

COMPARISON OF THE AMERICAN-CHINESE WITH OTHER OVERSEAS CHINESE COMMUNITIES

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I. Introduction

One of the peoples who have migrated most widely and, on the whole, found ways to accommodate and to adapt themselves to any and all environments have been the Chinese. Although they are now found in the United States, the Soviet Union, Peru, Brazil, the Carribean, and in scattered groups throughout the world, their greatest concentration and socio-economic significance is in Southeast Asia.

Increasingly sociologists and political scientists are directing their attention toward the Chinese in Southeast Asia and some significant work has also been done on the social processes involved in the Chinese ghettos in American cities; however, this research has been of a descriptive rather than a comparative nature. Rather than a mere repetition of the descriptive material, it is the intention to develop the thesis that circumstances have been and are so different in the two areas discussed that to a certain extent differences have arisen among the Chinese communities involved.

II. Background of the Chinese in America.

(a) Descriptive History

The early history of Chinese international migration has usually been short-range migration. Only in comparatively modern times have they mastered longer distances and taken advantage of striking differences in economic opportunity. Lasker speaks of the characteristic demographic picture for eastern Asia, as "a predominantly centripetal population movement, creating reservoirs of population the most fertile land; and these spill over from time to time in expansionist, centrifugal movements"¹.

More than ninety percent of the Chinese in the United States are drawn from or at least descended from inhabitants of the southeastern Chinese province of Kwang-tung. (In fact the great majority are drawn from the districts immediately surrounding the provincial capital, Canton). Kwang-tung, with an area slightly smaller than that of the Philippines has a population of more than 40,000,000. Labor, as the largest "export commodity" of southern China, has long been big business. Some of the most densely populated areas of western Kwang-tung have for many years prior to the war (World War II) been supported largely by remittances from emigrant residents overseas.²

In the mid-nineteenth century the economic and demographic pressure for emigration received further stimulation by the discovery of gold in America and the need for labor in the mines and for railroad building.

¹ Bruno Lasker, *Asia on the Move*, p. 7.

² Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, p. 243.

Previous to 1854 the number of Chinese was insignificant.³ Then there was a steep rise in immigration.

Year	Total of Chinese Immigrants
1860	34,933
1870	63,199
1880	105,465
1890	107,488

But after this, a gradual decline is noted throughout every decade, until 1920 when the bottom is reached, as the following figures show:

Year	Total of Chinese Immigrants
1900	89,863
1910	71,531
1920	61,639
1930	74,954
1940	77,504

For the convenience of the study, the American reaction to Chinese migration may be considered under three successive periods. Initially Americans were disposed on the whole to welcome immigration—including Chinese immigration—as an aid to the development of the country. At that time racial antipathy was subordinated to economic necessity. The California governor (1852) even recommended a system of land grants to induce the further immigration and settlement of the Chinese.⁴ The Burlingam Treaty of 1868, which was signed with an optimistic view of the tremendous trade possibilities with China, gave further momentum to the rising tide of Chinese immigration.

But soon the tide was reversed. Racial antagonism combined with the Anglo-Saxon myth of racial purity was compounded with fear of economic competition. The dynamic situation connected with mining and Western railroad buildings afforded too unsettled a base for prolonged harmonious relations. As soon as the speculative bubble burst and Caucasians were thrown out of work, the cry arose, "The Chinese must go!" Political agitation, rioting, and massacres characterized the "Period of Antagonism and Persecution, 1878-1894." These anti-Chinese agitations brought about the Treaty of 1880 which provided for a ten-year suspension of immigration, giving the United States the right to "regulate, limit, or suspend" the immigration of Chinese laborers, but not to "absolutely prohibit it," and culminated in the Exclusion Act of 1894.

Since 1894 the Chinese either consciously or unconsciously adapted themselves to the atmosphere of racial tension in two ways, namely, (1) by geographical dispersion and (2) by occupational adaptation. Formerly concentrated in just the Pacific Coast states, the Chinese are now distributed throughout the whole country "so that it does not exert

³ Placed as low as 68.

⁴ David Te-Chao Cheng, *Acculturation of the Chinese in the United States*, p. 218.

any pressure in any particular spot."⁵ However, with the national dispersion, tending toward the Eastern Coast, went the segregation of the Chinese into ghettos (Chinatown) in the different cities. In addition they quit industrial and mining work in order to pursue *non-competitive occupations*—the *ni kung* or work usually done by the women in China, such as cooking and washing. As Barnett has observed:

"Traditional social attitudes toward the Chinese implemented by the vested economic interest of white occupational groups were instrumental in constraining them into circumscribed economic operations. Successful exploitation of these areas re-enforced by continued discrimination have enhanced the perpetuation of occupational stratification."⁶

Barnett goes on to comment on the way in which the Chinese restaurant is in itself an instrument of accommodation, symbolic of the submerged status of the Chinese Americans.⁷

