

Involuntary Migrants, Political Revolutionaries and Economic Energisers: a history of the image of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia

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Along the contemporary migration history of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, three distinctive images have been constructed through the interaction between the overseas Chinese and Mainland China. First, the image of involuntary migrant, formulated by their migration activity and the continuous remittance they sent back to their hometowns, closely linked to the political and social-economic disturbances in the early years of the twentieth century. Second, the image of the overseas Chinese as political revolutionary was heavily politicised by the revolutionary policies of Mainland China in the 1950s and 1960s. Third, through the operational means of foreign direct investment, the overseas Chinese image of economic energiser was re-focused and mirror-imaged with the imperative of the economic reform of Mainland China in the 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand, the images of involuntary migrant, political revolutionary and economic energiser of the Southeast Asian overseas Chinese describe their situational status. On the other hand, these images also reflect the contemporary historical development of Mainland China.

Whatever the reasons for studying the Overseas Chinese, there is no doubt that they are a bona fide object of research. The diversity of cultures represented by these people, the diversity of settings in which they have found themselves, the wide differences in the histories of specific Chinese 'colonies', all of these things make them a fascinating laboratory for social scientists of various disciplinary bents.¹

In Southeast Asia the capitalists were the Chinese. It was not possible to discriminate against capitalists because they were Chinese and at the same time successfully to oppose Communism, because that too was backed by China. In the long run Southeast Asian

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1. Morton H. Fried, ed., *Colloquium on Overseas Chinese* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1958), p. v.

countries must decide whether they wanted Chinese capitalism or Chinese Communism, and the run was not going to be very long.²

Even if a Chinese became a naturalized Asian, King Rama [VI of Siam] argued, he would still remain a Chinese at heart without any consideration for his adopted homeland.³

Introduction

The historical change of Chinese society and politics has impacted the images of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. These overseas Chinese have been framed by the three images of involuntary migrants, political revolutionaries and economic energisers. On the surface, these images tell the story of their socio-economic condition in their host countries in Southeast Asia. In practice, the images were generated by the interaction between the history of Southeast Asian overseas Chinese and political developments in China. Thus the images of overseas Chinese are part of a historical process which has constructed their identity.⁴ The sources used in this essay are chosen to highlight the image-building process, especially as it changed from 'political revolutionary' in the 1950s and 1960s to 'economic energiser' in the 1990s.

The thesis of this essay is that images of the overseas Chinese are socially constructed in relation to the social and political development of China. This image building closely connected with George Hebert Mead's understanding of the relations among mind, self and society. He contended that 'What we have here is a situation in which there can be different selves, and it is dependent upon the set of social reactions that is involved as to which self we are going to be'.⁵ Constructivism is useful for understanding the overseas Chinese because their very existence is closely related to the social and political conditions that pushed them to migrate. In particular, the physical movement of this group of people from Mainland China to Southeast Asia does not preclude them from developing closer relations with Mainland China according to shared ethnicity and business networks.⁶

Historically, in the late Qing period the social and political turmoil in China pushed the Chinese people away from their homeland to the Nanyang (Southeast Asia countries).⁷ The image of involuntary migrants gradually developed as more and more Chinese migrated to Southeast Asia to improve upon the poor living conditions in China which were generated by political turmoil, economic hardship, civil war,

2. Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 37.

3. Garth Alexander, *The Invisible China: The Overseas Chinese and the Politics of Southeast Asia* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), p. 45.

4. See Ronen Palan, 'The constructivist underpinnings of the new international political economy', in Ronen Palan, ed., *Global Political Economy: Contemporary Theories* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 216.

5. George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 143.

6. Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 5.

