

Individual, Ethnic and National Identity in the Age of Globalization: The Case of the Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia (2002)

Aileen S.P. BAVIERA

*Associate Professor, Asian Center
University of the Philippines Diliman*

Caroline S. HAU

Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Abstract

On the fringes of the debates on nationhood are minority ethnic groups struggling to preserve cultural identities. To them, globalism is shapeless, indeterminate, unfathomable as to whether it should be desired or deplored. It brings more confusion to the already confounded problematic of identity formation. The struggle of minority ethnic groups used to be against assimilationist national programs imposed by the dominant majority, but now it appears to also be against the rising tide of globalization and its hegemonic elements that tend to erode whatever value was attached in the past to the small group, the indigenous and the particular. On the other extreme, globalization—which belittles the state-nation and the nation-state—liberates the oppressed and the marginalized cultures by making their differentness legitimate, through its arguments that we are—in the ultimate analysis—all different and all the same in one world.

Globalization is a many-sided issue, concerned at once with things economic, technological, cultural and political. An umbrella term for the expansion of capital and production, the technological changes that marked the latter half of the twentieth century and the worldwide dissemination of (often American based) mass culture, commodities and practices through media and communication networks, globalization evokes the idea of standardization and of increasing fragmentation, of homogenization and the explosion of differences. Inasmuch as globalization is about the celebration of cultural differences, it is also about the Americanization of the world. Inasmuch as globalization is about increased transnational capital flows and flexible production, it is also about the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the rise of ethnic conflict and generalized violence in everyday life.

Globalization and the revolutionary pace of economic, political and social change it has helped bring about in Asia have shaken concepts of nationhood across the region. The new mobility of information, capital, material goods and human populations has rendered political boundaries unimportant. Globalization has killed the myth of state sovereignty in its infancy, for certainly in most of Asia—Southeast Asia in particular—the idea of the nation-state was a recent construction in the rich and complex tapestry of history.

On the fringes of the debates on nationhood are minority ethnic groups struggling to preserve cultural identities. To them, globalism is shapeless, indeterminate, [and] unfathomable as to whether it should be desired or deplored. It brings more confusion to the already confounded problematic of identity-formation. The struggle of minority ethnic groups used to be against assimilationist national programs imposed by the dominant majority, but now it appears to also be against the rising tide of globalization and its hegemonic elements that tend to erode whatever value was attached in the past to the small group, the indigenous and the particular. On the other extreme, globalization—which belittles the state-nation and the nation-state—liberates the oppressed and the marginalized

cultures by making their differentness legitimate, through its arguments that we are—in the ultimate analysis—all different and all the same in one world.

A globalized market tends to undermine diversity: Coke becomes the international drink; national economies are pressured to liberalize, deregulate, privatize. A backlash has manifested itself, in the form of nativist/nationalist unrest, and even recourse to violence by social movements in some Asian societies. Yet the “global village” has also promoted a keener sense of common humanity, as when UNICEF flashes on cable television the images of dying children in Ethiopia, tugging heartstrings (and hopefully purse strings) in America or Asia. For those who choose not to resist it, globalization has brought about rapid integration, homogenization of values and aspirations, as well as expanded understanding and mutual empathy.

Globalization and the Diasporic “Chinese”

Uniquely placed in the universe of ethnic minorities caught in the globalization trap is the immigrant or the diasporic minority. What does globalization mean for the individual who belongs to an immigrant ethnic minority? It raises fundamental questions. For how long can one hold on to the cultural markers of one’s immigrant ethnic group in the face of not only indigenous cultural influences in the host country but globalized culture as well? Does the effort to overcome ethnic loyalties to shape a supra-ethnic national identity even make sense? How do factors associated with globalization come into play in the spaces where one negotiates the boundaries of old ethnic ties and the emergent national identity?

Globalization thus offers the individual new options and ways of defining one’s cultural, economic and political identity. On the one hand, to the person who in the past had been defined and fixed in space by his/her gender, age, occupation, education, religion, kinship ties, ethnicity,

language group, region or citizenship, globalization seduces with its more inclusive definition of the “self” as “global citizen.”