The status of the Chinese is that of a repressed minority. A host of factors emerge as repressive-inferior and inadequate housing, an unequal sex-ratio with its deleterious effect on marriage and family relations, socio-economic discrimination in a variety of spheres, and fear of deportation because of illegal entry into the United States. The Chinese ethnic group can be described as the most repressed, withdrawn, and passive minority group in America. (Although the Japanese have experienced in some respects even greater restrictions and discriminations, their reaction has not been characterized by the retreat, withdrawal, and socio-economic avoidance as has been that of the Chinese group). Thus, it would appear that in a situation where a minority group is impotent, small, but considered competitive, the minority group may tend to adopt to the situation by dispersing geographically and entering non-competitive occupations.

(b) Social Institutions.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive survey of Chinese-American institutional forces, this section will briefly cite those institutional aspects which might facilitate comparison with the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. The disproportion sex ratio (285.3 males per 100 females as of 1940)⁸ is so large as to profoundly alter the entire social scene. The emotional and physical tensions resulting from such an arrangement are further intensified by the widespread American antipathy toward "mixed" marriages. This disproportionate Chinese sex ratio offers the environment for the flourishing of organized prostitution and related vices.

With the Immigration Act of 1924, which excluded all aliens ineligible to citizenship, the alien wives of Chinese-Americans were barred

⁵ R. D. McKenzie, "The Oriental Invasion", *Journal of Applied Sociology*, 10 (1925-1926), p. 120-130.

⁶ Milton L. Barnett, *Alcohol and Culture*, p. 96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136. Specifically the quasi-case relationship between the Chinese waiter and the Caucasian customer.

⁸ Disproportion is even greater for the migrant as distinguished from the native born group.

from entry.⁹ Such immigration regulation has produced a family pattern among the Chinese-Americans, which has been described as the "mutilated family"—the phenomenon of the "married-bachelors" of "Chinatowns." Often the children of the "mutilated" family were sent to live with the father.

Despite such hardships, a semi-approximation to a Chinese family system has been able to emerge. The closely knit community, kept isolated and self-contained in part by its own desire and in part from outside pressure, has been able to supply a considerable measure of stability and social and personal organization. All this stands in sharp contrast to the lurid American Caucasian images of opium dens, tong wars, and prostitution. (In large part such misleading images are deliberately perpetuated by the organized bus tours to "Chinatowns").

In the economic realm the corporation is rare in the American-Chinese community. Two major patterns of ownership prevail:

- (1) the establishment is owned by a single entrepreneur, and
- (2) the establishment is owned by a group of partners as few as two and very often as many as eight or twelve.¹⁰

To a certain extent the lack of the corporate form and of the available capital resultant from such an arrangement has seriously handicapped the economic development of the group.

Since "Chinatown" as a racial group is perhaps the most exclusive of all alien colonies in America, economic and social necessity have resulted in the emergence of a "government" for the group, in every Chinese district to guide and regulate Chinese affairs, to keep peace among the Tongs (guilds), and to treat with the outside world. Each of these "local governments" is independent, but all are organized on the same plan.¹¹ The "government" has mainly a judicial role, but it does possess executive, legislative, and assessment powers. Often by American legal definition it pursues extra-legal and even illegal ends.

The "tong" (a secret society which may be a guild) is but one of the many transplanted Chinese institutions. Unfortunately, some sociologists, lacking perhaps a background in traditional Chinese culture, have seen the "tong" as a Chinese response to the challenge of the American scene.¹² The truth the American environment has influenced the functions of the "tong", but secret societies have been a recurring phenomenon in Chinese culture for two thousand years or more. They have been mere kinship organizations or guilds, but often they have been subversive, political, anti-dynastic, and criminal. In America, "The Tongs are Chinese secret societies grown wild"¹³ Since their inception in America, they have been connected with all the organized vices in the Chinese districts. It serves as an organization designed to accommodate

⁹ Modified in 1930; abrogated by later legislation.

¹⁰ Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

¹¹ Leong Gor Yun, *Chinatown Inside Out*, gives a descriptive account of the functions and abuses of the "Public Assembly of the Chinese" in New York City, pp. 26-52. However, he wrongly regards it as an "American product."

¹² W. C. Smith, *American in Process*, p. 3, seems to misunderstand the functions of the "tong" in China.

¹³ Cheng, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

the gambling and vice interest to a hostile environment. Personal and economic rivalries were productive formerly of the "tong wars." Since the early thirties the political distress in the homeland has tended to unify the tong interests. The power of the tongs have also tended to be greatly diminished as the new generations take on American cultural modes.

