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Josh STENBERG

Chien-Wen KUNG

Charlotte SETIJADI

Singapore Management University, [csetijadi@smu.edu.sg](mailto:csetijadi@smu.edu.sg)

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## From Pulau to Pulo: Archipelagic perspectives on Southeast Asian Chinese ethnicity from the Philippines and Indonesia

Josh Stenberg<sup>a</sup>, Chien-Wen Kung<sup>b</sup> and Charlotte Setijadi<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Chinese Studies, The University of Sydney, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Department of History, National University of Singapore, Singapore; <sup>c</sup>School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore

### ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia is an important region for working through questions of Chineseness. It is, however, a notoriously heterogeneous region, and conclusions derived from some parts of it can be of limited applicability elsewhere. This special issue offering empirically-grounded, multi-disciplinary research engages with and expands on existing scholarship on Southeast Asia's Chinese. By focusing on Indonesia and the Philippines, the articles in this special issue investigate diverse models of being Chinese in Southeast Asia and depart from the familiar paradigms offered by Singapore and Malaysia, where ethnic Chinese populations are in the highest proportions and hold significant political power, and where Anglophone institutions transmute formulations of Chineseness into academic and political discourse. In so doing, we call for recognising diversity within Chinese communities in the region, not only among localised, hybrid expressions of Chineseness, but in the coexistence of both hybridity and persistent identification with Chineseness in multiple forms.

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Southeast Asia has in recent years been an important region for working through questions concerning the contingency, networks, persistence and stakes of Chineseness.<sup>1</sup> Yet the study of Southeast Asia's Chinese is in something of an intellectual bind. Scholars from the People's Republic of China (PRC) depict the region's Chinese as 'victims shanghaied into contract labor by wicked capitalists in the past [19<sup>th</sup>] century, or as unfilial souls who have forsaken their ancestors and the mother country'. Particularly in studies of Malaysia, such scholarship is typically centred on 'good-versus-bad ethnic Chinese who either assimilated or resisted assimilation' and on 'debates about local-sojourner identities' that generated political and cultural friction.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Southeast Asian nationalist histories often exclude the Chinese despite their significant contributions to the development of national cultures and economies. Furthermore, in Anglophone academia, the dominance of liberal multiculturalism as a framework for conceptualising ethnic difference often results in insufficient appreciation for the diverse, unstable forms of political and cultural identification available to ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, or for the internal variability of those options across time and space.

**CONTACT** Josh Stenberg  [josh.stenberg@sydney.edu.au](mailto:josh.stenberg@sydney.edu.au)  Department of Chinese Studies, The University of Sydney A18 - Brennan MacCallum Building, Australia

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Popularised by scholars based in North America such as Shu-mei Shih and David Der-wei Wang, the Sinophone turn in literary and cultural studies has been useful in promoting an open system of understanding Chinese communities outside of mainland China, and in helping to loosen the assumed chains of equivalence between language, culture, and political allegiance for ethnic Chinese.<sup>3</sup> However, as we demonstrate in this special issue on the Chinese in the archipelagic states of the Philippines and Indonesia, the spatial and thus conceptual dimensions of Sinophone studies can be broadened further. Malaysia and Singapore dominate Sinophone studies. Although they provide many vibrant examples of Southeast Asian Chinese sociocultural expression, they do not typify Chineseness throughout a culturally heterogeneous region. For instance, unlike most ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia who speak Chinese languages in some capacity, the majority of Chinese in Indonesia, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries today have little or no knowledge of these languages. Singapore's position as an ethnic Chinese-majority country and Malaysia's large, politically active Chinese population also mean that the Chinese there are freer to publicly express themselves linguistically, culturally and politically compared to other Chinese in the region. Many Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese can communicate their ideas effectively to both Sinophone and Anglophone readerships, while Vietnamese or Laotian Chinese, for example, have much less access to either. The predominance of examples from Singapore and Malaysia has limited the visibility of other Southeast Asian Chinese communities in Sinophone studies discourse. In this issue, we argue for a recognition of diversity among Chinese communities in the region by focusing on the Philippines and Indonesia as sites for thinking about Chineseness in history and the present day.