Wang Gungwu defines the global citizen as one who reaches beyond national borders to embrace a common human history. Few human beings possess such distinctive personality that they are able to “deny their personal pasts, downplay race and nation-state and claim loyalty only to the history of human progress.”¹ Yet the challenge to do so is perhaps more lucid and manifest to certain groups of people—the future-oriented young, the cosmopolitan schooled, the cyber-adroit and—in a special way—diasporic peoples. Among the latter are the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia who, rather than choose between being Chinese and being Southeast Asian, can now exercise the option of not being one or the other, but being “global” instead.

On the other hand, globalization radically reduces the role of time and space in forming the individual’s identity. One need not be physically in a particular boardroom or village hall or international meeting to feel unity or sameness with what goes on there. For the Southeast Asian Chinese capitalist, one need not be in China to behave and think and feel and interact as a Chinese or, since the 1980s, to be part of the burgeoning “global Chinese economy.”

In contrast, therefore, to having a non-ethnic, non-national identity as a “global citizen,” it is “global capitalist Chineseness” that is strengthened and promoted.

Global Capitalism and the Ethnic Chinese

The situation of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, in fact, strongly resonates with the multivalent nature of “globalization,” not least because the “Chinese” have, since the 1980s, been held up as purveyors of global capitalism in Southeast Asia. The literature on overseas Chinese, for example, posit diasporic “Chinese business networks” (*guanxi* networks)

linking various communities across national boundaries. They dwell on the reproduction of state-sponsored neo-Confucian ideology, enshrined in the so-called “Asian values” debate in Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong and concerned with rewriting Max Weber’s sociology of religion as an explanatory account of the rise of East Asian capitalism.

The discourse of neo-Confucian capitalism is ambitious in that it explicitly conjoins the economic issue of capitalist development with the cultural issue of Chinese “values,” arguing that, once freed from the constraints of the communist state, “Chinese” culture nurtures a superior form of global capitalist development. On a less grandiose level, scholars have pointed to the circulation of Chinese cultural products within Asia and in Europe and America as one of many examples of the globalization of an “alternative” modernity that is inextricably bound to, yet also distinct from, that of the West.

Indeed, the Chinese in Southeast Asia have long had a *historical* relationship with capital. This relationship to capital is determined by complex historical factors which include the determining role of the colonial and neocolonial state and the political and economic developments in mainland China. This historical identification of “Chineseness” with merchant capital serves as a double-edged weapon that has made the Chinese both a model of entrepreneurial success as well as an object of class and nationalist resentment and persecution in their “host countries.”

Thus, discussions of the relationship between globalization and the Southeast Asian Chinese need to be grounded in the acknowledgement of the difficult double bind in which the Chinese have found themselves at the turn of the new century. This double bind consists of the fact that the values and practices that are often used as markers for the distinctiveness of Chinese “culture” have been more identifiably linked to “merchant capitalism” than to a primordial notion of “Chinese” civilization. In China, values or practices like thrift, diligence, perseverance and determination are no more Chinese than they are Jewish or Armenian or Sikh. The “mystery,” if one can call it that, is why these values “become Chinese” once they leave China and migrate, so to speak, to Southeast Asia.

It is the continued identification of the Chinese with capital (whether global or local) that accounts for both the emergence of a Chinese identity politics and the resurgence of anti-[S]inicism, most notably in Indonesia and, to a relatively lesser extent, the Philippines.

Negotiating National Identity in the Global Era

From a historical perspective, the states of Southeast Asia are only in the early stages of nation-building. Most were multicultural societies to begin with, having to contend with the concept of the nation-state only recently and often only as a result of the unifying impact of the colonial experience. The ethnic Chinese have been in Southeast Asia even before colonialism and before the nation-state. For the most part, they have lived multiple identities, one closely tied to their Chinese past, another making new history and common destiny with their fellow Southeast Asians.

