The Study of the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia: Some Comments on its Political Meanings with Particular Reference to the Philippines

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The aim of this article is to consider, with particular reference to the Philippines, the concerns associated with cultural and structural explanations of the Overseas Chinese and their economic organizations and practices in Southeast Asia, and to think about how we might look outside these boundaries. It is argued that the cultural-structural analysis has a profound bearing on how individuals—whatever their ethnicity— see themselves and each other. Its meaning is intrinsically and deeply political, and may create or exacerbate divisions and damage confidence in the Philippines' political economy. Therefore, it is suggested that we might be prepared to consider a different "take" on the cultural-structural analysis and its interpretations.

KEYWORDS: Overseas Chinese, Philippines, culture, structure, relationships, attitudes

Mackie (2000, 237) is surely right when he points out that in the study of the Overseas Chinese and their economic preeminence in Southeast Asia, there has been a tendency at times for social scientists "to put more stress on behavioral and cultural aspects, especially the values and family solidarity of the Chinese, than on economic and structural issues." Yet, even before the economic crisis of 1997 and during the spectacular rise of many of the economies of East and Southeast Asia, there was no school of writers—nor perhaps any single writer—who argued that only Chinese culture could explain why the Overseas

Chinese behave and organize themselves as they do, or why some Chinese are so successful in business. Culture was certainly a large part of the explanation, but there were other things at work—structure, circumstance, history, and economics, among others—that, for different writers and even for the same writer at different times, were more or less important. And there were always those writers who were more directly skeptical of the cultural explanation, or at least of the emphasis given to it by some, and who preferred to shift the burden of explanation on to structure.

And so, while in recent years there has been a discernible, if marginal, shift away from cultural and towards structural or institutional explanations of the Overseas Chinese and their economic organizations and practices in Southeast Asia, it is doubtful whether this marks any fundamental movement in the debate. Across the disciplines the study of the Overseas Chinese seems to have settled within the parameters of cultural and structural analysis. So firm are these parameters that often there appears to be no question of looking outside them. Those who minimize or dismiss factors of culture, states Wang (1999, 11), "invariably attribute all significant developments to the forces of modernization." Chirot and Reid (1997, 3), in setting the question for their study, also present the reader with a limited choice: are there cultural traits that determine groups' prospects in modern economies, or "is the success of any particular ethnic group situationally determined and explainable in terms of recent, almost chance, political and economic configurations?"

It is, therefore, rather difficult to share the confidence with which Wang (2000, 39) stated that there has been, for at least fifty years, a major disagreement about "whether Chinese are like all other migrants when they leave their country or whether they are quite different." Whether the Chinese were indeed different and whether culture and structure explained this difference has never been seriously in question: the only doubt has been the extent to which the Chinese were different and precisely where the burden of explanation lay. It is as if a kind of dialogue or accommodation has emerged between the structural and the cultural, the former embedded in the latter, each mediated through the other producing some degree of change, and together

providing some level of explanation. The aim of this article is merely to consider, with particular reference to the Philippines, the concerns associated with this accommodation and to begin thinking about how we might look outside its boundaries.

Concerns: Confidence and Division

The cultural-structural analysis and its explanation of the Overseas Chinese and their economic success in Southeast Asia has an importance which extends beyond the professional interests of academics in Europe, America, or Asia. It has a profound bearing on how individuals—whatever their ethnicity—see themselves and each other. Its meanings are therefore intrinsically and deeply political. Nowhere is this more true, perhaps, than in the Philippines—a young society not yet confident about its past, let alone its future. If Filipinos have a collective self-image, then it is probably fair to say it is one that is self-deprecating (see, for example, Mulder 1997). This is an alluring quality, but in the absence of true self-confidence defensive sensitivities will never be far beneath the surface. This lack of confidence owes something to, and may help to exacerbate, the personalistic and fissiparous nature of Philippine society (Landé 1965, 1996; Sidel 1997, 1998; Hutchcroft 1991, 1994; Anderson 1995; Thompson 1995; Kerkvliet 1995; Davis 1973; McCoy 1993). Together, these qualities—personalism, fissiparousness, and lack of confidence—make it difficult to secure for the nation a strong sense of direction and purpose, difficult to instill in people a faith in government and in institutional life more generally, and difficult to instill in government a faith in their people.

The suggestion that the preeminence of the Chinese within the domestic economy can be explained in large part by their Chineseness and by regional or global structures, is only likely to separate those who are seen or who feel themselves to be Chinese, and also to diminish the confidence of Filipinos, who are left to ponder the implication that their comparative lack of success can be explained both by those traits (presumably their culture and their historical genesis), which define them as being Filipino and, consequently, by their inability to take full advantage of global and regional structures. It also follows quite logically that

Chinese influence is likely to play some part in explaining the achieve-
ments of those Filipinos who are successful. The particular quality of
the Filipino and Chinese cultures, some have argued, combined with
complex historical events, have strengthened the economic power of
the culturally pure Chinese, and brought about creolization of such a
scale and intensity that mestizos (the offspring of Chinese and Filipino
unions) "were not really absorbed into indigenous society . . . [but] merged
with it to form modern Filipino society" (Skinner 1996, 90). Many
better-off Filipinos are, despite their Filipino names, Chinese or of
Chinese descent and, it has been suggested (ibid.), exhibit aspects of
Chinese and mestizo culture even today.