The articles on the Philippine Chinese in this issue fall into two distinct yet interconnected groups. Similar to works by the likes of Caroline S. Hau and Juliet Uytanlet, Richard T. Chu's study of Chinese identities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Joseph Ching Velasco and Jeremy De Chavez's close reading of the 2004 horror film *Feng Shui* constitute what we might regard as mainstream scholarship on the question of what it means to be Chinese in the islands.<sup>4</sup> Informed by postcolonial theory and Asian American Studies, among other frameworks, this scholarship is the rich intellectual byproduct of a social and cultural movement and organisations such as Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran (Unity for Progress) that have vigorously asserted the place of ethnic Chinese Filipinos (Tsinoys) within a multicultural national community since the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> By critiquing homogenising representations of 'Chinese' and 'Filipinos,' such literature underscores the importance of treating 'Chinese' and 'Filipino' not as a binary, but, in Chu's words, as 'lying within a shifting and changing continuum.' The concept of hybridity that underpins his and the other two authors' work is ubiquitous in postcolonial studies and the study of ethnic Chinese societies, especially in the emerging field of Sinophone Studies. It can be what Velasco and De Chavez call a 'reparative force' against the anti-Sinitism that manifests itself in everything from popular cultural productions such as *Feng Shui* to the ethnonationalist utterances of public figures such as Solita Collas-Monsod and F. Sionil Jose and again to pejorative descriptors of Chinese such as *sangle* and *intsik*.<sup>6</sup>

As their articles suggest, Chu, Velasco and De Chavez are keenly aware of the broader historical and contemporary contexts of everyday anti-Sinitism in the Philippines. The 'Othering' of the Chinese today is a legacy of colonial policies in response to the influx of Chinese emigrants and perceived Chinese dominance of the Philippine economy over

a century ago, during the waning years of the Qing empire and the transition from Spanish to US rule in the islands. Today, reactions to yet another wave of working-class emigrants from China (the ‘TDK’ and ‘CNN’ that Chu refers to) and age-old perceptions of the ‘Chinese’ as threats to Filipinos’ livelihoods continue to drive prejudices. Global capitalism and geopolitics, however, have shifted. The PRC is the Philippines’ biggest source of Foreign Direct Investment in Asia.<sup>7</sup> Despite former President Rodrigo Duterte’s pivot towards the PRC and away from the United States and new President Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr.’s vows to maintain his predecessor’s foreign policy, diplomatic relations between the Philippines and China remain tense because of competing sovereignty claims in the South China/West Philippine Sea. In the shadow of the PRC’s growing economic and territorial assertiveness in Southeast Asia, social relations between ‘Filipinos’ and ‘Chinese’ have become more strained, and ethno-cultural distinctions more pronounced.

Thematically and methodologically, Kung and Stenberg’s articles resemble Chu, Velasco and De Chavez’s in that they explain the construction of Chinese identities in the Philippines by critically engaging with specific historical and cultural texts. But if the latter are interested in unpacking external (US colonial) and negative (filmic monstrous) representations of Chineseness, the former two focus on practices of self-identification by a subset of cultural gatekeepers and producers from within Chinese society. More than that, Kung and Stenberg suggest that hybridity need not be the only paradigm within which to understand Chineseness in recent Philippine history. In what amounts to a call for a more inclusive and eclectic Sinophone Studies, Stenberg argues that Chinese-language literature by ethnic Chinese Filipinos (and Indonesians) exhibits less hybridity and engagement with local cultures, and more long-distance cultural nationalism directed towards an imagined Chinese homeland. As he writes, we cannot ignore ‘the substantial (but, for most in the Anglophone academy, uncomfortable) bloodlines discourse which continues to have valency in Sinophone Southeast Asian literatures.’ The study of Chinese essentialism as a neglected feature of Sinophone culture reminds us that different groups of Southeast Asian Chinese have responded to anti-Sinitism by embracing either or both liberal multiculturalism and (re-)Sinicization. The Tsinoys whom Stenberg quotes might well consider the latter their own ‘reparative force’ against the anomie of ‘rootlessness’ and in-betweenness.

