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The United States and the “Chinese Problem” of Southeast Asia

In October 1967, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore paid his first official visit to the United States. Over the past year, Lee had become increasingly forthright in his support of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Washington was eager to have him plead its case to the American public. To this end, U.S. officials arranged for journalists to interview Lee on the National Broadcasting Corporation’s *Meet the Press* program on October 22. Twelve minutes into the televised interview, Seymour Topping of the *New York Times* proposed to “shift” from discussing the Vietnam War to the real “questions in our minds”: China’s relationship with Southeast Asia. Topping asked Lee to “estimate” whether China, despite the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, remained a “danger” to Southeast Asia, and to speak “as a Chinese who understands China.” Lee shot back: “I can’t speak as a Chinese because I am a Singaporean.” He stated that he was of “Chinese ethnic stock,” a distinction he began to insist was most “crucial” when Topping said that answering “as an ethnic Chinese” would suffice. Smiling wryly, Lee intoned that Beijing and the “aspirant in Taipei” would take umbrage that he presumed to speak for the Chinese. But he could not resist the opportunity to become the United States’ informal advisor on Chinese foreign affairs. Lee claimed he did indeed possess “the built-in memory—programming of the Chinese people,” and proceeded to address Topping’s question at length.¹

We need not be overly concerned with Lee’s subsequent commentary on Chinese policy and Southeast Asian affairs. Overall, Lee’s core message was clear: that noncommunist Southeast Asia wanted the United States to remain in Vietnam and the region. He expressed it on American television with an eloquence that endeared him to Washington.² More importantly, the exchange between Topping and Lee gestures at the salient features of this essay’s

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1. “NBC Meet the Press: Interview with Lee Kuan Yew (October 22, 1967),” *YouTube*, last accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VexrmTAcOAA>.

2. See Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY, 2019), especially chapter 5.

transnational approach to U.S. relations with post-1945 Southeast Asia. Topping’s question underscores the place of China and, crucially, its Southeast Asian diaspora in U.S. strategic views of the region. It represents one popular version of official U.S. perceptions and portrayals of Southeast Asia in the Cold War, which centered on fears of Chinese communists seizing the region, aided by a transnational network of overseas Chinese (numbering some ten million by the 1950s) spread across Southeast Asia. While Topping understood that the U.S.-friendly Lee did not serve Beijing, he simultaneously assumed that Lee’s ethnicity gave him special insight into China’s goals. It was an assumption not too far removed from believing (somewhat uncritically) that the hearts and minds of Southeast Asian Chinese were inextricably tethered to Beijing, that the overseas Chinese would invariably become China’s fifth column. Then again, Lee’s declaration (and he suppressed a cheeky grin as he spoke) that he could actually invoke the “built-in memory” and “programming of the Chinese people” to answer Topping purposefully re-inscribed the journalist’s assumptions about China and its diaspora, allowing Lee to position himself as the United States’ inside man, an asset with actionable intelligence about China’s approach to the region. For much of the Cold War, U.S. officials had expressed their strategic concerns about China’s regional policy and its diaspora with phrases such as “Chinese penetration” and the “Chinese problem” of Southeast Asia.³ Britain, the United States’ closest ally in post-1945 Southeast Asia, also dubbed this perceived security menace the “Chinese problem” in its colonies.⁴

By whatever name, the purported “Chinese problem” of Southeast Asia, when subject to scholarly scrutiny, illuminates a transnational history of U.S. relations with the broader region, a history often overlooked because most works concerned with U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia are bilateral studies. Here, historical analyses of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship make up the vast majority, something of an overrepresentation.⁵ Yet if the predominance of U.S.-Vietnam studies partially obscures transnational developments beyond Indochina and across the wider region, then major bilateral studies of the

3. NSC-51: U.S. Policy toward Southeast Asia, July 1, 1949, U.S. Declassified Documents Online (henceforth, USDCO) (Gale document no. CK2349354016), 1-4, 5-6; R. Allen Griffin, Report No. 5 of the United States Economic Survey Mission to Southeast Asia: Needs for United States Economic and Technical Aid in Indonesia, May 1950, ii, 2-3, 9, Papers of John Melby, Folder: Southeast Asia File, Miscellaneous, General—1950-1952, Box 9, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO (HSTL); “Memorandum re: checklist of action for Southeast Asia,” January 29, 1954, Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #1) (2) [September 1953-July 1954], Box 79, White House Office (WHO), National Security Council (NSC) Staff: Papers, 1948-61, Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) Central File Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS (DDEL).