The cultural-structural accommodation, and the political meanings
extracted from it, may take on a special potency in the Philippines (and
in other countries in Southeast Asia) because the representations of the
Chinese which that accommodation generates may have been built,
however loosely, upon street representations of the Chinese—that of
middlemen, different in their thought and behavior, dominating the
economy and everyday life. The observation that marketplaces (peri-
odic and permanent) and small retailers are often strongly dependent
upon wholesalers who are often seen to be, and see themselves as,
Chinese is an old and common one in the Philippines and in many
other parts of Southeast Asia. For many people in the streets, and
more especially for those who rely on the markets, wholesalers and
cheaper shops for everyday goods, "the Chinese" have long since be-
come so much a part of their daily routines that economic success
itself has become the prime marker of Chineseness. So strong and
prevalent are these representations that it is probably not unrealistic to
suggest that they, and the observations which partly inform them, may
have constituted the basic knowledge upon which the very idea of
turning the economic success of the Chinese overseas into a matter for
analysis may have been cast. This synthesis of street and scholarship
may have made it easier for the now distorted versions of scholarly
representations to find their way out on to the street. It may also have
helped to inflate the economic importance of the Chinese, by centering
attention and energies upon the question of why Chinese were preemi-
nent, and not upon whether this was so in all places and at all times.

Given the way in which the problem was now framed, it was entirely logical that the next step was to enumerate and, therefore, to define "the Chinese." And the more closely "the Chinese" was defined, the "harder" this concept became: "being Chinese" became more than what people felt themselves to be, and more than just a matter of choice. It was, therefore, entirely reasonable to conclude that "the Chinese" could be explained at least partly by the criteria which defined them as "being Chinese." The harder this representation became, the more likely also was it that explanations of Chinese success would be prefigured in those representations, and the more likely it became that analysis would lose sight of what it was that an understanding of those people who lay outside, or met only some of, these criteria might be able to tell us about those who are Chinese.

The certainty of this whole line of thought deepened with the economic success of the countries of East and Southeast Asia. For in their success lay vindication of a belief that the non-Western was just as good as, if not better than, the Western. Of this sentiment, the Chinese became perhaps the most important symbol, and did so for good reasons: three of the economies of East and Southeast Asia (excluding mainland China) were populated mainly by Chinese; two were thought to be heavily influenced by Confucianism; and, in most of the remainder, street representations of the Chinese were already well-established—for the reasons we have set out. All of this also fitted with constructions of Chineseness in which a sense of difference was strong, which had long been of great value for the government of a united China, and from which, arguably, scholarship on China had learned much (Hodder 2000). It was only natural that, as it looked to the study of China's social, political, civil and economic institutions and behavior, the study of the Overseas Chinese would also absorb these more refined and complex constructions of Chineseness. In the light of the question set—why were the Chinese overseas preeminent—and of the broader circumstances in which it was asked, it would not be remarkable if the absolute and relative significance of the Chinese, where they constituted a minority, were inflated, and their success ascribed still more closely to the qualities by which they were defined.

It is hardly surprising, then, that we should now have ample statistical material that appears to demonstrate Chinese dominance of national economies. It is said, for instance, that the Chinese, though they constitute just 10 percent of the population of Thailand, hold an 80 percent share of the country's market capital. In Indonesia, where they constitute just 3.5 percent of the population, their share of market capital is around 75 percent. In Vietnam, the Chinese comprise just 3 percent of the population but account for 50 percent of Ho Chi Minh's market activity, and dominate its light industry, foreign trade, shopping malls, and private banks. In Malaysia, they constitute about one third of the population, but they hold a share of between 60 percent and 70 percent of the country's market capital.

In the Philippines, the Chinese constitute just 1–2 percent of the population, but their share of market capital is between 50 percent and 55 percent. They control the Philippines' major supermarkets, department stores, fast-food chains, and nearly all the main banks and stock brokerage firms. Furthermore, it is said, the Chinese dominate the nation's wholesale distribution networks, its shipping, construction, textiles, real estate, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and press. In Laos the Chinese make up just 1 percent of the population but they account for almost the entire business community. The Chinese, it is also said, dominate the economies of Burma and Cambodia (though figures for these two countries seem less readily available). Taken together, the foreign reserves of those Chinese whose economic networks extend throughout Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore amount to well over US$100 billion. Worldwide, as a group, their floating assets are believed to amount to around US$2 trillion (see Peng 2000; Chua 2003; Hutchings 2001). The Overseas Chinese, states Peng (2000), constitute the world's largest overseas linguistic and cultural group, exhibit remarkable cultural cohesion, and possess great commercial power.