Kung’s translation and analysis of the 1957 Declaration of the First Convention of Chinese Schools in the Philippines affirms but goes further than Stenberg’s piece. It reveals a powerful current of pro-Kuomintang (KMT) political and cultural nationalism that coursed through elite Chinese rhetoric in the late 1950s, at the height of the Cold War. On the importance of this period and phenomenon to understanding Chinese identities in the Philippines, Kung and Stenberg are in agreement. Scholars working today on the Philippine Chinese pay relatively little attention to the 1950s–1970s and have said little about how the KMT was able to dominate Chinese society in the islands and orient it towards the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan to a far greater degree than in any other Southeast Asian country.<sup>8</sup> In schools and the media, the KMT’s cultural hegemony was premised on downplaying and rejecting hybridity. Instead, tolerated by successive Philippine post-independence governments, the KMT propagated precisely the kind of pro-China sentiments that the authors in Stenberg’s piece espouse, and liberal Tsinoys reject. Much like during the Spanish and US colonial periods (as Chu’s article shows), the state bore significant responsibility during the Cold War and postcolonial

decades for reifying ethnic and cultural differences. If indeed a 'New Cold War' is upon us, then we need a better grasp of its predecessor, including how the China that looms large over the Philippine Chinese today compares with the one that held sway over the community in the recent past.

The four further Indonesia-focused pieces in the issue also consider similar questions through approaches based on national historiography (Vickers), the institutions of memory (Chang), regional ethnography and borderland identities (Setijadi), and religious sociology (Hew). The articles remind us that Chineseness is not always frameable as a home/abroad dyad, but is often best understood as a network of regional patterns, forms of belonging, and communities with a shared narrative about ethnicity. In his contribution, Adrian Vickers examines the Chinese historiographical question within the framework of Indonesian national history, tracing the erasure, re-inclusion and reframing of Chinese Indonesians in accounts of mainstream history. Among other insights, what emerges from his analysis is the necessity of seeing historical narratives about Chinese figures as diverse as artist Lee Man Fong or Admiral Zheng He within the contexts of local, national, and regional affinities and aspirations.

Pi-chun Chang's examination of efforts to memorialise the tomb of Souw Beng Kong, Batavia's first Chinese *kapitan*, shows how the 21<sup>st</sup>-century memory politics of the Jakarta Chinese community shape this figure into an emblem of localised belonging. As Chang convincingly shows, commemoration of the community's past is a defiant response to a framing of the Chinese as outsiders, caught between the insistence of long-term presence and implicit indigeneity, and the necessity of using low-key tactics in order not to incur ire. Like Chang, Setijadi zeroes in on a geographic community, using ethnographic methods and a political scope to examine the nature and orientation of ethnicity among the Riau Islands Chinese. Located in the busy borderland waterways between Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, Riau Islands' peculiar geography has enabled the Chinese communities there to maintain a fiercely self-sufficient and transnationally connected existence. Examining this phenomenon through the analytical lens of translocality, Setijadi argues that the Riau Islands Chinese's fluid notions of supra-national belonging and mobility also helped them in sustaining their cultural identity as Chinese during the New Order's assimilation policy. This analysis places into question Javacentric accounts of state power in the shaping of ethnic minority identity common in studies of Chinese Indonesians, especially since their immediate economic and identarian orientation is neither Jakarta nor Beijing, but Singapore and the broader Riau archipelago region.

Working at a national level, Hew Wai Weng's work similarly adopts a translocal maritime approach. His exploration of archipelagic forms of belonging emerges from his study of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia. Inspired by the Indonesian narrativisation of 'archipelagic Islam' (*Islam nusantara*) as a way to distinguish Indonesian Muslims' supposedly indigenised Islamic practices, Hew coins the term 'archipelagic Chineseness' in proposing that long-standing local discourses can be deployed to valorise an open yet rooted understanding of Chineseness. This understanding is beholden neither to the demands of assimilation nor to the pressures of culture/religion as promulgated by the Chinese and Indonesian states. In many ways, the Chinese identities conceptualised based on a sense of localised archipelagic belonging as observed by Setijadi and Hew can be seen as a diasporic/hybrid compromise as these communities negotiate local, national and regional pulls.

