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Chinese Overseas Emigration

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Review Article

Chinese Overseas Emigration

This article is concerned with a study of the economic role of the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia written by a young Soviet scholar with a degree in history from the Institute of International Relations in Moscow.¹ The translation gives no date for the original work but most recent references are for 1958. It is based on library research using the standard Western language sources for each country concerned, various professional journals, and a number of Chinese and Russian sources unknown to this reviewer. There is one important omission in the case of the Philippines: G. H. Weightman's substantial M.A. dissertation on the Chinese community in the Philippines which was the only comprehensive study on the Philippine Chinese when Simoniya wrote his paper. Several copies of this unpublished manuscript were available in Manila and large extracts of it were published in 1954 in the *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review*.

Most "reactionary" scholars will disagree with many interpretations of the facts described by the author, but the meat of his analysis is thorough, well thought out, and generally well documented. It is a welcome addition to existing Overseas Chi-

¹ OVERSEAS CHINESE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA; A RUSSIAN STUDY. By N. A. Simoniya. Translated by the U.S. Joint Publications Research Service. Data Paper No. 45, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. December 1961. iv, 151 p. \$3.00.

nese studies which have concentrated more on the social and political aspects of this society at the expense of the economic.

In his first chapter, the author makes a historical review of Chinese overseas emigration and its causes, and he describes the general characteristics of the Chinese population in the countries of Southeast Asia: its size, occupational composition, and geographical distribution. Emigration is explained in terms of political and economic factors in China and abroad. The advent of machine industrialism and the exploitation of the population by Chinese landowners—both an effect of developing capitalism in China—resulted in millions of Chinese peasants and artisans being forcibly removed from production. As the cities were unable to absorb them they had no other choice but to emigrate.

There is no doubt that poverty was a major factor in Chinese emigration, but many qualifications are called for which the author does not make. Poverty in the emigration centers of China antedates the machine age in that country. It had been endemic for centuries, long before the periods of intensive emigration at the beginning of this century. It is doubtful that the industrial development of the first quarter of the 20th century was sufficiently widespread to cause by itself a major deterioration of the economic condition of the masses. Demographic factors such as the critical overpopulation of the coastal areas of China should have been at least mentioned. Poverty as caused by incipient industrialization does not explain why emigration took place on a large scale from the Southeast China coastal areas only, and not also from such industrial centers as Shanghai and Tientsin.

Emigration seems to have been conditioned more by developments outside of China: the demand for immigrant labor to exploit natural resources in the various Southeast Asian countries. Conditions inhibiting Chinese enterprise overseas during the depression years of the early 1930's actually reversed the emigration movement resulting in more Chinese returning to China than leaving it. The immigration laws of host countries also had a considerable influence on the trend of immigration. These are mentioned by the author but he does not bring out their selective effect for the various coun-

tries concerned. The quality of Chinese immigrants in the Philippines after 1900, for example, was quite different from those of Malaya and Indonesia because Philippine immigration laws barred the entry of large numbers of coolie labourers. The discontinuation of large-scale emigration from China after the war is certainly not due to any considerable economic improvement in China even if we were willing to admit that such an improvement has taken place. Its cause is the refusal of overseas countries to admit any large numbers of Chinese immigrants.

In stressing the economic factors of emigration the author overlooks other factors that are certainly not without importance, especially in the case of families which have sent members overseas for several generations. As this reviewer has documented elsewhere (Amyot 1960:55-64), emigration in long established centers of emigration relates to a tradition, to a way of life founded on a specific relation between economic enterprise abroad and the recruitment of its personnel in a specific locality in China. Although the recruitment is made mainly for economic reasons, it is made along lines quite independent of economic considerations, namely, kinship and local association in China. For these old emigrating families individual members do not go abroad because of the pressure of poverty at home but at the request of kinsmen to maintain established businesses abroad which, in turn, contribute a part of their income toward the livelihood of the home communities.