Yet rarely is it clear how figures such as these were compiled; nor, even more fundamentally, how the Chinese were defined in order that their numbers might be calculated, and their assets and broader economic contributions estimated. They are simply accepted as being at least strongly indicative, and are passed on from one academic or

journalistic article and book to another, accompanied only occasionally with some general qualification, and very often without knowledge either of the original source, or of how the figures were established. Once in circulation the same figures remain there for many years, or so it would seem.[1]

This suggestion—that the cultural-structural accommodation and the political meanings it generates are especially potent because that accommodation, however unwittingly, both strengthens street representations of the Chinese and inflates their economic significance—is not an easy one to substantiate. It does not lend itself readily to empirical verification, nor, to my knowledge, has it been the subject of direct and thorough debate. However, there are probably few commentators who would deny that scholarly representations often find their way on to the street (though rarely in the form they would prefer). And if the Chinese are indeed neither as important in those countries where they form a minority, nor as exclusive in their operations domestically or internationally as is sometimes thought, then this observation would not be incongruous with growing doubts over estimates of their numbers and economic strength (Wang 1999; Jomo 1997; Chu 2002; Wickberg 1999), and wider acknowledgment of the fluidity of "the Chinese." Nor would this observation be incongruous with the move towards greater professionalization noted among, say, Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese companies in East and Southeast Asia, and the move away from the limits of particularism and of mixing family ownership with control (Amante 1997; McVey 1992; Nisse 1999; Mackie 1992; Hodder 2002). But it is, perhaps, the cultural-structural analysts' own admission, that they may generate the kinds of concerns to which we have drawn attention above, which best illustrates the significance of those concerns.

Inverse Orientalism

To some writers Chineseness is largely, though not entirely, a deliberate and semipolitical fabrication produced in response to structural forces. Greenhalgh (1994), for instance, argues that Chinese culture and tradition have never been quite as wholesome and their influences as benign as is often thought, and, under the pressure of global forces, had cer-

tainly been manipulated for the good of some at the expense of oth-
ers. In Taiwan the drive to keep costs down to remain competitive and
successful in an uncertain global economy, a government suspicious of
big business, and banks who denied credit to small firms left entrepre-
neurs with little choice but to create firms out of their families. To this
end they exploited traditional family hierarchies and cultural expectations
about the role of men and women. The use of culture by scholars to
conceal this fact was understandable: Chinese and Chinese-American
scholars were attempting to disrupt the European-American cultural
legacy and to give their own culture a place in the sun. But in so doing
they drew on older orientalist constructions (such that these scholars
were participating in a kind of inverse orientalism) and inadvertently
contributed to a conservative, antifeminist, intellectual-cum-political
agenda in the United States that idealized strong families, strong tradi-
tion, strong social and political discipline, intelligence, and industriousness.
In other words, Chinese and Chinese-American scholars chose to see in
the Chinese what it was that the dominant conservatives thought best
about America.

Dirlik (1997) took a similar position. "Chineseness"—a construct in
which lies the notion of Chinese capitalism and the cultural explana-
tion—represents, at least in part, a response to globalization. The
strength and intensification of transnational subcontracting practices re-
newed the significance of small businesses, and to this end Chineseness
was reshaped, reorganized, and reinvented. Production was, in a word,
"ethnicized." But in doing so certain realities were ignored. In particu-
lar, cultural practices of uncertain ethnic origins were appropriated. The
values and practices commonly ascribed to Confucianism (such as a
strong family, commitment to education, strong kinship or pseudo-kin-
ship, social networks and their use for economic and other purposes),
were hardly unique to the Chinese and were much more the product
of particular social and historical circumstances. Indeed, weaving such
practices and values into the cloak of Chineseness represented nothing
less than an assimilation of Chinese traditions to the values of Euro-
pean capitalism or, to put it in another way, the "Weberizing" of
Confucianism. And yet, at the same time, differences such as class, gen-
der, and even ethnicity among the Chinese were suppressed. The

reconfiguration of Chineseness, argued Dirlik, also justified autho-
ritarianism while transforming socialism into a historical aberration
that stood briefly against the natural tendency of the Chinese towards
capitalism.

In common with Greenhalgh, Dirlik (1994; 1997) argues that this
resinification or the rearrangement of Chineseness is not conditioned by
globalization alone. It must also be understood as an assertion against
centuries of Euro-American cultural hegemony—an assertion which
Dirlik describes as a kind of self-orientalism, which may itself have
become hegemonic. After all, the idea that there might be a "Chinese"
variant of capitalism arose not in any Chinese society but in the U.S.
where "two conditions, both of global significance . . . gave birth to
it: the retreat from socialism in China, and the apparent regression in
Euro-American capitalisms against evidence of unprecedented growth in
East and Southeast Asian societies" (Dirlik 1997, 305).

Caricatures and Scapegoats

Arguments such as these, combined with a sharp economic downturn
in 1997, had a hand in reducing the explanatory burden which culture
has had to bear in more recent years. A still more pressing reason to
lighten its burden was a concern that a strong emphasis on culture,
combined with inflated estimates of their economic worth, might only
serve to hone the perception of the Chinese as the alien "other."[2] This
could not be more dangerous in states with long histories of violence
against Chinese, and now buffeted by economic crisis. Certainly the
view that there is something else at work other than culture was made
more explicit. Greater emphasis was given to "situation," historical
circumstance (Cribb 2000), organizational context (Hamilton 1999),
structure and institution, the broader social and political context, and
even, on occasions, chance (Chirot and Reid 1997).