4. F. Brewer (Acting Secretary for Chinese Affairs), “The Chinese Problem in the Federation of Malaya,” April 1955, FCO 141/7365; Joint Intelligence Committee (Singapore), “The Chinese Factor in the Problem of the Security and Defense of Southeast Asia,” February 20, 1947, FCO 141/1699, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, London (TNA).

5. See Robert J. McMahon’s still relevant historiographical essay in *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia after World War II* (New York, 1999), 259-62.

United States' relations with different Southeast Asian states ironically retread the same path by claiming that another state was the single most important to Washington.⁶ In effect, the region as a whole slips from view, not to mention the wide-angle lens through which U.S. officials consistently perceived and acted upon Southeast Asia. This essay contends that one way to redress these imbalances is to study the "Chinese problem" and, thereby, scrutinize U.S. thinking about the transnational dimensions of race and the Cold War struggle for the Southeast Asian region. Historian Meredith Oyen has shown how a similar inquiry yields valuable insights into the similarities and differences between Beijing's, Taipei's, and Washington's policies toward the overseas Chinese in the 1950s, though her work does not dwell on the profound and lasting importance of U.S. policymakers' concerns with the supposedly transnational "Chinese problem" and their persistently regional approach to Southeast Asia.⁷ With special attention to U.S. policymaking toward Southeast Asia from the 1940s through the early 1960s, this essay attempts to both reveal a narrative potentially more characteristic of U.S. approaches to the wider region than bilateral studies have thus far rendered, as well as underscore how U.S. Cold War views of Southeast Asia's Chinese in essence resembled older patterns of western and Japanese imperialism in the region.

Seymour Topping's question was of a piece with Washington's long-held conviction that Southeast Asia's ethnic Chinese—many recent immigrants, many whose families had long settled in the region and married into indigenous communities—might collaborate with Beijing. This conviction was not simply a function of American Cold War thinking. Indeed, U.S. officials from before and during the Pacific War had learned repeatedly of the high degree to which Chiang Kai Shek's Guomindang (GMD) on the mainland could influence, and was at the same time reliant on the financial support of, the large "overseas Chinese" communities of the "South Seas" (meaning Southeast Asia).⁸ It is of

6. See for example, John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (Madison, WI, 2006), 14; Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca, NY, 2012), 1–6; Kenton J. Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945* (Ithaca, NY, 2015), 2, 4.

7. Meredith Oyen, "Communism, Containment and the Chinese Overseas" in *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, ed. Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi (Leiden, 2010), 59–93.

8. Telegram, The Minister in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State, January 5, 1934, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1934, vol. III, The Far East, eds. John G. Reid, et al. (Washington, D.C., 1950), doc. 511; Letter, The Ambassador in China (Gauss) to the Secretary of State, May 28, 1942, *FRUS*, Diplomatic Papers, 1942, China, eds. G. Bernard Nobel, E.R. Perkins (Washington, D.C., 1956), doc. 634; Telegram, The Ambassador in China (Gauss) to the Secretary of State, December 7, 1942, *FRUS*, Diplomatic Papers, 1942, China, doc. 446; Telegram, The Charge in China (Vincent) to the Secretary of State, March 28, 1943, *FRUS*, Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China, eds. G. Bernard Nobel, E.R. Perkins (Washington, D.C., 1957), doc. 339; Letter, The Acting Secretary of State to the Secretary of War (Stimson), June 28, 1945, *FRUS*, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East, vol. VI, eds. John P. Glennon, et al. (Washington, D.C., 1969), doc. 386. See also Sunil Amrith, *Migration and*

little surprise then, that in 1946, before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had even taken the mainland, U.S. intelligence officials warily concluded that the “4,500,000 alien Chinese and millions more persons of part-Chinese blood” had a “disposition to isolate themselves politically and culturally and direct their loyalties to China.” Based off such observations, U.S. officials concluded that the Chinese diaspora was a “potential tool for the extension of China’s influence in Southeast Asia,” whether it be for GMD or the CCP.⁹