7. Lynn Pan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999); Gungwu Wang, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991); Mee-kau Nyaw, Gordon C. K. Cheung and Chak Yan Chang, 'Money migration: an assessment of ASEAN's investment in China with special reference to overseas Chinese investment after 1979', *The Journal of World Investment* 2(3), (September 2001), pp. 440–442. See also Gordon C. K. Cheung, 'Chinese Diaspora as Virtual Nation: Interactive Roles between Economic and Social Capital', *Political Studies*, 52(4), (2004), pp. 664–684.

social upheaval, and so on. Thus the migration was accompanied by tragic stories. Studies of the overseas Chinese tell us that powerlessness and an underdog mentality forced people from different clans and regions to bond together, eventually leading to a high degree of ethnic Chinese cohesion abroad.⁸ To support their families and to make a living, they buried themselves in their own Chinese business enclaves. While this ghetto of economic culture isolated overseas Chinese from people in their host countries, the social and economic linkage between overseas Chinese and China was maintained through the continuous remittances sent to the Mainland. The physical transfer of money from their host countries to their hometown in China showed that the immigrants still had passionate ties to China, and wished to eventually return.⁹ In this paper, I will not question this mainstream view so much as point out that the role, identity and problems of overseas Chinese were the mirror images of what was happening in China itself. True, it seems obvious that overseas Chinese experience is different from that in China. Indeed, one could say that they had rejected China since they chose to leave. However, I will argue that their role as 'involuntary migrants' is closely linked to the political weakness of the Qing dynasty, and the attendant socio-economic disturbances in China.

The second image for overseas Chinese is 'political revolutionary'. This notion of overseas Chinese as a revolutionary force in Southeast Asia became dominant once the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949.¹⁰ The primary image of overseas Chinese thus changed its hue to revolutionary red. Many overseas Chinese were impressed by Mao Zedong who was seen as both a nationalist and a socialist hero who had liberated China; some returned to China.¹¹ Various state agencies were founded to advocate socialist ideas among the overseas Chinese, including the Commission of Overseas Chinese Affairs at the national level, and other organisations at the sub-national and party level. As a result, the image of overseas Chinese began to change. Overseas Chinese interaction with China provoked suspicions among the new postcolonial Southeast Asian countries. The question of their political status and loyalty—either Chinese or local—became an important issue. Overseas Chinese were considered to be representatives, agents and even spies spreading revolutionary ideas from Mainland China. This politicisation of identity coloured the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s.¹²

8. A recent study of the early associations established by the overseas Chinese can be found in Hong Liu, 'Old linkages, new networks: the globalisation of overseas Chinese voluntary associations and its implication', *The China Quarterly* no. 155, (September 1998), pp. 582–609.

9. Lynn Pan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd, 1998), p. 108; and Elena S. H. Yu, 'Overseas remittances in South-eastern China', *The China Quarterly* no. 78, (June 1979), pp. 339–350.

10. To study the overseas Chinese policy under the National government (before 1949), one can consult Ying-hui Lee, *Huaqiao zhengce yu haiwai minzu zhuyi [The Origin of Overseas Chinese Nationalism, 1912–1949]* (Taipei: Academia Historica, 1997).

11. A good source of references on the Cultural Revolution and overseas Chinese can be located from these papers. Stephen Fitzgerald, 'Overseas Chinese affairs and the Cultural Revolution', *The China Quarterly* no. 40, (October–December 1969), pp. 103–126; and Stephen Fitzgerald, 'China and the overseas Chinese: perceptions and policies', *The China Quarterly* no. 44, (October–December 1970), pp. 1–37.

12. The distinction between 'party-to-party' relations in the Mao era and 'state-to-state relations' in the Deng era can best be understood from C. Y. Chang, 'Overseas Chinese in China's policy', *The China Quarterly* no. 82, (June 1980), pp. 281–303. Other communist movement of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia can be traced from Justus M. Van der Kroef, 'Communism and Chinese communalism in Sarawak', *The China Quarterly* no. 20, (October–December 1984), pp. 38–66.