At the same time some writers were more careful to distance them-
selves more explicitly from the purer forms of cultural explanations
that, in recent years, have been described variously as incredible, exag-
gerated, probably mischievous, serving chauvinist and nationalist agendas,
peddling caricatures and colonial myths, essentialist, reductionist, falla-

cious, and deceitful (see, for instance, Wang 2000; Chan 2000; Ruskola 2000). So deeply rooted do culture and tradition appear to be that they have become virtual hereditary properties (Chirot and Reid 1997, 3), such that "even the most elevated review of the historical record and of competing social scientific theories that try to elucidate some of the questions raised by the comparison of Jews and Chinese can lend itself to gross misrepresentation and abuse" (ibid., 5).

The problem of definition, too, was given more than just a passing nod. No longer could the differences among Chinese be acknowledged yet subsequently ignored. That not all Chinese entrepreneurs are successful economically—a not uncommon observation before 1997—now became a standard phrase. Even the individual took on a little more significance: individual Overseas Chinese exhibit diverse responses because they operate differently and have different capacities and perceptions, just as the individual indigenes' responses and attitudes to Chinese people are also varied (Jomo 1997). Having retreated from his "scientific approach" which involved the identification of those attributes that made somebody Chinese, Wang (1999; 2000) strongly emphasized self-identity as one of the few reliable tests of "Chineseness." Even being seen as Chinese by other people was no criterion unless the individuals concerned also saw themselves as being Chinese. Chinese ethnicity, then, derived from cultural identity and was subjectively determined. Estimates of numbers of Chinese and of their economic strength were, therefore, recognized more explicitly as being intrinsically vague, unreliable, and inaccurate. Thus, the figure of 25 million given for the number of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia (excluding Taiwan and Hong Kong) assumed an accurate definition of who was and who was not Chinese (ibid.). At the same time, estimates of Chinese economic power in Malaysia, including the assertion that the Chinese owned more than twice as large a share of all corporate stocks than did the Bumiputera, even though the Bumiputera population is one and a half times that of the Chinese, were problematic (Jomo 1997).

With such doubts abroad, comparisons highlighting structural similarities became easier. There was, argued Hamilton (1999), no certainty that the Overseas Chinese are operating in ways that are peculiarly

Chinese. This point was echoed by Amber, Styles and Wong (1999) who suggested that it was unwise to assume without hard knowledge that any aspect of marketing practices in China and the West were different or, indeed, the same. In their "creative and vulnerable role as 'outsiders at the center' in the dynamic process of change" (Chirot and Reid 1997, 34) the Chinese could be compared with the Jews of Europe. But why, asked Hamilton, should we focus only on these two groups? Certainly *guanxi* is not unique to the Chinese: it exists to some degree in every human society (Standifird and Marshall 2000), and its practice is to be explained in large part by transaction costs. Flexible networks of information, supplies, and finance lower the costs associated with negotiating contracts and searching for partners, and reduce the likelihood of opportunism. Ruskola (2000) found still deeper and broader comparison. He challenged Fairbank's view that there was, in China, no idea of the corporation as a legal individual. Even in imperial China, Ruskola continued, clan corporations were true corporate and legal entities that met most, if not all, of the conventional corporate criteria of Anglo-American law—qualities that were retained during the Republic and under communist rule.

Maintaining the Boundaries

Despite these concerns, the consequential shift in emphasis from culture to structure, and from difference to similarity, did not mark an attempt to move outside the cultural-structural accommodation. Indeed, for many writers the pendulum has swung too far away from culture, and balance needs to be restored. They are in no doubt that culture helps us to understand how attitudes and practices instilled in the homeland may affect behavior among Overseas Chinese. While even Jomo (1997, 250) is willing to concede that

> there do seem to be business networks based on specifically Chinese cultural resources, including language, education, and social organizations such as clan associations . . . trade guilds, chambers of commerce, school boards, temple committees, and local community associations. Such frequent interaction has undoubtedly generated considerable "cultural" or "social" capital, which is crucial for

explaining business trust, risk sharing, informal contracts, and infor-
mation as well as transaction cost reduction.

After all, the main weakness of the cultural explanation, in Mackie's
(2000) view, is not the presumption that it could explain, but rather that
no attempt had been made to formulate a more systematic hypothesis
about how and why cultural factors work. Collectively of course, the
Overseas Chinese today do share many similar values and customs
which derive from a common Chinese culture several generations old.
Many strong arguments and much fragmentary evidence could be
given in support of the idea that economic success among Overseas
Chinese owed much to entrepreneurial abilities and to the values, tradi-
tions, culture, personalism, familism, and socio-economic institutions
inherited from China. For Mackie, then, there is little doubt that this his-
torical-cultural legacy gave Overseas Chinese a major advantage, at least
in days gone by, though today the "values of trade" and an indirect
historical-cultural legacy provide the more significant influences.

Wickberg (2000; 1999), too, argues that, historically at least, the Chi-
nese in the Philippines comprised a distinct and indeed separate group
whose form and qualities are to be understood by reference to cultural
models of thought and behavior that derive from China. Although
always changing and influenced by personal experience, these models
were distinctively Chinese—a quality that strengthened with resentment
of the group's success. During the second half of the twentieth century,
however, a state both suspicious of Chinese loyalties and also deter-
mined to make good use of their economic wherewithal (and cultural
skills) as globalization proceeded apace has helped to weaken that sense
of Chineseness, most especially among the younger generation. Even
so, and even though more restrained estimates of their share of the
economy (at about 35 percent) are now offered, distinctively Chinese
business systems persist.