Importantly, U.S. strategists’ suspicions about the political leanings of Southeast Asia’s Chinese broadly match not just the anxieties harbored for centuries by the Spanish and Dutch colonial governments in the region but also the insecurities of the Japanese Empire during World War II. For though the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) expressed no interest in courting the Chinese of Southeast Asia, the European rulers of the Philippines and the East Indies were intermittently seized by fears of Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia via the region’s (still rather small) Chinese populations. Acting on these fears, the Spanish and Dutch colonial administrations sporadically abetted massacres of local Chinese by stoking indigenous resentment of Chinese economic success.¹⁰ The early twentieth century brought new iterations of these old fears, as the western powers in Southeast Asia warily eyed the surging Chinese nationalism in the colonies that had been inspired by the 1911 revolution against the Qing.¹¹ It was not lost on the colonial authorities in Southeast Asia that the Chinese revolution had toppled a foreign monarchy, for the Europeans and Americans were also alien rulers and their position also potentially vulnerable to indigenous mass movements. Crucially, the rise of the CCP in 1921 and, in connection, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in 1930—a party comprised almost entirely of ethnic Chinese—put Southeast Asia’s approximately six million Chinese at the forefront of potential threats to the colonial order. Even the Japanese Empire at the height of its powers in the early 1940s harbored similar concerns about the Chinese populations it ruled over in occupied Southeast Asia. After all, not only had the Chinese diaspora (particularly those of Malaya and Singapore) raised massive sums of money for the GMD’s war against Japan from the late 1930s, but the MCP—supplied by Britain—waged a resilient guerrilla campaign against occupying Japanese forces. The Japanese military,

Diaspora in Modern Asia (London, 2012), 101–102. For an examination of the relationship between Singapore’s Chinese community and mainland China during the Pacific War, see Ernest Koh, *Diaspora at War: The Chinese of Singapore between Empire and Nation, 1937–1945* (Leiden, 2013).

9. Central Intelligence Group, “Chinese Minorities in Southeast Asia,” December 2, 1946, 1-2, 7, CIA FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) Reading Room, last accessed November 23, 2018,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A002800100004-6.pdf>.

10. Edgar Wickberg, “Anti-Sinicism and Chinese Identity Options in the Philippines,” in *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe*, ed. Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid (Seattle, WA, 1997), 153–86; Anthony Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia* (Chichester, 2015), 189, 266–68.

11. Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*, 76.

deeply suspicious of Malaya and Singapore's Chinese and their ties to China, massacred thousands of ethnic Chinese in these two former British colonies, intent on suppressing Chinese-led resistance movements and ending the transnational flow of resources from the Chinese diaspora to the GMD.¹²

The United States, as the predominant world power after 1945, would also espouse this enduring imperial and transnational view of the "Chinese problem" in Southeast Asia. Indeed, as the CCP appeared on the cusp of triumph over the GMD in early 1949, U.S. analysts pondered—in ways reminiscent of European and Japanese imperial elites before them—how communist "ascendancy" in China would exert a "profound effect on Southeast Asia," how China could "be expected to make use of the considerable Chinese minorities" in the region, all of them supposedly "bound to the homeland by strong ties."¹³ In July of that year, still three months shy of the CCP's consolidation of control over China, U.S. policymakers had come to see the overseas Chinese as a problem "afflicting the entire region." It was at precisely this moment that U.S. officials trying to articulate their broad-based strategy for Southeast Asia raised the specter of "Chinese penetration" of the region, a view that—given the region's imperial history—was certainly not novel.¹⁴ At the end of 1949, U.S. officials who visited Southeast Asia following the CCP's victory returned with reports that the "alien and unassimilated" Chinese diaspora might be an "entering vehicle for infiltration of Communism" into the region. For good measure, these officials also detailed the numbers of ethnic Chinese residing in different countries in a map of Southeast Asia for Washington to pore over. The map, mottled with numerous red dots "each represent[ing] 10,000 Chinese," no doubt helped to crystallize U.S. notions of the region's interconnectedness, the clusters of red dots in mainland Southeast Asia like a disease bound to spread throughout the archipelago.¹⁵

To be clear, U.S. views of Southeast Asia's Chinese were not without nuance. American government analysts did offer decision-makers fairly detailed studies of the Chinese diaspora.¹⁶ One such study, produced by China specialist Josiah W. Bennett in the early stages of the Korean War, involved surveying the opinions of individuals (from indigenous communities and ethnic Chinese) in several Southeast Asian countries as well as drawing on the scholarly work of American anthropologist G. William Skinner and British historian Victor Purcell, who served in the Malayan civil service as Chinese Affairs Advisor to

12. Reid, *History of Southeast Asia*, 334; Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*, 102–104.

13. CIA, Intelligence Memorandum No. 112: Effect of a Communist-dominated China on Southeast Asia, January 5, 1949, CIA FOIA Reading Room, last accessed November 23, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A000300130001-0.pdf>

14. NSC-51, 1–4, 5–6.

15. Mutual Defense Assistance Program Chat, "South and Southeast Asia: Chart 11-Distribution of Chinese," (undated, likely December 1949), Folder: State Department, Correspondence, 1949 [3 of 3], Box 40, White House Confidential File, State Department Correspondence, Papers of Harry S. Truman, HSTL.