The failure of many ethnic Chinese to more successfully adopt the national identity of the host people as their own can be attributed to colonial economic policy. The colonial states in Southeast Asia played an important role in “sinicizing” merchant capitalism and turning it into signs of “Chineseness.” The “plural society” policies of the colonial states in the Dutch East Indies and Spanish Filipinas, for example, created and cemented the occupational niches of the Chinese, and their alienation from the “native” peoples. Merchants who prized their participation in the colonial economy learned to adopt or affirm their “Chineseness”: that is to say, their very survival in that colonial setup depended on the assertion of their distinctiveness from the rest of the population.

The colonial situation itself played a role in hindering assimilation. The Spanish creation of a “mestizo” intermediate category between *indios* and *sangleyes*, for example, aimed to separate the offspring of Chinese-Filipino unions from their Chinese fathers or recent immigrants. This, in effect, cemented the separation between mestizos and *sangleyes*; the former elevated its own Hispanized hybrid culture to the national realm, often at the expense of, and through the demonizing of, its Chinese ancestry.

It was as if one could only be a “true” Filipino if one loved the *indios* and loathed the *chinos*. In such a dichotomy, the seeds of a certain kind of Filipino nationalism were sown.

It was the Chinese mestizos who eventually became the Philippine entrepreneurial middle class by the mid-19th century. But the many ethnic Chinese who remained culturally distinct were marginalized from the politics of the new republic. The granting of citizenship to the ethnic Chinese proved crucial to their decision to adopt the national identity, but this came as late as 1975 for the Philippines and even later—1992—for Indonesians of Chinese descent.

In Indonesia, most ethnic Chinese have also successfully acculturated, not least because of the coercive actions of the State. The New Order regime of Suharto deliberately cultivated the image of the *Masalah Cina* as a problem for national unity. The incompatibility of Chinese culture with the national identity was always emphasized, and the ethnic Chinese had to forego public display of most cultural markers—their names, their writing system, their religions. With the onset of globalization, it is expected that more Chinese will resist indigenization and instead opt for a more cosmopolitan and universalist cultural identity.

The dominance of the Indonesian-Chinese in business meant that they were the first to profit from the new globalized economy of the 1980s and 1990s. They were the pioneers of the new age of transnational Asian capitalism. They contributed significantly to high economic growth and the accumulation of surplus. And still they continued to be viewed with suspicion and to be treated as “outsiders.” They were often deprived of open access to political power, which would then lead to the use of informal channels and the inevitable charges of corruption. Poor performance of the national economy would invariably raise the temperature of ethnic tensions, with the Chinese often being made scapegoats, both by the indigenous elite and by the disaffected masses.

The economic growth of the People’s Republic of China also appeared to produce new challenges to national identity formation. Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia began to take advantage of their cultural and

linguistic linkages with China to obtain inroads into the China market. Among young ethnic Chinese in the region, the attraction of learning Mandarin and other things Chinese grew. It was argued that this was not so much because of reinvigorated loyalties to a long-lost motherland but was merely instrumental to exploring new business opportunities. Nevertheless, the stereotype of the transnational Chinese before long gave way to renewed fears of exploitation and even treason. The anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia in the late 1990s demonstrated just how structurally insecure the position of the ethnic Chinese remains in Southeast Asia.

And where exactly does the individual situate himself in these changing conditions brought on by globalization? Let us listen to what is being said.

**A Peranakan personal account
Jakarta, Year 2000**

The gongs are more deafening this year than I can ever recall. Tonight, the crowds fill the streets and big, red paper lanterns hang outside the well-lit homes and shops. The children watch, excited, as the dragon dancers weave their way through the narrow lane. Across from where I stand, three beribboned girls jump up and down as the dragons head bobs up and then down, twists left and then right to the rhythm of the drums.

I look at the old man standing a few paces behind them. Grandfather is about my age. He has a frozen smile on his lips, but when our eyes meet briefly I see no joy but muted pain instead. In that instant, he too recognized the apprehension in my own eyes. Embarrassed, we both quickly look away.

It is Cap-go-meh, Spring Festival, in the year 2000—the beginning of the new millennium. The new president, Abdurrahman Wahid, had a month ago enacted Presidential Decree No. 6, and so for the first time

since 1967, we are legally allowed to celebrate Chinese New Year publicly in the traditional way. In previous years, we had to keep our celebrations to our homes or hold them inside temple grounds to avoid offending our neighbors, who happen to be mostly Muslim.