In passing it should be observed that each "chintown" in America possesses at least one Chinese language school (significantly in the regional language Cantonese and not the national language). Classes must be in the afternoons—after the close of the American public schools. Discipline appears to be a great problem, and few—especially the children—are satisfied with the results, which usually includes the production of an artificial "Chinglish" and the knowledge of some of the characters. However, as Smith points out, the schools perform the functions of bringing together the two generations and exerting a stabilizing influence.¹⁴ Since few of the older group know English, the younger group must master Chinese if they are to communicate with their elders.

III. Chinese in Southeast Asia.¹⁵

The Chinese in Southeast Asia are almost exclusively drawn from the southeastern provinces of Fukien, Kwang-tung, and Kwangsi. The ethnic composition of the emigrants from south China varies in the different Southeast Asian countries.¹⁶ More in the past than now, this was a source of considerable "tribal" and economic rivalry and even conflict.

Historically almost all of Southeast Asia was, at one time or another, tributary vassals of the great Chinese empire. However, there was little migration southward until comparatively recent times. Chinese administrative sanctions and the force of public opinion for generations served to hold back migration. Chinese religion with its family system of ethnics and its ancestor veneration tended to condemn those who deserted the graves of their ancestors as "unfilial." But with the weakening of administrative sanctions and the increasingly acute economic pressure, proximity, climatic similarities, economic opportunity, and acquaintance with maritime pursuits combined to encourage the movement southward. Census figures are notoriously bad, and there is strong politico-economic motivation for the Chinese concealing their numbers. However, there must be at least 10,000,000 "ethnically" Chinese in the area. There must be at least three million in Thailand alone (Thailand's total population in 1947 was 17,000,000) and two and a half million more are in Malaya. (where the total population is not much bigger than five million).

¹⁴ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

¹⁵ Includes by popular definition the Associated States of Indo-China (Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia), Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, and British, Dutch and Portuguese colonies in the East Indies.

¹⁶ Nine dialect groups are represented among the immigration: Hokchui, Heng-hua, Hokkiens, Teochiu, Canton, Hainan, Hakka, Kwongsai, and Yunnan. However, rarely are there more than three significant groups represented in anyone migrant area.

The interests of the Chinese in the region have been commercial and individual rather than political, governmental, and national. This, however, is not to say that their activities have not had political, governmental, and national repercussions. The Chinese have manifested considerably more business acumen than the people of Southeast Asia, and they have gained a degree of economic control over them that is far greater than their limited number would seem to indicate. For Southeast Asia is a region where the minority groups (American, Europeans, Chinese, and Indians) were long politically dominant and still are economically. On the whole, the Chinese were (and are) the middlemen and retailers, providing the medium of economic intercourse between the Westerners and the native population. Such a position has of course in the past exposed them to the animosity of the two opposing forces who have utilized them as a buffer. Nevertheless, from the perspective of history it can be seen that Western-Chinese relations have in the long run benefitted both parties. (The colonial system just now drawing to a close has been described as a situation wherein "the white man held the cow while the Chinese milked it").

The proposition might be made that in a situation where a minority group has superior skills and resources (in contrast to a passive, defeatist majority group), and are considered competitive, the minority group will reinforced its position by geographic concentration and acquiring dominance in the economic sphere.

IV. Comparison of the Overseas Communities.

(a) *Similarities and Contrasts.*

The groups have both migrated from the same general area; thus, in their homeland they had similar socio-economic institutions and a similar position of subservience to the dominant north Chinese. Economic and demographic pressure contributed to the motivation for migration to America or Southeast Asia. In both areas they live as a group apart with their own economic, political, and social organizations. In neither area of emigration have the Chinese made use of the corporate business form; however, in Southeast Asia they are not at a resultant disadvantage as they are in America.

Migration has produced disproportionate sex ratios among the emigrants. Formerly, in Southeast Asia but not America, this considerable unbalanced sex ratio served to encourage racial intermarriage in all the Southeast Asian countries except Malaya (more religious than racial opposition). In the past intermarriage served to absorb the Chinese settlers into the native community within three generations even though their economic activities and successes had caused some resentment. Now intermarriage throughout the area is decreasing because the improvement in transportation on one hand facilitates frequent passing to and from the mainland, permitting the family in China to perform its socio-biologic functions more efficiently and on the other hand has made possible a more rapid approach to equalization in the sex ratio. Intermarriage and eventual assimilation are being further discouraged by the growth of nationalism among both the Chinese and the native people.

(However, until recently in countries such as the Philippines, restrictions upon the economic activities of foreigners encourage the taking of native wife—even if one already had a wife in China).

As for the contrasts: the migrants to Southeast Asia come from a more varied dialect ("tribal") background than the Chinese in America. To some extent the old "tribal" clashes in Southeast Asia had their counterpart in the clan and village rivalries in America. The tongs were (and are) even more important in Southeast Asia than in America for these guild-like organizations have considerable politico-economic power beyond the mere control of the vice traffic. Formerly the tong wars in Southeast Asia (especially Malaya) were the open manifestation of tribal hostility. Now since the triumph of the communists on the mainland, the secret societies are increasingly taking on political overtones.