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the beginning of the Open-Door Policy in 1978, the image of overseas Chinese as economic energisers was re-built. The economic relations between the overseas Chinese and China were re-constructed through foreign investment. This was engendered and facilitated by the famous business networks which joined the overseas Chinese with the PRC. In other words, these Chinese networks gave rise to the conceptual as well as operational methods for understanding Chinese business. At this stage, the operational level of image building was predominantly governed by economic relations. The building of economic networks among the overseas Chinese and China was later described as a 'Chinese Commonwealth' and also gave rise to the more profound study on the formation of Chinese business networks.¹³

However, a more contemporary context of interaction and constructive meaning behind the overseas Chinese and China not only serves our purpose of a historical trajectory of these people's development. The images that they generated challenge the role and the autonomy of the state because '[l]arge-scale international migrations are embedded in rather complex economic, social, and ethnic networks. They are highly conditioned and structured flows'.¹⁴ The study of overseas Chinese allows us to shed light on the emerging area which examines the transnational flows of products, knowledge, people, and particularly international finance.¹⁵

In the following sections, I will detail each stage of image building by highlighting the historical development of overseas Chinese. It will demonstrate that the image of overseas Chinese as involuntary migrants, political revolutionaries and economic energisers is dependent upon parallel and complementary developments in China.

Overseas Chinese as involuntary migrants

The study of overseas Chinese is itself problematic. Who are the overseas Chinese? Shall we use 'overseas Chinese', '*huaqiao*', or 'Chinese diaspora' to describe this group of people? Though the clarification of the meaning of these terms is important,¹⁶ the objective of this paper is not to clarify their definition but to give a general picture of their historical development. This will highlight the importance of image building throughout these three periods. That said, some basic definitions are necessary. First, according to *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, it is hard to

13. The complex relations of Chinese business were described by John Kao as the 'Chinese Commonwealth'. See John Kao, 'The Worldwide Web of Chinese business', *Harvard Business Review* 71(2), (March/April 1993), pp. 24–36. A more systematic study on the Chinese business network was carried out by Chan Kwok Bun. See Kwok Bun Chan, *Chinese Business Networks: State, Economy and Culture* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 2000).

14. Saskia Sassen, 'The de facto transnationalizing of immigration policy', in Saskia Sassen, ed., *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 13.

15. Susan Strange, *The Retreat of State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert Gilpin, *The Challenge of Global Capitalism: The World Economy in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Sassen, ed., *Globalisation and Its Discontents*; and Ethan B. Kapstein, 'Winners and losers in the global economy (review essay)', *International Organisation* 54(2), (Spring 2000), pp. 359–384.

16. I agree that a clear definition is very important especially in differentiating between the connotations of 'overseas Chinese' and the 'Chinese diaspora'. From a semiotic view, 'overseas Chinese' gives rise to more imagination of relations with China. While 'Chinese diaspora' has better adapted to the global development of international migrations at the age of globalisation.

come up with a fixed meaning of overseas Chinese. Most of the time its meaning depends upon the situation. But, generally speaking, overseas Chinese are seen as ‘Chinese in foreign countries’.¹⁷ Such a definition excludes Chinese residing in the three other Greater China areas, i.e. Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan as ‘overseas Chinese’. Second, profound writings about overseas Chinese came after 1895, argued by Wang Gungwu.¹⁸ The term ‘overseas Chinese’, according to Yu-sun Lu, was first used by Hsu Yun-chao who recorded that in 1898 some Chinese traders in Yokohama, Japan launched a campaign to raise funds for a Chinese school: ‘The Overseas Chinese School’.¹⁹

Finally, according to Victor Purcell, the earliest and surest contact between Mainland China with Southeast Asian countries was in the Han Dynasty in a place that was then called Annam (Vietnam).²⁰ Traders were most likely the main group who travelled between Southeast Asia and China. C. P. FitzGerald argued that ‘There is certainly no evidence that in the Han period any Chinese settled in the lands beyond the seas ... although it is at least possible that traders began to move on seasonal expedition, sailing south in the winter, and returning to China with the South-West Monsoon in the summer’.²¹ Others agree that the overseas Chinese who first set foot in Southeast Asia had connections with shipping and sea voyages. Lois Mitchison points out, ‘The first Chinese to settle in [S]outh-east Asia were often ships’ crews who stayed, with or without imperial permission, to rebuild their junks in cheap, local wood, or to take advantage of particularly favourable trading conditions and local demands for Chinese skills’.²²

Here, one should be aware that the relations of China and Southeast Asia had long been anchored in Chinese history. Sea voyages and trading relations between China and Southeast Asia facilitated the image building of overseas Chinese. First, the image of business entrepreneur was created among the overseas Chinese. Second, their link with China through business activities generated the physical linkage among the overseas Chinese with China. Regardless of their frequency and profitability, trade relations between China and Southeast Asia served as communicative channels in a reciprocal manner. Even though the Chinese status changed from one dynasty to another, trade relations between China and Southeast Asia continued.