16. Also see Oyen, "Communism, Containment and the Chinese Overseas," 64–65.

the British Military Administration. Bennett’s paper warned that it “would be a mistake to consider Southeast Asian Chinese as merely a Chinese audience transplanted,” a “mistake” indeed to presume the diaspora was a “vast Communist Trojan horse.” The interviews he had conducted in Malaya, Thailand, Burma, and Indonesia convinced him that “only a small percentage” of the overseas Chinese in the region were doctrinaire communists, that the “great majority” instead were “neutral and would be anti-Communist if they were accorded effective protection and . . . encouragement.” Importantly, Bennett pointed out that Southeast Asia’s Chinese faced enduring “local discrimination and intolerance” in virtually every country of the region, an observation shared by most U.S. studies on the overseas Chinese. Thus, Bennett argued, when Southeast Asian Chinese looked to Beijing, it was not so much for ideological solidarity but “existential and psychological” reasons, for “outside backing” against domestic hostility. From his perspective, Beijing’s regional ambitions were actually caught in a bind: courting the overseas Chinese “risk[ed] . . . alienating the native Communists” whereas a purely ideological appeal to the local communists would surely “los[e] the adherence of the Chinese.”¹⁷

However, Bennett’s meticulous study simultaneously provided U.S. policy-makers ample evidence of the CCP’s “surprising success” (Bennett’s own words) with the “penetration of the Southeast Asian Chinese school system,” signaling that China had likely chosen at the time to extend its influence more via its diasporic networks than native communist parties. His findings emphasized that the CCP had effectively “convert[ed] Overseas [Chinese-language] schools into Communist propaganda organs,” staffed with “pro-Communist teachers” and CCP-produced textbooks. In countries with anticommunist governments, such as British-controlled Malaya and pro-U.S. Thailand, “clandestine Communist penetration” occurred easily because the CCP operated through “underground” activities and education. Here, Bennett admitted that “Communism has the same strong attraction for the Chinese youth of Southeast Asia that it has for youth in China,” for the ideology offered young ethnic Chinese “excitement and adventure,” appealing “radical slogans” that stoked the “immature nationalistic emotions of Chinese youth” with the rousing narrative of valiant struggle against “reactionary oppressors” at home and “imperialist aggressors” from the West. By these means, Bennett seemed to concede, the CCP seemed on the way to “winning the loyalty of the rising generation of Southeast Asian Chinese.”¹⁸

17. Josiah W. Bennett, “The Southeast Asian Chinese: A Public Affairs Survey,” not dated (likely late 1950), Folder: Southeast Asia File, General – 1948–1949, Box 8, Papers of John Melby, Philippine File, Press Release File, South Pacific Commission File, Southeast Asia File, HSTL.

18. Bennett, “The Southeast Asian Chinese: A Public Affairs Survey,” not dated (likely late 1950), Southeast Asia File, General–1948–1949, HSTL.

In any case, U.S. intelligence had already learned in May 1950 that the CCP had formally decided to “redouble efforts to utilize overseas Chinese groups” for “strengthening and expanding Communist influence in Southeast Asia.”¹⁹ Indeed, Beijing had attempted to woo Chinese who had recently immigrated to Indonesia, shipping pro-communist propaganda to Chinese-language schools in the newly independent republic as well as organizing cultural tours for Indonesian Chinese to the mainland. This CCP campaign to prove that it, rather than the GMD, deserved the loyalty of overseas Chinese was most effective, to the point that many Indonesian Chinese spurned Indonesian citizenship and left to join the Chinese civil service.²⁰ CCP propaganda flowed copiously into middle schools in Malaya and Singapore, too. This, coupled with the absence of a Chinese-language university in either country, saw many ethnic Chinese students from both Southeast Asian countries make their communist predilections plain by pursuing their higher education in the People’s Republic.²¹