In the socio-economic realm there are significant contrasts. In America the Chinese are passive and withdrawn into non-competitive occupations. In part this is a result of an inability to compete with the "corporate wealth," but mainly it is the result of an inability of a numerically insignificant racial minority to cope with the pressure of the American "quasi-caste" racial system. In the semi-colonial "plural society" of Southeast Asia circumstances are quite reversed. Here their economic rivals also lack the corporate form; here it is the native population which is passive and defeatist. The native groups fear Chinese competition, and believe that without direct intervention of their governments that they could not hope to cope with Chinese economic power. At the Asian Conference in Delhi (1947) the delegates from Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, and Ceylon, voiced their fears of an Indian and Chinese economic stranglehold in Southeast Asia. In 1954 the Philippine Congress enacted legislation designed to lead to the ultimate Filipinization of the retail trade.

In America all too often the Chinese Americans have been treated as being inferior racial and culturally. On the other hand the native peoples of Southeast Asia (especially the Viet Nameese) have borrowed heavily from Chinese culture, and historically all have to acknowledge the power and prestige of Chinese culture. In fact even the most untutored Chinese migrant regards the native culture as culturally inferior to that of China. Whereas the Chinese schools in America are in the local dialect (Cantonese) and serve mainly to bridge the gap between the migrants and the native-born; the Chinese schools in Southeast Asia teach *Kuo yü* (modified Mandarin—the Chinese National Language) and are one of the main instruments of inculcating Chinese nationalism. (A Chinese educator in the Philippines has been quoted as saying that the purpose of the Chinese school system in the Philippines is to make the students good Chinese citizens and good Philippine residents).¹⁷ The national governments of Southeast Asia are becoming increasingly suspicious of these school systems. Although safeguarded by treaty in the Philippines, and more or less tolerated in the greater part of Southeast Asia, they have been severely restricted in Thailand. Socially, economically, and politically the Chinese embassy in Southeast Asia plays a very important part in the affairs of the overseas group.

¹⁷ G. William Skinner, *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia*, p. 94.

(b) Causes and Significance of Divergencies.

The very number of Chinese in Southeast Asia tends to cause a qualitative difference in the problems of the group. If America were to have the same proportion of Chinese as does the Philippines (300,000 but comparatively small for Southeast Asia) there would be more than 2,500,000 Chinese in America. Nor have the Chinese been able until World War to remove the legal discrimination against them in America. Conflict between the Chinese and the natives of Southeast Asia has been economic and cultural (increasingly becoming nationalistic); in America there was strong racial undertones. But even as the Chinese groups were discriminated against in America, the compulsory school laws were to produce the assimilation of the younger Chinese generations. To a great extent the young Chinese Americans have accepted their contemporaries' evaluation of their old culture. Despite the past history, the Chinese Americans¹⁸ ask only to be treated like other Americans. But in Southeast Asia the breach grows ever wider between the patriotic Chinese, contemptuous of the native groups, and the nationalistic native peoples, suspicious and fearful of Chinese domination.

V. Conclusion.

In the past the Chinese have fared far better socially and economically in Southeast Asia than in America. They never encountered the racial discrimination there that they encountered in America. (Although conflict might be intense,—even leading to massacre or expulsion of the group¹⁹—it never partook the nature of the steady, effective exclusion of the Chinese in America). In the last century the American Chinese found themselves unable to compete against American (Western) capitalistic creations nor to cope with the quasi-caste race relations. They retreated geographically (away from the Pacific Coast, which was the scene of so much rioting and discrimination) and occupationally to (non-competitive task). The occupational stratification has been continued up to the present in part because of success in these areas but also because of continued discrimination. However, the Chinese-American youth have become imbued with the democratic American credo inculcated in the public schools. In large part it is the discrimination of the dominant group and which perpetuates second class citizens of the Chinese-American group.

While liberal opinion in America has finally become to assert itself in order to obtain equality for the minority groups, the situations of the Chinese in the Southeast Asia is becoming increasingly precarious. Having rid themselves of Western political domination, the native peoples now strive to rid themselves of Chinese economic domination. The old process of assimilation through the intermarriage has tapered off. Neither the native people nor the Chinese actually seem to desire assimilation of the emigrants. The demographic pressure for Chinese migration is tremendous. In the developing politico-military crisis the

¹⁸ Particularly the second and third generation groups. See Smith, *Americans in Transition* and Jade Snow Wong's, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.

¹⁹ Especially in the Philippines during Spanish times: Massacres of 1603, 1639, 1662, 1686, and 1762.

Overseas Chinese are apparently to be used as "pawns" in a great international "chess game." The future for the Chinese residents and the native inhabitants is neither clear nor hopeful.

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