To explore the rise of the image of overseas Chinese as involuntary migrants, we have to consider the history of the late Qing dynasty in order to understand the

17. Pan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, 1998, p. 15.

18. Wang Gungwu argued that the term first had been used in the period between 1895 and 1912. See Gungwu Wang, *China and the Chinese Overseas*, p. 25. But, he wants to use ‘Chinese overseas’ or ‘diaspora’ rather than overseas Chinese. He mentioned those points in his open seminar held on 8 November 1999 at Lingnan University, Hong Kong.

19. Yu-sun Lu, *Programs of Communist China for Overseas Chinese* (Hong Kong: The Union Research Institute, 1956), p. 1. Again, there are many historical traces of the use and meanings of overseas Chinese. See Ying-hui Lee, *Huaqiao zhengce yu haiwai minzu zhuyi*, pp. 9–16 for more definitions and historical traces of the originality.

20. Although we need more substantial literature support or archaeological findings before knowing when the first contact between Mainland China and Southeast Asia first took place, vigorous interaction and development were made very often in the first and second century BC. See Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, p. 8.

21. C. P. FitzGerald, *The Third China: The Chinese Communities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Donald Moore Books, 1965), p. 1.

22. Lois Mitchison, *The Overseas Chinese: A Background Book* (London: The Bodley Head, 1961), p. 15.

Chinese migration to Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century. The reasons for this migration were due to the relative change of power between the Qing government and the rest of the world. According to Barrington Moore, social-economic decay and the institutional breakdown of bureaucracy in the Qing dynasty contributed to the downfall of the empire.²³ International migration was the result of the interaction between economic and social forces.²⁴ In contrast to China's weakening power, the United States was an emerging power, expanding internationally in 1865 after the American Civil War, and particularly toward China after the Open Door Policy was launched in September 1899.²⁵ The image of involuntary migrants of overseas Chinese, depicted from many historical scenarios of working as railway track workers in the United States or as miners in the case of Malaysia, was a product of their plight of economic hardship, especially in the last Qing period.²⁶

Yet, the reverse side of the image is characterised by the devastation of social and political structure of the late Qing dynasty. The more unstable the socio-political structure, the heavier the outflow of involuntary migrants. More importantly, the image of overseas Chinese as involuntary migrants was further reinforced by European colonisation. As Garth Alexander argues in *The Invisible China*, 'It was the European colonials of Southeast Asia who laid the basis for the modern racial crisis by importing millions of coolies from China to work their tropical plantations and tin-mines. Between 1920 and 1930, over two million coolies were shipped to the British-protected Malay states and settlements'.²⁷ The 'coolie trade' in the Southern provinces of Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi reflected on the one hand the economic problems created in the late Qing dynasty.²⁸ On the other hand, those areas were coastal areas of which access to the overseas was much easier. Again, it explains why the predominant population of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia came from that source.

When we look at the history of Chinese migrants, the first peak of Chinese migration occurred according to Morton H. Fried between 1860 and 1880. In particular, the peak migration to Singapore occurred between 1895 and 1922.²⁹ Chinese migration was described as 'the phenomenon of Chinese living and working abroad with the likelihood of settlement, whether or not these Chinese intended to do so from the start'.³⁰ In general, impoverished rural Chinese were attracted by economic opportunities overseas, but this impoverishment was not just economic, but social: Chinese emigrants in Malaysia, for example, suffered from being 'alienated

23. Barrington Moore, Jr, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 162–187.

24. See Stephen Castles, 'New migrations in the Asia-Pacific region: a force for social and political change', *International Social Science Journal* no. 156, (June 1998), pp. 215–227.