Last year was the worst, and many of us did not feel like celebrating Spring Festival at all. The riots in Jakarta of May 1998 were still fresh in our memory, as they are even today. My first cousin's hardware was looted and burned that month, along with the whole row of shops where my wife goes for cooking utensils and curtain materials. The former librarian from my grandsons school—who was *peranakan* like myself—was raped and, two months later, she decided to kill herself. If I had not just reinforced the gate of my shop with iron bars a few months before, my family and I could have been as unfortunate.

There was much confusion that year, and even today not everything is clear to me. The students were not happy with the old man Pak Harto. They chanted accusations of *KKN*—corruption, collusion and nepotism. Among most Chinese-Indonesians, we were grateful to Pak Harto for having given us a stable business environment. Up to 1997, when the Asian crisis hit us, we had enjoyed many good years. Many of us felt we were finally being accepted and our contributions respected despite our different culture.

Yes, there were anti-Chinese rumblings in the outlying provinces. But we were so sure Jakarta would be different. Jakarta had, after all, become so modern, so international in outlook in a relatively short span of time. It was a global city by many standards. But in those days and nights of rape and pillage, everything suddenly turned so devastatingly uncontrolled and primeval.

They say that we Chinese had become rich from the corruption under Suharto, and that we stay together all the time to keep our riches to ourselves. They criticize how we have made fortunes off the backs of *pribumi* employees and workers, and accuse us of having no loyalty to Indonesia.

I can understand such logic. I have never felt more Indonesian than when business is doing well and I see my grown children deciding to raise their families in Jakarta, rather than in Australia or Canada. On the other hand, I have never felt more alien and Chinese than during those riots, when I began to fear for the safety of my children and grandchildren, whose fair color and facial features would surely give them away.

I think it was when the IMF came in and demanded that government “restructure the economy” that our problems really began. That was so much worse than the financial crisis itself, as it not only aggravated the social situation, but also stripped our leaders of any remaining legitimacy they still held. Before long, there was so much rioting and looting, and we ethnic Chinese became the main targets. There was talk that the riots were not really spontaneous, and that pro-Suharto factions of ABRP² were said to be behind them. So now I blame the IMF, but frankly I am not exactly sure what for. I think it is for being faceless outsiders daring to dictate on the Indonesian people. Perhaps they reminded our pribumi neighbors that those of us of ethnic Chinese descent were also “outsiders.”

Do I really feel an outsider here, in the only country I have ever known? I speak some Hakka, and very little Mandarin, but only among business friends. Even my peranakan wife doesn’t understand Chinese dialects, and I gave up trying to teach my children a long time ago. My own father, of course, disapproved and said I give up too easily.

My father was pure-blooded Chinese, a first-generation totok from Medan, but he met and married my mother in Jakarta. We lived as an extended family—my five brothers, two sisters and myself—until he passed away thirty years ago. After my father died, I moved out and changed my name to one that sounded more pribumi. Many of my ethnic Chinese friends did so. Yet every single time I sign my name, I feel the guilt all over again, my betrayal of my father. I convince myself that I had to do it, so my own children would be more accepted as Indonesians.

After I moved away, I learned that one of my boyhood friends had taken an even more drastic road. He converted to Islam at the age of 35. His father was a communist who had fled to Guangzhou in 1965 to escape

the killing of Chinese and suspected leftists by anti-Sukarno forces, and had not been able to come back since. For years after, to all but the closest relatives, they pretended that their father was dead. It was the only way they could escape ideological persecution under the New Order. This personal trauma dogged my friend for years, until he decided that the only way he could become whole again was to completely embrace pribumi culture and identity, or at least this Javanese culture that passes itself off as Indonesian.

I, on the other hand, became Protestant like my wife. Many of our friends at church are of ethnic Chinese descent like us. Like good Chinese, we still visit the Chinese temple to burn incense on special occasions, although at home we have stopped praying to our ancestors for good fortune. My daughter, who lives a few blocks away from us with her husband and children, refuses to go to the temple at all. She says the old customs make her feel very uncomfortable, and that the rituals are so alien and silly that she cannot conduct them without bursting into laughter. My wife and I pretend to be offended by such remarks, but we know she cannot help herself.