The author rightfully emphasizes the importance of speech-group associations in overseas Chinese communities but it should be noted that the most important associations are not always organized according to the "dialect principle." Functionally, these associations are derived from the need for mutual assistance among closely related people as provided by the lineage organizations of Southeast China, themselves based on kinship and local association. Conditions abroad made it necessary to constitute associations on a broader basis of recruitment in order to group a sufficiently large number of members. This expansion was made in two directions. The territory of origin from which members could be recruited was expanded from a village or cluster of villages to the territory occupied

by the whole speech-group. The various speech-group associations: the Cantonese Association, the Hokkienese Association, etc. are based on this principle of recruitment. The kinship principle was made to include more than the localized lineage in China. It came to include whole surname groups which are reputed to have a common ancestor. Chinese clan associations are founded on this principle. Intermediary types of associations using both principles in varying degrees for their recruitment were also constituted. Historical circumstances determined which type of association became the most important. In most overseas Chinese communities the speech-group associations predominated but in the Philippines where the Hokkiens constitute the largest group, there is no Hokkien Association and clanship is the major principle of recruitment. These clan associations, on the other hand, are constituted along speech-group lines so that one "clan" can have two associations: one Hokkienese and one Cantonese.

Chapter 2 deals with the part played by the Chinese in the economic development of the Southeast Asian countries. It describes the specific character of Chinese commercial enterprise, different from that of Western firms in this part of the world in that its capital is not brought in from outside but produced locally. The Chinese were crowded out of the overseas trade with the coming of foreign capital in countries where they were already established. They then assumed a *comprador* function in relation to the big foreign firms and cornered the intermediate trade for which they were well prepared because of their familiarity with the market, their organization for economic cooperation among themselves, and their sources of credit. As the Chinese merchants were at the same time buyers of agricultural produce, retailers of consumer goods to the same producers, and often primary processors of their yield, rubber for example, the peasant population in due course found itself in complete economic dependence upon them. The role of the Chinese middle-man was reduced by the establishment of large Western-owned plantations and industries in these countries, on the one hand, and on the other, by the development of cooperatives and agricultural credit systems. The development of the latter, however, was difficult due to

the weak development of capital relations at the village level. This led to usurious activity on the part of Chinese and Indians, but the ultimate blame for this state of affairs is placed by the author on the colonial Powers responsible for the system they created.

As a result of the depression and the accession to political independence of the Southeast Asian countries, the economic interests of the Chinese became less connected with foreign firms and foreign markets, and more and more directed to the production of consumer goods for the domestic and intra-regional market. The growth of Chinese enterprise did not follow the Western pattern, however, because of insufficient mobility of capital and labor. Characteristically, the accumulation of capital was not accompanied by its concentration in any one industry but by the ownership of a variety of enterprises. With the increase of anti-Chinese discrimination after the war, there was a growing tendency for Chinese business concerns to merge with members of the local elite to make them appear less alien and facilitate their operation in an atmosphere of nationalism.

Although this section is generally excellent, the political and doctrinaire biases of the author result in a number of faults of omission and of commission. For example, it is difficult to understand why he should not also include the Chinese of North Viet-Nam in his considerations. The comparison with other "non-liberated" countries of Southeast Asia would have been enlightening. In his preface to the translation, G. William Skinner points out the interest of the author's treatment of entrepreneurial capitalists who happen to be Chinese and his selective handling of anti-Sinitic discrimination in the various countries under consideration. Resorting to neo-Marxist casuistry, the majority of Chinese capitalists are dissociated from their Western counterparts and the accusations pronounced against them because they belong to the "national bourgeoisie", that interested in the development of the national economy, and not to the reactionary "comprador bourgeoisie" in the service of foreign monopolies. Ruggedly anti-communist countries such as Thailand, Viet-Nam and the Philippines are roundly denounced for their anti-Chinese discrimination whereas Indonesia is hardly mentioned. The author attributes

the increase in anti-Chinese discrimination after the war to a campaign against the Chinese People's Republic. This is a contributing factor, no doubt, but in most instances, the threat of political subversion by the Chinese was used as a pretext. Local nationalism and resentment against Chinese economic domination are the real causes of discrimination. Both are much older than the CPR but it is only since the acquisition of political independence that they can be translated into action without the restraints of the colonial power.

The third and last chapter of the work is a study of the Chinese working class in Southeast Asia: its history, numerical strength, structure, and working conditions. The author concludes with a history of the development and activities of the Communist Party among the working classes of these countries. Simoniya is at his best in the purely descriptive sections. The reader could also accept his conclusions here as in other parts of the book on condition that the premises be also accepted—Marxist economic determination is the ultimate explanation of social facts; what is good for the CP is also good for the people; whatever is associated with the CPR cannot be wholly bad in principle; all that is derived from the "imperialistic" powers is vitiated in principle. It would seem that the sociological and historical interpretation of the facts requires a bit more nuance.

JACQUES AMYOT

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