Taken together, the four papers on Indonesia reveal the heterogeneity of various Chinese communities and how multiple, often incompatible, notions of Chineseness are produced and circulated to suit the strategic needs of these communities across different time periods. These papers also challenge what may be considered as a false dichotomy that in the past has dominated scholarship on Chinese Indonesians, whereby the Chinese are commonly seen as either adhering to, or rebelling against, the state's and society's pressures to move away from their Chineseness. The papers show how conformity and tension can and does exist in parallel, and the two are deployed by different groups as they strive to exercise their agency.

The diversity of Chinese experiences, cultural products, and expressions represented in this issue suggest that it is inappropriate to ever resolve Chineseness either into a homeland-abroad dyad or, conversely, to retire or ignore that binary and consider Chinese ethnicity resolutely independent of a national homeland and always unquestionably local and indigenised. The emergence of the PRC as a major political force in the Asia-Pacific region will continue to generate both admiration and suspicion. Intermittently and opportunistically, both friendly and hostile forces will conflate or associate domestic minority populations with the Chinese nation-state; indeed, Chinese-language sources often embrace such linkages. As Yinghong Cheng notes, the PRC's 'strategy for global blood-based Chineseness will perfectly facilitate such an anti-Chinese racism. Racial nationalism preys not only on Others, but eventually victimises the members of its own blood community.'<sup>9</sup> In Southeast Asia, of course, it has done so before.

Diasporic and 'overseas' Chineseness cannot be substituted for a deterritorialised 'Sinophone,' not only for reasons of language (the one describes ethnicity, the other language) but also because in most polities both essentialist and deterritorialised versions of Chineseness coexist, even if they do not always communicate. While individuals and discourse communities on either end of this spectrum may feel and assert either that Chinese ethnic identity is absolutely bound to the Chinese nation-state or that it is absolutely locally integrated or indigenous, their interlocutors – Chinese and Southeast Asian states, majority populations, Western outsiders – show no signs of reaching resolution in either direction. It is thus not probable that the 'end of diaspora' is in sight; on the contrary, the most respectful and accurate way to approach Chinese communities is to remain open to both elements, without allowing geopolitics to overwhelm evidence from throughout the region.

## Notes

1. This special issue builds on work from an International Workshop entitled "Towards a New Nanyang Studies: Examinations of Tionghoa and Tsinoy Beyond the "Sinophone"" held at the University of Kyoto on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17 December 2019. Its contents benefit from the support of the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre and, for Stenberg's part in it, the Australian Research Council's Discovery Early Career Research Award.
2. Wong, 'Inter-imperial, ecological interpretations of the "Five Coolies".'
3. Shih, 'Theory, Asia, and the Sinophone,' 482.
4. Hau, *The Chinese Question*; Uytanlet, *The Hybrid Tsinoy*s.
5. Founded in 1970 to advocate for *jus soli* citizenship, Kaisa promotes the 'integration of the ethnic Chinese into mainstream Philippine society' in the belief that '[o]ur blood may be Chinese, but our roots grow deep in Filipino soil; our bonds are with the Filipino people.' Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, 'About Kaisa'; See et al. (eds.), *Tsinoy*, 5.

6. Collas-Monsod, 'Why Filipinos Distrust China'; Jose, 'Can we Still Trust America?'
7. Philippine Department of Trade and Industry, 'Philippines Invites Investments from China'.
8. KMT hegemony in the Philippines is covered in Kung, *Diasporic Cold Warriors*.
9. Cheng, *Discourses of Race*, 303.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Josh Stenberg* is Senior Lecturer in Chinese Studies at the University of Sydney and the author of *Minority Stages: Sino-Indonesian Performance and Public Display* (University of Hawaii Press, 2019).

*Chien-Wen Kung* is Assistant Professor of History at the National University of Singapore and the author of *Diasporic Cold Warriors: Nationalist China, Anticommunism, and the Philippine Chinese, 1930s-1970s* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

*Charlotte Setijadi* is Assistant Professor of Humanities (Education) at Singapore Management University.

## ORCID

Charlotte Setijadi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0266-1307>

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