25. See Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

26. The overseas Chinese in the late Qing period were portrayed by the Westerners in a very discriminative way. See Philipe P. Choy, Lorraine Dong and Marlon K. Hom, eds, *Meiguo zaoqi manhua zhong di huaren [Chinese in the Cartoons of Early America]* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishers, 1994).

27. Alexander, *The Invisible China*, p. 7.

28. Marilyn W. Tinsman, 'China and the returned overseas Chinese students', Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1983, p. 44.

29. Morton H. Fried, 'The Chinese in the British Caribbean', in Fried, ed., *Colloquium on Overseas Chinese*, p. 60.

30. Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas*, p. 4.

and antagonistic because of their powerlessness in the face of a Malay-led coalition government and the perceived abuses of the special rights as a result of arbitrary implementation'.³¹

However, the poor image of these involuntary migrants never weakened their considerable economic contribution to China via remittances. Indeed, these overseas Chinese remittances often could cover China's balance of payment. In 1935, for example, China recorded a deficit of over US\$116,000,000, while the overseas Chinese remittance of US\$93,300,000 was almost 80% of the deficit. In the following year, remittances from overseas Chinese exceeded the deficit by 30%.³² Apart from economic assistance, the regular remittances sent by the overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia carried a strong social meaning. The continuous provision of remittances also constituted a token of connection with China and the fulfilment of filial responsibilities to the family left in China. The remittances were a symbol which overcame the physical disassociation of the overseas Chinese from their families in China—as well as materially alleviating the poverty in these hometowns [*qiaoxiang*]. Eventually, the money from the overseas Chinese became the centre of focus for our understanding of the Chinese business network. Before we come to that part, it is important to examine how the image of overseas Chinese transformed in conjunction with the political change after the Chinese Communist Party took power and socialism prevailed in the PRC.

Political revolutionary image of overseas Chinese

The image of overseas Chinese gradually changed from involuntary migrant to 'political revolutionary' after the Communist victory in 1949 and the establishment of the PRC. The revolutionary ideas of Mao Zedong provided an important source of political meaning for and about overseas Chinese. The US containment policy in Asia tried to stem the spread of communism from the Soviet Union, to the PRC, to Southeast Asian countries; overseas Chinese, as political revolutionaries, acted as one of the key links in this domino theory. They nurtured this image through the various tangible measures (i.e. visiting China) and intangible measures (i.e. political propaganda).

The overseas Chinese image of the political revolutionary created problems for them. First, as revolutionaries they were not welcomed by the international society. Second, they were not welcomed by the host countries because of the fear of clandestine actions. Third, they were not welcomed by the Chinese government, especially during the Cultural Revolution when they were criticised as capitalists.

According to Stephen Fitzgerald, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) '... provided an insight into the Overseas Chinese policies of the People's Republic of China since 1949'.³³ Overseas Chinese were considered by the Communist government as propaganda tools for spreading socialism in Southeast Asia.³⁴

31. Beng Soon Yeap, 'The Chinese in Malaysia: politics of a troubled identity', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1992, p. 1.

32. Yu-sun Lu, *Programs of Communist China for Overseas Chinese*, p. 3.

33. Fitzgerald, 'Overseas Chinese affairs and the Cultural Revolution', p. 103.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

This image of Chinese as political revolutionaries, and the fear it produced, was exacerbated by Chinese propaganda campaigns designed to win the loyalty and cooperation of the overseas Chinese. Overseas Chinese could ‘receive directives and training in carrying out the strategy of world revolution’ from Beijing.³⁵ In Thailand, the appeal of the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 encouraged the Communist Party of Thailand to be more open and more challenging to the Thai government.³⁶ The anti-Communist measures taken by the Thai government became more severe in the 1950s when it joined the Korean War and became a close ally of the US. Likewise, in Sarawak (which joined The Federation of Malaysia in 1963), communist movements were considered as ‘wholly Chinese in character’.³⁷ Many overseas Chinese organisations and youth movements worked to spread communist ideas through various Chinese newspapers and publications. Hence during the 1950s and 1960s, the overseas Chinese image once again reflected political changes in Mainland China, and much more so during the Cultural Revolution.