Furthermore, the MCP challenged British authorities from the late 1940s with its guerrilla activities on the Malay peninsula while its affiliates in Singapore ran a well-organized political campaign that held sway over Singapore’s trade unions and Chinese-language middle schools. It is unclear if Beijing truly offered substantial support to the MCP, though British and U.S. intelligence did discover that some CCP agents had been dispatched to Malaya and Singapore, and certainly believed that “instructions to the MCP” came directly from Beijing (and Moscow).²² The MCP, for its part, gestured overtly within its ideological materials at its intimacy with “brother” China, which only confirmed American suspicions that the party clung to the “Chinese Communist orientation” of its inception two decades earlier.²³ North of Malaya, in Thailand, U.S. intelligence learned that CCP agents had deftly used

19. CIA, “Chinese Communist Plans for Expansion in Southeast Asia,” June 28, 1950, last accessed November 23, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R005100500006-8.pdf>.

20. Taomo Zhou, “Ambivalent Alliance: Chinese Policy toward Indonesia, 1960–1965,” *China Quarterly* 221 (2015): 208–228.

21. CIA, “Delegation of Chinese Communist Students from Malaya,” August 21, 1950, CIA FOIA Reading Room, last accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R005600440010-5.pdf>.

22. CIA, “Current Situation in Malaya,” November 17, 1949, CIA FOIA Reading Room, last accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A003500050003-5.pdf>; CIA, “Infiltration of East Coast of Malaya by Chinese Communists,” April 10, 1951, CIA FOIA Reading Room, last accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R007100740002-4.pdf>; Kenneth P. Landon, “Paper for OCB Consideration Re: Singapore,” Dec 1, 1955, OCB 091 Malaya (1) [December 1954–February 1957], Box 51, WHO, NSC Staff Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

23. Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, chapter 1; Operations Coordinating Board (OCB), “The Pattern of Communist Movements in Southeast Asia,” March 16, 1955, 18, 21, Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #3) (1) [March–August 1955], Box 80, WHO, NSC Staff Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

the “alien minority” of overseas Chinese to rapidly become the “largest alien Communist party in Southeast Asia with the possible exception of [that in] Malaya.” Even further north, U.S. officials established that the Burma branch of the communist-dominated China Democratic League courted even the small ethnic Chinese population of the former British colony “with the blessing and financial support” of Beijing. In the Philippines, too, as American analysts found, Chinese communists had been “very active in the Philippine Chinese community,” infiltrating schools and cultural organizations as well as gaining control of newspapers in the same way they had done elsewhere in Southeast Asia. A “Special Committee Report on Southeast Asia” expressed the region’s vulnerability to communism in the bluntest terms in April 1954: “Southeast Asia is part of and ethnically associated with . . . principally China” and “China today is the base of international Communism in the Far East.”²⁴ As a consequence, U.S. views of the broader region would, during the early Cold War, be conditioned by the principles that Beijing was “heavily emphasizing the wooing of overseas Chinese, that they too may act as a fifth column” and that overseas Chinese (with some exceptions) did indeed “feel the future lies with the communists.”²⁵

Crucially, British colonial authorities seeking increased U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia fed their ally’s suspicions of the overseas Chinese whenever the opportunity arose. They strove to convince U.S. officials who visited Malaya and Singapore from the end of 1949 onward that Beijing would operate easily by “proxy,” activating the “local fifth column” of communists and ethnic Chinese in each Southeast Asian country in order to achieve regional dominance. Even in communications within the UK policymaking elite, not orations staged for the benefit of the Americans, British officials held that the “great Chinese communities” of Southeast Asia might be galvanized by the Chinese communists and the anti-colonialism of the postwar era. Above all, London worried that this scenario might unfold in Malaya (almost forty percent Chinese) and Singapore (three-quarters Chinese) and undermine British influence not only in these two territories but also Southeast Asia as a whole. Many British administrators had long believed the Chinese populations of these colonies were inherently “bound to the mother country China” by virtue of their race and culture. And British views on the transnational threat of China’s diasporic networks were especially persuasive to their American ally, not least because U.S. officials already harbored similar notions and eagerly sought Britain’s confirmation. U.S. officials needed little help imagining the overseas Chinese of Southeast Asia, numbering in the millions, reaching across state-lines, forming a gigantic belt—a road, even—that linked mainland China

24. “Special Committee Report on Southeast Asia—Part II,” Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #1) (6) [September 1953–July 1954], Box 79, WHO, NSC Staff: Papers, 1948–61, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