This daughter had always been so stubborn. I think that her university education, especially her exposure to Western ideas, set her farther apart from her Chinese roots. When she said she wanted to marry her boyfriend—a pribumi and a Muslim—soon after university graduation, nothing we could say or do could persuade her otherwise. I told her she would never be “one of them,” and she replied that she already was as an Indonesian. She was right and I have never regretted her wisdom.

My pribumi son-in-law has more common sense, is more hardworking and is more respectful of elders than many Chinese his age. My own sons have become so accustomed to their nice cars, good clothes and overseas vacations but show little of the traditional values that so many admired in our immigrant ancestors. My son-in-law, on the other hand, now manages his own packaging business. He often travels to Singapore and Hong Kong to meet with principals, and occasionally to China to help train the staff of a sister company.

I once read in the newspapers that the networks of huaqiao (overseas Chinese) in Hong Kong, Taiwan, all over Southeast Asia, and their hometowns and ancestral villages in China made up this thing called “Greater China.” It is said that we ethnic Chinese, with our strong sociocultural and business networks, our Confucian values and our mobile capital, were helping turn the Asian region around from poverty to prosperity. Most of all that China, which my father used to call zuguo (motherland), had become a rising new economic power.

Reading about such things at first inflated my heart with pride, but this lasted only a fleeting second before fear crept in. It is strange how fear slices through the gut like a cold sharp knife. As an Indonesian, was I entitled to feel such pride? Would not such pride diminish my allegiance to this country of my birth, where I was raised and where I had raised my own sons and daughter?

Then again, I say to myself, what “Greater China” is this and how could I be considered part of it when even my own huaqiao connections aren’t half as good as my pribumi son-in-law’s business connections in Hong Kong and Singapore?

My daughter says she doesn’t always feel accepted by her pribumi in-laws, but usually by those who belong to my generation. With her younger pribumi relatives, her own friends and co-workers, she feels that she is one hundred per cent accepted as no one questions her Indonesian identity. Bahasa and English are, after all, her only languages, but more and more it is English that I hear her using, even with my two young grandsons.

I remember my daughter came home from a visit to Medan one time, complaining that so many ethnic Chinese business people were speaking in Chinese among themselves, even within earshot of pribumis. It made her feel that the pribumis were the ones that were not fully accepted and that needed to be integrated in Medan’s business community. She said she was politely treated by the peranakans as one of them but that she definitely felt like one of the pribumis, and could not help but resent the Chinese-speakers. As she said this to me, I could almost see my father

turning in his grave, saying to me “I told you so.” He would think I am to blame that my daughter has become so estranged from her own bloodline.

My poor daughter. When there were anti-Chinese riots near her home and her husband was away, she took her sons and sought shelter with pribumi friends rather than with us. A wise move, no doubt, because her friends could protect them in a way we could not. But it hurt her that she had tried so hard to be a good Indonesian, and yet others still couldn't see beneath the color of her skin. The color of my skin.

What loud firecrackers we have this year! They rouse me from my contemplation and bring me back to the here and now, and I see the dragon dancers disappearing around the street corner. As the din of gongs and drums slowly fades away, I steal another glance at the old man and his three granddaughters. Earlier, I envied him because my own grandsons would not come for this celebration. I could not tear them away from their video games, which my son-in-law had just brought in from Singapore last night. But now, I sigh, it is just as well that they did not come.

Those two boys, with their Indonesianized peranakan mother, pribumi father and their confused grandfather, should not be burdened with matters of ethnic, cultural and national identity at such a tender age.

But now, I must go home and offer incense before my father's portrait, asking forgiveness for yet another betrayal.

An Intsik personal account Manila, Year 2000

I grew up in Santo Cristo, in the heart of Chinatown, near the market, near an old bahay na bato that had been partitioned into a drugstore, a warehouse, and a rabbit's warren of apartments. My parents were then in the last stages of winding up their flour retail business and initiating the move out of Binondo to Parañaque. When the move happened, it involved something more than physical movement. My parents changed professions

as well, and shifted to, of all things, Chinese painting. My adult life would be shaped by this physical and professional change, and the shift in emotional and intellectual attitudes that accompanied it.