At the height of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the image of overseas Chinese as political revolutionaries spreading communism reached its peak. Mao emphasised that ‘various complementary international conditions are required’ in the pursuit of socialist victory and revolution.³⁸ His revolutionary ideas were echoed in the Southeast Asian countries. Some overseas Chinese might be mobilised and become revolutionary forces in different Southeast Asian countries. In the case of Indonesia, Wang Gungwu wrote that ‘many younger Chinese in the 1950s did admire the ideals of the Chinese revolution. Some became ardent supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party while others chose to return to China to work for the new China’.³⁹ Regardless of Beijing’s overseas Chinese policy, one could not deny that Mao’s revolutionary ideas were influential not only at home, but abroad as well—especially in mass movements for national liberation and the world revolutionary development.⁴⁰ The combination of the export of Mao’s revolutionary ideas and the growth of communist movements in Southeast Asia nurtured the image of overseas Chinese as political revolutionaries.

But just how serious was Beijing’s revolutionary overseas Chinese policy, and what was its affect on the image of overseas Chinese? To answer this, it is helpful to recall views presented by key scholars at that time. For example, Fitzgerald maintained in his book *China and the Overseas Chinese* that the overseas Chinese were not as a whole mobilised and deployed to facilitate the PRC’s foreign policy.⁴¹ Yet, he still felt that ‘The fact that Peking has not sought to activate the bulk of

35. Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *Minority Problems in Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955), p. 11.

36. G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 322.

37. Van der Kroef, ‘Communism and Chinese communalism in Sarawak’, p. 39.

38. Mao Tsetung, ‘Speech at the Chinese Communist Party’s National Conference on Propaganda Work’, (12 March 1957), *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), p. 423.

39. Wang Gungwu, *Joining the Modern World: Inside and Outside China* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2000), p. 25.

40. Peter Van Ness, *Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy: Peking’s Support for Wars of National Liberation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

41. Stephen Fitzgerald, *China and the Overseas Chinese: A Study of Peking’s Changing Policy 1949–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

Overseas Chinese in the cause of revolution does not mean that pro-Peking Overseas Chinese revolutionary groups do not exist'.⁴² C. Y. Chang gives a more crystallised image of revolutionary overseas Chinese. He felt that 'FitzGerald's conclusion was owed mainly to the lack of factual evidence showing that pre-1967 Chinese approach to overseas Chinese affairs had been seriously changed ...'⁴³ and '... a series of policies apparently designed to sever the connexion with the overseas Chinese'. To conclude, Chang argued that joint policy of the spread of revolutionary ideology and the manipulation of overseas Chinese as political tools later changed to more practical foreign policy in the 1970s after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao. Only then could China join the United Nations and start to normalise its state-to-state relations with the international community.⁴⁴

In other words, the revolutionary image of the overseas Chinese weakened when China changed its domestic policy to pursue economic reform and opening after 1978. The shift of Chinese policy to stress economic reform not only required China to downplay revolutionary ideology, but also pushed China to seek international partners to facilitate its economic development. Given the economic power and the business relations of the overseas Chinese, they were regarded as valuable assets in energising, if not moving China to be more economically developed.

Overseas Chinese as economic energisers

The image of overseas Chinese changed to 'economic energisers' after China began its reform and opening policy in 1978. However, the economic reform was never plain sailing. According to Barry Naughton, the experience of economic reform from 1978 through the 1990s was never smooth, but always controversial and thus subjected to careful scrutiny in terms of its pace and the long-term consequences for the Party.⁴⁵ It was true particularly in the early phase of the reform because China was quite fragile both politically and economically. The reform movement had to address what to those officials seemed to be the socialist intransigence evidenced by Mao's revolutionary ideas and the Cultural Revolution. More importantly, the bureaucratic rigidity and irrationalities of the Socialist planning model still needed to be altered more gradually, especially in a political manner.⁴⁶ Economically, the reform movement in 1978 started from scratch, and entailed a major restructuring of institutions and policies from top to bottom. In *Deng Xiaoping: Portrait of a Chinese Statesman*, David Shambaugh describes Deng as 'a staunch nationalist who sought to restore China's wealth and power'.⁴⁷

In response to Deng's thorough reform of the Chinese economic landscape, both the Southeast Asian countries and the overseas Chinese were ambivalent. Many

42. Fitzgerald, 'Overseas Chinese affairs and the Cultural Revolution', p. 108.

43. Chang, 'Overseas Chinese in China's policy', p. 284.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

45. Barry Naughton, *Growing out of the Plan: Chinese Economic Reform 1978–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

46. Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 466.