Wang's (2000; 1999) view is similar: the expression of Chinese cul-
ture has changed and continues to do so, but for him "culture" remains
a more vital force. There were in the past, and still are today, many
kinds of Chinese. They range from the traditional to the modern and
many grades in between. There are the sojourners whose norms are

those of the Chinese who stayed at home in imperial China. And there are the local-born Chinese of the twentieth century who have resisted both assimilation and resinicization, and from whom has developed a form of cultural expression which, though it remains Chinese, does not depend upon traditional values nor even upon the Chinese language and script. Wang seems to be less certain about the features of this new form of cultural expression, but they included family and networks, being effective in business, and being multicultural. Chinese culture was vital, adapting, changing and surviving, and remained different in its nature as well as in the degree to which it exerted an influence. Nor did structure and circumstance deny that difference. Quite the contrary. The circumstances in which the Chinese found themselves and their uniquely structured history, and the force of events, helped form the conditions peculiar to them.

Others saw Chineseness as being something still deeper and saw tradition as being still more resistant. Identity, argued Wong (1999), was not simply a matter of preference: one could not simply choose to be, or not to be, Chinese. The family was a well of experience and strategies from which the entrepreneurial spirit and identity drew (ibid., 137): it was always seeking to maximize autonomy and avoid its subjugation to the state, and always reproducing a special type of Overseas Chinese capitalism. For Hamilton (1999) "deal-making" was that quintessential cultural characteristic of the Overseas Chinese entrepreneur's habitual economic practice. Cultural traditions such as this, which had a significant bearing on explanations for success—local conditions, local histories, or sociologies of minority capitalism—were by themselves inadequate.

Still other writers, who follow similar, though less nuanced, lines of argument, sometimes convey the impression that there has never been any critical debate on this issue: it is beyond question that Chinese culture and the orientation of the Chinese mind was a crucial mediating variable determining the nature of small firms (Siu 2001). Guanxi had profound implications for the dynamics of Chinese society (Park and Luo 2001), and this could not be otherwise. It was a classic cultural phenomenon (Dunfee and Warren 2001), a characteristic deeply embedded and an integral part of Chinese culture. The five principles of

Confucianism generated strong solidarity among family members, trans-
forming family networks into fixed, stable channels through which
could flow the information, markets, finance, and capital so necessary
to the establishment and survival of a business (Luo 1997).

Not surprisingly, the use of comparison to highlight cultural differ-
ence and its importance in explaining economic success was continued.
In a study of the Chinese and the European Jews, it was not assumed,
states Reid (1997, 34), that the two groups, each considered as a whole,
could be considered usefully to have common characteristics, and still
less that they should be compared with one another. Indeed, "in cultural
and religious terms . . . the Chinese experience is about as far from
that of European Jews as is possible within the spectrum of entrepre-
neurial minorities" (ibid., 39). That difference is, for Hamilton (1999),
highlighted by comparison with the Japanese, while Hui and Graen
(1997) look to comparisons with Americans. Guanxi, they argue, is not
unfamiliar to "cross-cultural workers," but it is different in that it is
rooted in Confucianism, and in that it tends to be more deterministic
than, say, the American "leader-member Exchange."

Hui and Graen (1997) go on to argue that there is, in view of all
this difference, a need to identify points of commonality around which
a "third" culture may be built (with the help of transcultural negotia-
tors). Wang (1999) and Chan (1999), too, while noting similarities be-
tween the West and China, present the latter as a high context culture,
and, when understood as such, obvious differences emerge. To the
Chinese being considerate implies adaptability and accommodation. The
Chinese evaluate a partner through human qualities displayed in negotia-
tion. They also believe that, aside from the goal of profitmaking,
people must have feelings before they can be trusted to share profit
and benefits.

The Chinese overseas, then, could still be viewed to some extent as
a bloc, for how else could such generalizations be made? The circula-
tion of statistics, therefore, continued. Still at work is the kind of
cultural drift favored by Omohundro—a stock of Chinese cultural ma-
terials to which Chinese merchants make slight alterations, retaining
those that prove successful in a particular structural context, and dis-
carding those that are not, such that culture evolves slowly and often

imperceptibly. Still "history" and "socialization" serve as the link between the cultural traits with which the Chinese are defined and enumerated. Indeed, it is not so much the traits themselves as the power of history and socialization that, for some writers, appears to define Chineseness. There are, observes Gambe (1999), differences among Chinese businesses: older people tend to adhere to tradition while the younger people do not; hard work, thrift, and trust are not peculiar to the Chinese; and the Chinese are not the only people to build networks. But what *is* unique about Chinese merchants is that these traits have their roots in Imperial China: there *is* a distinctively Overseas Chinese transnational economy; there *is* an invisible empire of conglomerates without borders.