I am lucky in having parents whose own professions endowed them with an open mind about their children's career decisions. While my classmates, male and female alike, went into business administration, medicine and computer science, I took up English Studies, with an Imaginative Writing concentration. In this respect, at least, the Chinese and the Filipinos are united in their relatively low opinion of the arts and humanities, particularly the writing profession. "English lang?" [English only] was the most popular refrain in my conversations, second only to "But all Chinese are rich."

In retrospect, I was glad to get out of the "ghetto." Contrary to what most people would expect, we were not spared anti-Chinese gibes and taunts even in Chinatown. Amidst an ethnic Chinese majority population, I would still hear, from the mouths of children playing in the streets, the racist chant, "Intsik beho, tulo laway."

I used to resent the label. There was something about the word "intsik," the way the mouth shaped the initial vowel and spit out the final syllable, that made me think the word itself was meant to be derogatory.

Then there was the phrase itself—with its image of dribbling saliva and a descriptive term, beho, that I didn't recognize but sounded, anyway, like the word for smelly.

It wasn't until I took up Spanish in college that I learned that beho was the Tagalog pronunciation of the Spanish *viejo*, "old." This image of drooling, old Chinese—most certainly men—was no doubt an unpleasant one, but it was some time before I made further sense of the source of its unpleasantness.

It all had everything to do with history, and the forgetting of that history by the ethnic Chinese themselves. One or two generations and worlds removed from the harsh lives of their immigrant fathers, the modern-day Chinese Filipino sees only the slaver and the decrepitude,

but not their context. Anyone who has been subjected to hard labor, who has experienced the kind of back-breaking manual labor that hauls cargo and pulls heavy carts, need only to look at himself in the mirror to flesh out this image. The old, drooling Chinese is the face worn not by the prosperous merchant but by the bottle collector or taho vendor or stevedore eking out a living in the only way he knows and with the only means he has—by the sinews of his own physical labor. Years of hard labor bend the back, cut premature lines into the skin, and slacken the jaw.

The racist taunt, therefore, is a class taunt, and the ethnic Chinese's reaction is also a class reaction. It is ironic that the class element of this particular racializing image has been elided; or rather, it is especially ironic given the fact that racial stereotyping of the Chinese in the Philippines has always conflated the Chinese with merchant capital.

It is the class identification of “Chineseness”—an identification forged by a history of economic specialization—that remains the unresolved question at the heart of Chinese-Filipino efforts to claim an identity for themselves within the Philippines. It is not enough to assert that we have the best of both worlds or, in the face of more vociferous objections, to insist that we are “integrated” into mainstream Filipino society. No one can claim integration without being forced to question the “mainstream” into which one is supposed to be integrating. This Filipino “mainstream” is, like Chineseness, a construct which belies a social reality defined by crisscrossing behaviors of interest produced by class, ethnic, religious, sexual and educational differences.

Integration is no guarantee that stereotyping and scapegoating will end. At best, it forces people to be more careful about what they say in front of the Chinese. At worst, it obfuscates the real issue by relying on a vague notion of social relations or, worse, a monolithic Philippine culture and social harmony achieved mainly through identity politics.

It is a symptom, I think, of the failure to come to terms with the class issue at the heart of Chinese ethnic identification that most young Chinese Filipinos have turned the “older generation” into whipping boys whose

recalcitrant attachment to China and things “Chinese” can only be dissipated by their deaths. Similarly, the immigrant past has been banished to the edges of memory, to be summoned in a properly sanitized version only when it suits the younger generation. Do we not, in defining ourselves diametrically against our elders, also give up the opportunity and the imperative to rethink the assumptions that lie behind such commonsensical concepts as nationalism, culture and political loyalty? Most telling among the elisions of Chinese Filipino history involves the forgetting of the radical past—the marginalization of the histories and life-stories of the young Chinese Communists who fought in the Japanese war and were hunted down during the McCarthyite period that followed.