47. David Shambaugh, 'Introduction: assessing Deng Xiaoping's legacy', in David Shambaugh, ed., *Deng Xiaoping: Portrait of a Chinese Statesman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 1.

Southeast Asian countries did not have enough confidence in Chinese economic reform, given the traumatic political chaos during the Cultural Revolution. For those overseas Chinese, they needed to be assured with more genuine reform policies to be carried out in China before putting their trust (represented either in investment or in visiting) in China. To attract the overseas Chinese's investment and to re-build their trust, Deng began to establish more official linkages with the overseas Chinese. To begin with, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) was established to direct the overseas Chinese affairs at both the national and the provincial level.⁴⁸ The OCAO thus acted as a facilitator that connected overseas Chinese affairs with the government. According to C. Y. Chang, its five major functions were:

1. helping the CCP to devise a sound and feasible overseas Chinese policy;
2. supervising lower levels of government in implementing overseas Chinese policy;
3. promoting and protecting the interests and welfare of overseas Chinese so that their patriotism could be fostered;
4. encouraging and mobilising overseas Chinese to work for China's reform and modernisation; and
5. contributing to the four modernisations, and reunification with Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.⁴⁹

Although some of the objectives have political connotations such as the reunification with Hong Kong (in 1997), Macau (in 1999) and Taiwan, the most important message was that the cornerstone for overseas Chinese policy was the praising of the economic role of overseas Chinese. More importantly, from the Chinese point of view overseas Chinese were envoys of communication who facilitated the success of China's economic development.⁵⁰ Wang Gungwu, for example, feels that the economic power of the overseas Chinese could be re-interpreted as economic capital that can be used as a stronger force of colossal investment cluster in future Chinese development.⁵¹ In a 1995 report, *Overseas Chinese Business Networks in Asia*, the Australian government used the image of overseas Chinese business networks as the 'main forces driving the dynamic growth' of East Asia as major government and business reference for the future potential of Chinese business.⁵²

The important economic role of overseas Chinese is illuminated by the comparison of their economic power with the economic development of their host countries. *Yazhou zhouban* (a Chinese magazine) has been compiling annual statistical data of the 500 largest Chinese enterprises since the late 1990s. In 1999, for instance, the ten largest Chinese enterprises of five of the ASEAN countries shared a great percentage

48. Chak-yan Chang, 'The overseas Chinese', in Y. M. Yeung and David K. Y. Chu, eds, *Fujian: A Coastal Province in Transition and Transformation* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000), p. 79.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

50. According to Lai To Lee, ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia were used by the Chinese government as mediators for unofficial channels for communication with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the early 1990s. See Lai To Lee, 'Some thoughts on ASEAN and China: institutional linkages', in Richard L. Grant, ed., *China and Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1993), pp. 39–52; Deng Xiaoping had mentioned about the important roles of overseas Chinese in bringing up the successfulness of China. See *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* (Peking: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), Vol. 3, p. 358.