Clearly, the cultural-structural accommodation has proved resilient despite the concerns associated with it. True, there are doubts expressed occasionally about the very meaning and relevance of culture and structure in the work of writers such as Jomo (1997) and Ruskola (2000). Yet the center of gravity remains very firmly within the boundaries of the cultural-structural accommodation. Criticisms leveled against the cultural explanation only strengthen a more explicit recognition of what the culturalists already recognize—that structure shares the explanatory burden with culture. When analysis finds itself leaning too heavily towards structure, there seems no alternative but for it to right itself first, and then lean towards culture.

One reason for its resilience may be that it constitutes an attempt to manage what is believed to be the subsumation of the local, non-Western identities (read: culture) by what are regarded to all intents and purposes as Western or Western-style institutions, practices, values and behavior (read: international or global economic, political, and social structures). Depending upon one's point of view, the cultural-structural accommodation carries with it different messages. One message is that it is possible to retain one's local identity and, however slightly, to reshape those Western structures in one's own image. Another is that the inevitable transformation of local cultures into Western-style liberal market democracies can be made a little less painful if conducted under the illusion that the integrity of local cultures can be preserved. Yet another message is that both global-Western structures and local

cultures must adapt to, and adopt, something of the other such that both are transposed into rather different forms. In short, the cultural-structural accommodation may constitute a valuable rationalization of a political project.

Another reason for the cultural-structural accommodation's resilience, however, may be that, for many writers, its value as an explanation outweighs any drawbacks its politicization by others may generate. Whatever political meaning others might read therein, it represents a sound analysis and provides a sound understanding of real processes at work. It also has about it what is, for some writers, a kind of aestheticism. Yao (2002, xi) may make more explicit the argument that "the political and material condition in which [culture] operates must be brought into focus"; that analyses of the Chinese may have been influenced by romanticized images of them; and that behavior motivated by calculation and ethical beliefs is practised by each one of us. Yet, in the desire of the merchant to draw out social pleasure from the more practical aspects of social relationships, there is, for Yao, something peculiarly and culturally Chinese. And this must be so—for if we do not recognize the saliency of culture, then we are led into a crude and clumsy world of super-rational materialists and political-ideological manipulation. If we are to understand why people think and behave as they do, then we have no choice but to begin and end our analyses with the play of culture and structure. After all, the alternative, Yao believes, is to admit into debate explanations that are intellectually and morally wanting.

The cultural-structural accommodation also has much precedence. It lies at the heart of much social science, and has done so for many years. Over the last half-century and earlier, many writers have understood society to be the hierarchy within which individuals are positioned, and culture the standardized patterns of socially acquired behavior. To others, society was the totality of social relationships or, more specifically, the "structure" or networks of relationships among and within systems of groups, and culture the content of those relationships. And just as culture might influence the society, so might society influence culture, though as to where the balance of power lay every writer had a view. As for the significance of the individual, there was less uncer-

tainty. For many, the individual was incidental and individual freedom an illusion; for once culture had come into existence, the individual then became permanently subject to this irresistible force. For many more, culture and society were the context, the precedence, the ready-made solutions, the limitations on a possible range of actions and responses, by which the individual was constrained but within which individuals might vary their actions. The individual might reflect the culture but not exactly so. Small variations in the behavior and relationships of some individuals would bring about alterations by other individuals; alterations would build up; circumstances would alter, making certain discoveries or new practices and changes inevitable; and so, through a kind of convection or conduction or drift, even the basic patterns of culture and society might change. Even when the word culture was hardly mentioned, and the attention was on society, a force of some kind was ever-present. For Elias (1994) it was the unintended actions of individuals. Under the pressure of competition, social functions became more and more differentiated. As they did so, people became more interdependent and, therefore, had to attune their conduct more strictly; they had to behave correctly, though the sum of their actions and plans gave rise to changes and patterns in the web of social relationships that no individual had planned. Thus, did the patterns blindly formed from social interaction blindly produce changes in human mentality that were imprinted upon individuals from early childhood and, in turn, arose an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of any individual.

A Social Perspective?

But for whatever reasons it might be found attractive, the cultural-structural accommodation would be in danger of becoming an orthodoxy if debate were consistently limited within its parameters. This in itself would be stifling. There are also legitimate doubts about interpretations that seem to rest too heavily upon what Toynbee (1949) once called an apathetic fallacy—the assumption that there exist abstractions shaping and guiding human society. And while there may now be greater sensitivity to the kinds of political-cum-psychological concerns we have

emphasized in this article, we must still wonder whether the cultural-structural accommodation can meet those concerns effectively.

Whether it is viewed as a political project or as the framework of profound scholarly analysis, will the kinds of subtle qualifications and adjustments in emphasis we have already noted within the cultural-structural accommodation percolate out on to the street in the Philippines or elsewhere in Southeast Asia? Can the cultural-structural accommodation effectively manage what it sees to be the tension between the local and the global-Western? Or will it only exacerbate, or, by setting up this self-conscious dichotomy, even generate such tensions? Will, for instance, the suggestion that Western economic and political structures helped to create today's Chinese culture only fuel a determination to prove that Chinese culture is very much more than a Western creation? Is it not likely that attempts inside and outside the academe to strengthen Chineseness, and to give vigorous expression to it, will only prompt similar movements by non-Chinese? Is it possible for such creations to avoid creating friction, however well-intentioned and laced with qualification they may be? And is not the belief that such tensions may be defused by the transformation of local cultures into cosmopolitan and liberal market democracies only likely to prompt a reaction against such transformations?