What does the old, drooling Chinaman of our nightmares tell us? That his labor helped build a nation that had historically denied him access to its political institutions? That he died poor and a “failure” in the face of conventional wisdom which held his economic success as given and moot? That his very presence in Philippine history, like those of the masses of Filipinos before him and since, constitutes irrefutable proof of the contradiction between formal political equality and actual economic inequality that speaks to the core of nationalist discourse and practice, to a fundamental ambivalence that is expressed and manifested as anti-Chinese sentiment?

I was glad to get out of the ghetto, because in reality, there was no ghetto. Or rather, the ghettos were everywhere, and one need not be Chinese to be trapped in one. I see the imperatives of rethinking the politics of Chineseness as a necessary counterbalance to the celebratory rhetoric of Chineseness that comes with globalization. In the years of the Asian miracle, the role played by China and by the overseas Chinese in spurring the growth of the tiger economies of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have foregrounded entrepreneurial “virtues,” such as diligence, thrift, self-reliance, discipline and persistence and made Chineseness a special marker for them. Where Chineseness had long been a source of difference and shame, the ethnic Chinese have now embraced their “identity,” in some

cases going so far as to resinicize their names. This ethnoidentity is as much a product of the market as of an official nationalism that has tended to reify Chineseness by naturalizing its “attributes,” such as its alienness and its stereotypical clannishness and materialism.

Chinese Filipinos who claim a “Chinese Filipino” identity have, in a sense, been schooled to think of both their Chineseness and their Filipinoness in the language with which state and market have defined the terms. In struggling against these “images of the Chinese,” we signal our critique of the ideational structures that have long determined who counted as Chinese and who Filipinos. But in celebrating a pluralistic, democratic, civic and genuinely nationalist (rather than simply racist) Filipino nation that, to a certain extent, was made possible by the vicissitudes of globalization, we also need to look at the dark side of globalization, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the continued immiseration of the underprivileged and the persecution of the minoritized charges of labor exploitation—bad wages, long hours or unremunerated labor—will continue to plague those among the Chinese who are engaged in businesses which aim to compete in the global market, or the smaller businesses subsisting in the fringes of the international economy.

The vicissitudes of my personal and family history also reflect the demographic changes that have affected the traditional livelihood, not just of the Chinese but of the majority of Filipinos in the Philippines. Instead of going into business, and lacking anyway the capital needed for such a venture, my siblings and I have gone down the “professional” path first taken more than twenty years ago by our parents. Like many Filipinos, we have had to sell our labor abroad to earn a decent living—my brother in Singapore as an architect, my sister in China as the general manager of a multinational company, and I in Japan as an associate professor of Southeast Asian Studies.

Our situation—and we are not the exception—simply confirms the fact that the fates of the Chinese Filipinos are so entwined with those of fellow Filipinos that the plight of one group necessarily echoes the plight

of the other. The warm-body export of the Philippines is the most obvious example of the impact of globalization on everyday life, and, as Overseas Filipino Workers, we reap the benefits and suffer the consequences of globalization.

In this light, our collective experience of globalization forces us to qualify our dream of a pluralistic and democratic nation by factoring in the question of social justice. In aspiring to and working toward equality and respect, we Chinese must work not just for ourselves but for all disadvantaged groups, like the Muslims and the indigenous peoples. Questions of ethnicity are yoked to issues of socioeconomic inequality and oppression, and the role played by debates on social justice in remaking cultural identity is a necessary starting point of any attempt to assert cultural identity as such.

As a Chinese whose parents have chosen a profession contrary to popular expectations of the Chinese, and as a student of Filipino nationalism, I see the imperative for analysis and theorizing the Chinese place in Philippine history and the role of globalization in creating social realignments as well as social fissures in the Philippines. It seems to me that no attempt to address the “Chinese question” can ultimately afford to leave the parameters of its investigation untouched and uninterrogated.

Notes

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- ¹ Wang Gungwu, “Ethnic Chinese: The Past in their Future.” Keynote address at the 1998 Conference of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas. Manila: Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, 2000.
- ² The former armed forces under Suharto.

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