51. Wang Gungwu, 'Greater China and the Chinese overseas', *The China Quarterly* no. 136, (1993), p. 930.

52. See Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (East Asia Analytical Unit), *Overseas Chinese Business Networks in Asia* (Australian Government, 1995), p. 1. See also Kao, 'The Worldwide Web of Chinese business', pp. 24–34.

in their respective countries' gross domestic product (GDP) (Singapore 47.41%, Indonesia 11.88%, Malaysia 20.61%, Philippines 12.72%, Thailand 10.70%).⁵³ The case of Singapore is most obvious because its population is predominantly Chinese. It indicated that the market values of the ten largest companies in Singapore (US\$40.98 billion) comprised 47.41% of the GDP in 1999. The statistics first show that the economy in Singapore is dominated by overseas Chinese (77.7% are ethnic Chinese).⁵⁴ It also indicates that the size of the companies in Singapore is much larger than in other Southeast Asian countries.⁵⁵

By studying Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), we can also understand the economic influence of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia through another angle. During the period 1979–1999, there were 15,463 contractual FDI projects from ASEAN (valued at US\$46,831 million) to China. They comprised 7.6% of the total Chinese FDI received in that period.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the figures denote the relative importance of Chinese capital in those Southeast Asian countries. The economic role of the overseas Chinese individually is shown by their economic self-improvement. The keys of the success of the overseas Chinese, according to one businessman, are a 'willingness to learn, the determination to succeed, and hard work'.⁵⁷ The economic power of overseas Chinese in the landscape of Southeast Asia created a new image of the overseas Chinese. Clearly, the image building process has been facilitated by the interactive role between Chinese economic reform and the economic roles of overseas Chinese.

Conclusion

As we have seen, overseas Chinese studies is a complex field of study, where even the definition of overseas Chinese entails a life-long debate. Knowing the relation between historical development of China and the image building of the overseas Chinese is necessary in the study of the economic relations, culture and political change of overseas Chinese. Hence, the meaning of 'overseas Chinese' would be nothing without China. In particular, this essay has shown that the important historical phases of modern China's social and economic development gave rise to changes in the image of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia: involuntary migrants, political revolutionaries, and economic energisers. In the nineteenth century, the image of involuntary migrants became stronger when China was at the nadir of its social and economic condition in the late Qing dynasty. In fact, the national image of China as the 'Poor Man of Asia' was part of a pair of images: overseas Chinese were likewise seen as poor and weak involuntary migrants: coolies.

53. The market value of the ten largest Chinese companies in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand are compiled from the annual statistics of 500 largest Chinese enterprises from *Yazhou Zhoukan*, (1–7 November 1999), pp. 88–92.

54. Leo Suryadinata, 'Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia: overseas Chinese, Chinese overseas or Southeast Asians?', in Leo Suryadinata, ed., *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1997), p. 21.

55. W. G. Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Hing-Man Leung, 'Productivity of Singapore's manufacturing sector: an industry level non-parametric study', *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 15, (1998), pp. 19–31.

56. Although we are not directly measuring the FDI from the overseas Chinese companies, there are very close relations between overseas capital and the respective countries' economy. See Nyaw *et al.*, 'Money migration', p. 452.

57. Warangkana Tempati, 'From clerk to exporter', *Bangkok Post*, (9 April 2001), p. 1.

This pair of images thus reflected the plight of Chinese people both in China and overseas in Southeast Asia. Without much social or economic support from their host countries, overseas Chinese were isolated from the host society. Because of this alienation, their image was flexible, and could be altered to reflect the social and political changes in China.

This gave rise to the second stage of image building after the Communists took power in Mainland China, and established the PRC in 1949. Through party and state institutions, overseas Chinese affairs were manipulated by China. Overseas Chinese were seen as tools whereby communist ideology could be spread in Southeast Asia; thus their political revolutionary image became clearer. Following the radicalism of Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, this revolutionary image reached its apex. Finally, once China entered into a new reformist phase after 1978, the image of the overseas Chinese changed accordingly to become economic energisers. The image of economic energisers was further clarified and facilitated by overseas Chinese investment, business relations and economic networks with China.

Given the future development of China, the image of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia will certainly change according to the political changes on the Mainland. At present, they are considered as patriotic investors. Yet not all overseas Chinese provide such an economic contribution to China. Some may even choose not to have any relations at all. Nevertheless, like a kaleidoscope, you can change the image either by turning the focus or by shaking the kaleidoscope. By turning the focus, the overseas Chinese refine their images by having different types of relations with China. However, as the three radical shifts in image have shown, the patterns generated by the turning of the focus are still formed by the previous shakings of the kaleidoscope.