause on the Overseas Chinese as a component of the National People's Congress (Peaslee, 1966: 265). In fact, the change of the clause occurred in the 1975 constitution. The PRC, it seemed, no longer desired the Overseas Chinese to become involved in China's decision-making process, not even in terms of symbolic political participation. It is possible that the Chinese leaders foresaw the difficulties in involving the Overseas Chinese in China's politics without creating suspicions and animosity among the governments of Southeast Asia (Suryadinata, 1985: 25).

## Conclusion

China's policy towards the ethnic Chinese cannot be seen in isolation. It is part and parcel of China's foreign policy. Foreign policy is meant to serve domestic politics, and hence the policy has been largely decided by domestic considerations. Even during the Qing dynasty, the government was at first hostile towards the Chinese overseas who were perceived to be inimical to the dynasty. Indeed there was evidence that many Chinese who went overseas were hostile towards the Qing empire and wanted to overthrow it. In

fact, the ban on the Chinese from leaving and re-entering China was meant to stop the possibility of subversion. The closed-door policy was initially successful until the Manchu government was defeated by the West.

It was the West which forced the Manchu government to abandon the close-door policy and the ban of the Chinese from leaving and re-entering China. The Qing dynasty also discovered that the ethnic Chinese were a source of both political and economic strength for China. It began to win the hearts and minds of the Overseas Chinese. It attempted to neutralize the anti-Qing groups among the Overseas Chinese and cultivated those who were pro-establishment.

The Qing government also discovered that the Overseas Chinese could help China modernize since they had the financial resources and modern skills.

In order to maintain links with the ethnic Chinese, the Qing government issued a nationality law in 1909 which declared all ethnic Chinese as China's nationals. However, because the Qing dynasty was weak, it was unable to implement the policy to its satisfaction. The response of the ethnic Chinese varied from group to group.

The Republican government which came to power after the 1911 revolution, a revolution sponsored by Overseas Chinese, was of course fully aware of the importance of the Overseas Chinese. Not only did it continue the Late Qing policy but it also introduced various strategies in order to make Chinese overseas continue to be oriented towards their fatherland. The promotion of Chinese nationalism and Chinese education aimed to capture the loyalty of the overseas Chinese. Remittances and investment continued to flow into China until the Communists came to power in mainland China in 1949.

When the Republican government was in power, the Southeast Asian states, with the exception of Thailand, were all colonies. Colonial powers were occasionally quite critical of the Republican policy towards the Chinese. However, the main concern of the West was to control the local Chinese so that they could maintain power over the colonies.

There was a tussle between the colonial and the Republican governments for the loyalty and support of the Chinese overseas.

After the Guomindang was defeated and fled to Taiwan, both the Taiwan and Beijing governments continued the tussle to win over the ethnic Chinese to their side. The situation in Southeast Asia also underwent significant changes. All countries gained independence from the colonial powers and started the nation-building process. The old policies of Beijing and Taiwan irritated the newly independent Southeast Asian states. There was constant tension between Southeast Asian states and China, especially with Communist China. Part of the reason for such a difference was political ideology, but also the desire of the Southeast Asian governments to absorb the ethnic Chinese.

Beijing initially introduced a policy, which was in fact simply a continuation of that of the Guomindang. However, the distrust and hostility displayed by the Southeast Asian governments eventually forced the PRC to adopt a new policy which encouraged the ethnic Chinese to take local citizenship and to integrate with the local population. The PRC eventually issued a citizenship law in 1980, one and a half year after Deng Xiaoping visited Southeast Asia, unilaterally declaring that once a Chinese person has foreign citizenship, he or she ceases to be a Chinese citizen.

For the first time in the history of modern China, the citizenship issue was solved. But the problems in China-Southeast Asia relations are still not solved. China's policy towards the ethnic Chinese is still considered to be favoring China. Cultural and economic links between the ethnic Chinese and China are still regarded as a major obstacle for national integration in some Southeast Asian states. Indeed, Deng Xiaoping's policy attempted to use the ethnic links to lure Southeast Asian Chinese to invest and contribute to China's Four Modernizations Program. Southeast Asian states were divided on the issue – those which are able to integrate the Chinese population and those which are not. Nevertheless, even the countries with a large



ethnic Chinese population have also tried to adjust their policy towards China.

The Chinese population in Southeast Asia is not a homogeneous group and their response to the new policy of the PRC also differed. Some who are more integrated into local society tend to keep a distance from the PRC while others who were more Chinese in their cultural background are more responsive. Nevertheless, the Southeast Asianization of the Chinese continues due to the local conditions.

*National University of Singapore*