For all these reasons—intellectual, political, and psychological—we may need, on occasion, to stand outside the cultural-structural accommodation or, at the very least, to view it from a different angle such that its ideas, assumptions, and interpretations can be contrasted and examined more critically. But how is this to be done? This is not a question than can be dealt with here properly. In any case my intention has been simply to draw attention to the need for such an attempt. However, it is perhaps only fair to field one possible answer, part of which may be to take a more oblique approach. By "oblique" I mean that, rather than attempt to identify who is Chinese and then explain their economic success, we might attempt to understand and explain the relevance of the concepts of "the Chinese" and "Chineseness" to those who are successful in business. In other words, we can keep in mind the idea of the preeminence of the Chinese overseas; but rather than focus with a specialist frame of mind on this defined group and their

role in the economy of the Philippines, we should, regardless of their ethnicity, select and concentrate on all those companies, civil institutions, bureaucracies, and government agencies thought to lead the economy. Only by attempting to understand their activities, internal organization and workings, and dealings with each other (matters on which there is already a substantial literature), can we look at the ideas of "the Chinese" and "Chineseness" out of the corner of our eye and ask how, when, where, and why these ideas emerge and play within these broader circumstances. Now, refracted through this oblique perspective into many more complex dimensions, we can also set "Chineseness" within a more diverse empirical and theoretical literature on identity— a literature in which identity is perhaps more commonly understood as something fluid, uncertain, and fuzzy (see, for example, Valins 2003) than has sometimes been the case in the study of the Overseas Chinese.

The other part of the answer may be to refocus our attention on social relationships. That is, in our attempt to understand events—by which I mean the workings of institutions, practices, and behavior of government and business (and civil society more generally)—we can concentrate upon social relationships as the substance from which those events are shaped, rather than as the matrix in which those events are embedded and with which those events establish a dialectic.

This particular line of thought, which has been explored elsewhere with reference to the Philippines (Hodder 2002), emerges in part from the debate on the significance of guanxi in China. The suggestion that guanxi is withering away (Guthrie 1999; see also King 1991; Chen 1999) in the face of capitalism and its impersonal legal-rational system has elicited strong arguments in defense of the resilience of these relationships (Yang 2002; Wang 1999; Smart and Smart 1998). Some have also suggested that the legal-rational system emerging in China is of a species different from any found in the West (Chen 1999; Wang 1995).

Certainly the implication that a legal-rational system (no matter how impersonal it may seem) is somehow devoid of, or serves to marginalize, social relationships, is in itself troubling; and the demise of personalistic relationships on such a scale and so quickly is also curious. After all, it would be difficult to argue against the view that the instrumental and affective, and the pose and sincere, are qualities intrinsic in

all human relationships. The significance of these qualities—together with the ethical, religious, and philosophical questions surrounding individualism, individual and institutional probity, the rule of law, the limits of state authority and state interference, collectivism and communitarianism, and the distinction between beliefs genuinely held and mere performances—have long been debated in Confucian, Mencian, and Taoist writings as well as those of Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, and Bacon.

Perhaps the heart of the matter, then, is not whether guanxi is strengthening or in decline (for social relationships are of central and fundamental interest), but whether the affective or instrumental dimensions are more, or less, pronounced. It might be suggested, then, that the strengthening of institutional life, of rule by law rather than by men, and of a "formal" rather than an "informal" political economy, reflects the pulling away or "distancing" of the social dimension of relationships from economic and political life. As the instrumental quality of relationships becomes less acceptable and less prominent, and as relationships are moved conceptually into a more clearly delineated social sphere, our relationships come to be viewed and treated as important in their own right with their social and affective qualities now idealized. And rather than create an intrinsically impersonal atmosphere, their emotional or affective dimension, now cultivated in the social sphere, is introduced more easily to help oil, rather than clog, the wheels of professional life.

In short, the distinction between "institution" (whose meaning in the context of the present debate is carried by words such as structure, culture, formal, regularized, and legal-rational) and "social" (relationships, informal, and personalistic) reflects shifts in attitude towards social relationships rather than any material dichotomy. As attitudes become less instrumental, it is, in our thoughts, *as if* the distinction between "social" and "institution" is no longer conceptual but reified. "Institution" is now imagined to be separate from those relationships; and behavior is altered *as if* there are corporeal structures and cultures bearing down upon us.

Thus, we are led to the suggestion that notions of culture and structure are intellectual constructs. They have an influence only in so far as they are brought into thought and in that way affect behavior. If we

perceive the sets of relationships that we form or come up against either as distinct structural or cultural institutions in their own right, shaping and conditioning our lives, or as a nexus of malleable and permeable social relationships, and if we behave and think as such, then those attitudes will have a profound bearing on the quality of the social world.

We can infer, therefore, that what exists "out there" in fact is not a pattern in itself, set apart from each of us, but fuzzy composites of multidimensional relationships. Such coherence and order as we bring to, or experience in, our own lives is in each of us. That is, in our practical and everyday lives, we adjust our constructs and the place we each imagine ourselves to have within the whole, such that we can achieve some kind of modus vivendi.