25. OCB, “The Pattern of Communist Movements in Southeast Asia,” 6, 10, 28, 32, DDEL.

intimately to the entire region. It bears repeating that, in spirit, these U.S. visions of the “Chinese problem” of Southeast Asia echoed those of preceding foreign empires that once dominated the region. By the latter months of 1950, the purportedly transnational “Chinese problem” had come to underpin U.S. strategic conceptions of Southeast Asia’s interconnectedness. Here, then, was an emergent embryonic domino theory about the interlinked fates of the Southeast Asian countries, with American and British racial thinking as well as the region’s older imperial patterns nestled at its core. President Dwight Eisenhower would supply his peculiar domino metaphor only in 1954.²⁶

Accordingly, U.S. policymakers were resolved from the early 1950s to develop what would become a decidedly “regional approach to the problem of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.” However, it is vital to highlight that in formulating policy, U.S. planners may have differed slightly from the European and Japanese imperial elites in Southeast Asia prior to 1945. The Americans did not expect that all overseas Chinese would naturally cast their lot in with China, but instead (bearing reports such as Josiah Bennett’s and others in mind) held that the struggle for Southeast Asia could be decided by which side ultimately “recruit[ed] these energies [i.e. the overseas Chinese] in support of the free world.”²⁷

Indeed, the key principle of U.S. Cold War policy toward the region was to harness the interconnectedness of Southeast Asia’s Chinese so that Beijing could not. From mid-1954, U.S. planners began seeking ways to “encourage the overseas Chinese” to “organize and activate anticommunist groups and activities within their own communities.” Beyond this, Washington aspired to “cultivate” overseas Chinese “sympathy and support” for the GMD-dominated Taiwan as a “symbol of Chinese political resistance,” to forge one more “link” within the United States’ broader “defense against Communist expansion in Asia.” Even so, American policymakers were mindful that these efforts must remain “consistent with [the overseas Chinese] primary allegiance to their local governments.”²⁸

26. Wen-Qing Ngoei, “The Domino Logic of the Darkest Moment: The Fall of Singapore, the Atlantic Echo Chamber, and ‘Chinese Penetration’ in U.S. Cold War policy toward Southeast Asia,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, no. 3 (2014): 230–32, 234–35, 241–43; “The Chinese Factor in the Problem of Security and Defense in Southeast Asia,” February 20, 1947, FCO (Foreign Commonwealth Office) 141/16999; “The Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia,” April 26, 1955, FCO 141/7363; “Overseas Chinese Dual Nationality, 1956, FCO 131/15149, TNA.

27. Memorandum on the “Advantages of a Regional Paper” from Elmer B. Staats to Kenneth P. Landon, July 11, 1955; OCB, “Possible Regional Approach to the Problem of the Chinese in Southeast Asia in Connection with NSC 5405 and the Outline Plan of Operations for Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia,” July 8, 1955, Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #3) (7) [March–August 1955], Box 80, WHO, NSC Staff Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

28. OCB, “Progress Report on NSC 5405: United States Objectives and Course of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia, Jan. 16 – July 21, 1954, Annex ‘A’: Detailed Development of Major Actions,” July 30, 1954, Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #2) (1) [August –

These goals arose directly from U.S. strategists' focus upon the presumed transnational dimensions of the "Chinese problem." On the one hand, American planners wanted those transnational affiliations of the Chinese diaspora to persist such that they could be redirected toward the anticommunist government in Taiwan. In fact, the Eisenhower administration had already been studying for some time how it could help Chiang Kai-Shek "gain acceptance" as "the leader of these Chinese" and, thereby, establish Taiwan as a hub to which the many spokes of Southeast Asia's Chinese could be attached. On the other hand, U.S. policymakers simultaneously hoped that the appeal of indigenous anticommunism espoused by local nationalists in many Southeast Asian governments might whittle down the transnational affiliations of the overseas Chinese.²⁹

From the mid-1950s through the end of Eisenhower's presidency, U.S. officials attempted to meet these abovementioned regional objectives through a plethora of policy recommendations and programs. Here is but a sampling, scratching the surface of an underappreciated yet major preoccupation of U.S. cold warriors, a raft of policies that proliferated despite the protests of several officials who "regard[ed] the Overseas Chinese as an important although not a major factor" in the region.³⁰ In February 1955, for example, the Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) produced a paper, entitled "Overseas Chinese Students: A Study," focused on the multi-faceted draw of higher education in the Chinese mainland. The paper recommended that the State Department increase the number of exchange scholarship programs for overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia to visit the United States.³¹ Six months later, the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) proposed to "develop and carry forward a school children's program [in Southeast Asia] of at least equal magnitude and dynamism" to that of the People's Republic, a program that should be "aggressive, not merely a holding action," including supporting the creation of multi-ethnic Children's Community Centers to facilitate the "assimilation process" of ethnic Chinese children into the "host country," assisting schools with the running of extra-curricular activities ("sports, handicraft and manual arts, dramatics and

December 1954], Box 79, White House Office, NSC Staff: Papers, 1948–61, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

29. "A Report to the National Security Council by Task Force 'C' of Project Solarium," July 16, 1953, Folder: Project Solarium, Report to the NSC by Task Force 'C' [1953] (1), Box 9, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs: Records, 1952–61, NSC Series, Subject Subseries; "Memorandum re: checklist of action for Southeast Asia," January 29, 1954, Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #1) (2) [September 1953–July 1954], Box 79, WHO, NSC Staff: Papers, 1948–61, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

30. OCB, "NSC 5612/1 (Southeast Asia, Changes in Policy Guidance and Courses of Action Resulting from Revision of NSC 5405)," September 18, 1956, Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #5) (6) [June 1956–June 1957], Box 81, WHO, NSC Staff: Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

31. OCB, "Over Chinese Studies: A Study," Feb 7, 1955, Folder: Overseas Chinese (1), Box 5, WHO, NSC Staff: Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Secretariat Series, DDEL.

music”) to foster a “non-Communist orientation.”³² By December of that year, the USIA had already “increased its output of Chinese material, including Chinese textbooks” for dissemination to the region to combat the influx of propaganda from the People’s Republic.³³

In 1956, American officials drafted a paper entitled “The Overseas Chinese and U.S. Policy” which stated that the “primary goal of U.S. Government activities directed at the Overseas Chinese should be to deny this group to the Chinese communists.” In addition to a slew of projects, this paper also proposed the production of “Chinese motion pictures [with west-friendly themes] in Tokyo, combining Chinese acting and directing talent, Japanese technical facilities, and experienced American professional supervision.” The paper also suggested that the USIA discreetly support local Chinese newspapers and student organizations with pro-U.S. tendencies, as well as create opportunities for Southeast Asian Chinese to seek higher education in the United States.³⁴

By September 1957, the administration’s “Operations Plans Affecting Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia” had ramped up its suite of projects considerably, including ongoing efforts to “Counter Communist influence in the [Chinese-language] schools” by flooding them with “anti-Communist books [and] magazines,” and “training and placing non-communist teachers” in the schools. Also, the United States had been subtly “encourag[ing] national programs of integration” of overseas Chinese within each U.S.-friendly Southeast Asian country. Along with these, Washington plowed resources into supporting Taipei’s “information and cultural programs” to “raise its prestige” in Southeast Asia, underwriting the expansion of Southeast Asia-Taiwan trade fairs, cultural exhibits, and conferences, providing financial assistance to enable overseas Chinese to pursue their higher education in Taiwan, and empowering Taiwan to provide technical aid programs in Southeast Asia (all the while trying to keep the U.S. part in these projects hidden).³⁵ At the end of that year, the OCB tabled its “Guidelines for United States Programs Affecting the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia,” which reiterated (and called for the reinforcing of) the many strategies—including Taiwan-produced radio broadcasts and building a corps of U.S. officials with Chinese language and area training—already undertaken by the U.S. government to stymie the transnational reach of Beijing’s cultural

32. USIA to OCB, “Working Paper for Ad Hoc Sub-Committee Overseas Chinese School Children,” August 2, 1955, Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #3) (8) [March–August 1955], Box 80, WHO, NSC Staff Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

33. OCB, “Progress Report on U.S. Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia (NSC 5405) and Portions of NSC 5429/5,” December 9, 1955, Folder: OCB 091.4 Southeast Asia (File #4) (6) [December 1955–June 1956], Box 80, WHO, NSC Staff Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Central File Series, DDEL.

34. “The Overseas Chinese and U.S. Policy,” Sep 6, 1956, Folder: Overseas Chinese (1), Box 5, WHO, NSC Staff: Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Secretariat Series, DDEL.