This social perspective leaves us with some big questions to answer. How and why do these shifts in attitude take place? Moreover, it clearly asserts that there is about human relationships a profound commonality. But then what is the nature, and what is the origin, of this commonality? What are reasons for the variations in, or, if viewed with a more critical eye, for the evident differences in the forms into which those relationships are shaped? How does one explain these commonalities, if indeed they are real and not, as Geertz (1965) believed, fake?

The very idea of commonalities, or universals, has for many decades either been looked upon with a deal of ambiguity or made the subject of blunt criticism. The reasons for this are understandable: it is an idea that seems to limit, constrain, and homogenize; it is ethnocentric; it is feared that it might fuel or reflect other kinds of prejudice. And, to Geertz (1965) at least, it seems as if our nervous systems were the product of culture. It follows naturally that even if universals should exist, then how can we "see" them except through our own particular cultural states of mind?

Yet, to other writers such as Brown (1991), Gardner (1983; 1985), and Pinker (1994), commonalities is an idea that no longer seems to be incompatible with fluidity, change, variation, multidimensionality, complexity, equality, and tolerance. Neither is it an idea that denied a place to culture (or to structure), perhaps for the simple reason that an

attempt to establish the supremacy of nature over culture, or of culture over nature, merely gets in the way of explaining and understanding the human condition and human society. We may find, then, and it may already be the case, that explanations of the social world are being framed increasingly around concepts that are as much psychological, biological, neurological, mathematical, and profoundly philosophical as they are cultural and structural.[3]

Whatever our own initial beliefs, these ideas will need to be explored with an open mind. And given the intrinsically interdisciplinary and multidimensional nature of these ideas, and the exploratory nature of our discussion, we may also wish to experiment with ways of thinking and styles of expression that are improvisatory and essentially creative (Montuori 2003; Iglesias Santos 1999; Sawyer 1999; Morin 1994). To ignore or marginalize what these various debates and perspectives might hold for understanding the economic lives of those who feel themselves to be Chinese or indeed Filipino would be premature. Moreover, if we could throw a little light on how apparent differences and variations in the social world are translated from what may be our essential commonalities, then we might even begin to explain why there are so many exceptions and variations in behavior, actions, and institutions among people who are Chinese, just as there are similarities between groups identified as being Chinese and Filipino.

Conclusions

We have argued, then, that in addition to adopting an oblique view of the Overseas Chinese we might also concentrate on social relationships as the substance of institutions and practices rather than as the matrix in which those institutions and practices are embedded. In this view, culture and structure are no longer the parameters within which we necessarily operate and think. Our "take" on them now is that they reflect something of our social relationships and attitudes to those relationships. This is not to suggest that we should dismiss or marginalize cultural and structural interpretations; it is merely to argue that, for the reasons already set out, we should be prepared to contrast and examine them more critically.

Whether or not the reader finds this social perspective convincing, it remains important that we find some way of stepping outside the cultural-structural accommodation even if we do so only occasionally. This suggestion has a particular saliency for the Philippines, whose society, for all its faults, possesses the core qualities of great civilizations—openness and a tolerance of others. Geography confers much responsibility upon that civilization: its islands lie on the southeastern flank of a true economic giant and command routes from Southeast Asia into the Pacific. The current assessment is that China's economic development will be of benefit to the region and to the world, and that China will continue to be socialized into the world community. Yet we cannot rule out the possibility that the Chinese leadership will become more assertive. Driven either by a sense of destiny as its successes mount, or by frustration and fear in the wake of severe economic downturns, the leadership may determine to present China as an alternative locus of power, wealth, ideology, and culture to the West, and as Asia's rightful leader. Whichever way China turns, Filipinos will need cohesiveness, a strong sense of direction and, above all, confidence if they are to strengthen their political economy, deal with their neighbors on equal terms, and thereby meet their responsibilities.

Notes

1. For example, the figures cited in the main text (and which were themselves taken from a variety of journalistic and other academic materials) seem little changed from those cited by other writers nearly a decade ago (see, for example, Rao 1993; Minority Rights Group 1992; Suryadinata 1985; Redding 1990; Liang Yingming 1993; Kraar 1993; Lim 1992; Kotkin 1993). These older figures were themselves passed on from other, still earlier, academic and journalistic materials.

Even the origin of figures on the numbers of Chinese overseas is obscure. An article by Postan, Mao, and Yu (1994) represents one of the very few attempts made to provide an open and comprehensive assessment of the number of Chinese in every country throughout the world. This appears to indicate that, even where national censuses provide figures for the numbers of Chinese, the reliability of these data is far from certain. Indeed, estimates provided for any particular

country (with the possible exception of the United States) appear to vary quite considerably (commonly by hundreds of thousands or even millions) from one source to the next (compare, for example Postan, Mao, and Yu 1994 with Pan 1999). In most cases, then (and I do not say this critically), the bases of figures given for the numbers of Chinese are not clear, nor perhaps even known.

2. For historical analyses of the emergence of the Chinese as an alien national group in the Philippines, see Wickberg 2000 and Chu 2002.

3. Two very interesting works in this regard are David Brown's (1994) psychoanalytic explanation of ethnicity, and Fernandez-Armesto's (2004) reexamination of the very idea of "being human."

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