35. Ad Hoc Working Group on the Overseas Chinese, “Summary of Operations Plans Affecting Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia,” September 6, 1957, Folder: Overseas Chinese (1), Box 5, WHO, NSC Staff: Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Secretariat Series, DDEL.

and political programs, while simultaneously shoring up Taipei’s capacity to do the same.³⁶

Regrettably, how readily Southeast Asians took to these U.S. policies currently remains under-studied, and no wonder, given the few scholars who have actually paid attention to Washington’s fixation with the “Chinese problem.” Joey Long is one historian who has found that U.S. cultural diplomacy proved rather effective in Singapore during the 1950s and built up a “sizable reservoir of [local] goodwill toward the United States,” though the specific U.S. strategies Long has analyzed were not, like those mentioned above, targeted specifically at winning over ethnic Chinese.³⁷

Just as importantly, a major trend in indigenous Southeast Asian nationalism—helmed by local conservative elites—was not to court all the overseas Chinese as the Eisenhower administration intended but to seize and consolidate political power by exploiting popular, anti-Chinese prejudice that had long predated the Cold War.³⁸ The Eisenhower administration, if it sensed at all that its efforts in this area were faltering, doggedly kept trying to solve the “Chinese problem” by winning them over to the side of Taiwan and the United States. In time, the “Chinese problem” became so much a part of the fabric of U.S. strategy toward Southeast Asia that the Kennedy administration inherited many of the same presumptions. In early 1961, the NSC highlighted Beijing’s “built-in subversive potential in the 12,000,000 overseas Chinese” and resolved to “continue to encourage and support closer GRC [Government of the Republic of China, Taiwan] ties with the 12,000,000 Overseas Chinese, [as well as] getting Taipei to demonstrate effectively how it is the last great repository of true Chinese culture.”³⁹

However, Kennedy officials, and those of the Johnson administration, did seem to appreciate that the local anti-Chinese prejudice which analysts like Josiah Bennett had once discerned throughout Southeast Asia held some utility to the achievement of U.S. regional objectives. The Kennedy administration welcomed the merging of Malaya with Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak in 1963 to create Malaysia, anticipating that the anticommunist Malayan government would snuff out the thriving leftist movement of Singapore dominated by ethnic Chinese just as it had crushed the mostly Chinese MCP in the 1950s. (Eventually Lee Kuan Yew did the deed with Britain’s help by detaining his

36. OCB, “Guidelines for United States Programs Affecting the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia,” Dec 11, 1957, Folder: Overseas Chinese (2), Box 5, WHO, NSC Staff: Papers, 1948–1961, OCB Secretariat Series, DDEL.

37. See S.R. Joey Long, *Safe for Decolonization: The Eisenhower Administration, Britain, and Singapore* (Kent, OH, 2011), x.

38. Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, chapters 2–4. Also see Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*; Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford, CA, 2008); Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*.

39. Robert W. Komer, “Strategic Framework for Rethinking China Policy,” April 7, 1961, Folder: Staff Memoranda: Robert Komer, 3/30/61–3/31/61, Box 321, Kennedy Papers, NSF-Meetings and Memoranda, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (JFKL).

leftwing rivals months ahead of Singapore's merger with Malaya.) The Johnson administration, for its part, facilitated Indonesian Army General Suharto's massacre of Indonesia's communists in 1965, offering technical support to Suharto's propaganda machine as it whipped up local anti-Chinese sentiment in combination with indigenous fears of Beijing's intentions to animate a popular and bloody anticommunist purge.⁴⁰ Whether to woo the Chinese diaspora or support their suppression, Washington's persistent fixation with the "Chinese problem" in Southeast Asia goes some way toward explaining why Seymour Topping, in the abovementioned 1967 interview with Lee Kuan Yew ostensibly arranged for discussing U.S.-Vietnam relations, nevertheless posed a question that welled from enduring U.S. assumptions about the "Chinese problem," about China's connections to its Southeast Asian diaspora. At base, addressing the "Chinese problem" remained a fundamental part of the United States' engagement of Southeast Asia as a whole.

Without question, scholars have pursued many valuable inquiries into the United States' bilateral relationships with the countries of Southeast Asia. But the potential for unearthing a transnational U.S.-Southeast Asian history by examining the "Chinese problem" remains largely untapped. As this essay has demonstrated, U.S. cold warriors harbored sustained concerns about China achieving hegemony in Southeast Asia via its diasporic networks, concerns that well predated the Cold War. These transnational concerns—akin in logic and scope to the views of European and Japanese imperialists dominant in Southeast Asia before 1945—reveal how race, a fixation with the "Chinese problem," profoundly shaped U.S. strategic visions of Southeast Asia and underpinned the decidedly regional scale in which American policymakers thought and operated.

40. Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, chapter 4.