

The Challenge of Change for the Chinese in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Who are the Chinese in Southeast Asia? What are the changes that they have been through and what are their challenges for the future? Chinese Bahá'ís in some Southeast Asian countries are a microcosm of Chinese people in this region. I will address this issue from my personal experience as a Nanyang Chinese. Also, an e-mail survey was conducted. The following questions were asked: What attracts the Chinese in Southeast Asia to the Bahá'í Faith? What do they see as their contribution to the community at large? What are some of the difficulties they face? What changes are expected in the future? To conclude, I will outline how and why adopting a world vision helps the Chinese in Southeast Asia cope with their future challenges.

1. Introduction

What is change? Various definitions exist: "make different the form, nature, content of something", "to become transformed or converted", "to become altered or modified". Another definition of change is the experience of "significant difference". One way of describing the challenge of change for the Southeast Asian Chinese is to look for experiences that cause "significant difference".

Who are the Chinese in Southeast Asia? I am not referring to the Taiwanese Chinese or the Mainland Chinese who are permanent residents of Singapore. I mean people of Chinese ancestry who are born locally, and whose parents emigrated to this part of the world. They may not even speak or write Chinese. Their staple food may be Thai, Indonesian or

Indian. They are your sundry shopkeepers in a little village in Chiangmai, your fishermen in Balik Pulau in Penang, your rubber tappers in Sarawak as well as the Banker in Shenton way and IT specialists and electronics engineers now in great cities from Manila to Kuala Lumpur. They come from all walks of life. Most of them have never been to China nor know much about their cultural heritage or beliefs, except for one or two things like filial piety and Chinese New Year reunion dinner.

Loosely called, "The Nanyang Chinese" or Southeast Chinese,¹ they would be the descendants from the early Chinese immigrants who settled in Southeast Asian countries. They would be those who still retain some of the physical features and traditions or values of their forefathers. They don't necessarily speak Chinese, nor even any of its dialects. I discovered this when we organized the first Southeast Asian Bahá'í Chinese Teaching Seminar in Petaling Jaya when we had Chinese Bahá'ís from various Southeast Asian countries. We had great difficulties because we could only communicate with the Indonesian Chinese in Bahasa and the Thai Chinese were not proficient in Mandarin either. In the end, we used English, Mandarin and Bahasa to struggle through.

2. Migration Patterns

Southeast Asia was the place where the Chinese emigrated to predominantly in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The Chinese were in Southeast Asia even before the English sailed on the "Mayflower" to arrive on the shores of America. In 1504 AD, Admiral Cheng Ho visited the Malacca Sultanate. The presence of the Chinese just like the Indians in Southeast

¹ This is a popularization of the term, *Nanyang huaqiao*. The historian Yeu-Farn Wang explains this term in the following way: "The most commonly used term for Chinese in Southeast Asia is *Nanyang huaqiao*, literally meaning overseas Chinese in the South Seas. *Hua* signifies Chinese and *qiao* signifies a short-term visitor, a sojourner. Historically, people who left China at any period to go abroad did not generally do so with the blessing of the state... The fact that many had sojourned for centuries had not altered the prevailing expectation that they would eventually return to the motherland. This was the case at least until mid-20th century. The other half of the name, *Nanyang*, means southern ocean or the South China Sea. *Nanyang* is employed by Chinese to designate all the sub-continental and island countries of Southeast Asia." Y.F. Wang, *The National Identity of the Southeast Asian Chinese*, p. 2.

Asia is a known historical fact. Just a few interesting examples: Brunei in 1972 unearthed a gravestone dated 1264 AD of a Chinese Muslim official from Fujian. When the Europeans reached the East Indies in Indonesia in the 16th century, they already found a substantial Chinese settlement, trading in pepper. So did the Spanish when they arrived in Manila in the same century. The Chinese chronicler Zhou Daguan in 1296 AD recorded that there were Chinese merchants and carpenters at the Angkor city in Cambodia. Thailand's famous King Taksin was known to be half-Chinese. However, the influx of the Chinese to Southeast Asia came much later, due mainly to the expansion of trade created through the opening of tin mines and rubber plantations.

Professor Wang Gungwu outlined the migration patterns into four types²:

1. The Trader pattern (merchants & artisans)
2. Coolie patterns (landless labourers who worked in plantations and tin mines)
3. Sojourner (teachers, journalists and other professionals who went out to promote awareness of Chinese culture and national needs)
4. Descent or re-migrant pattern (Southeast Asian Chinese who migrated to other countries)

Wang Gungwu states that, "Migration is a universal phenomenon made more conspicuous today by international attention in an era of nationalism."³ This aptly describes the situation of Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia.

3. What have been these changes for the Chinese?

What have been the changes experienced by the Chinese people who migrated to Southeast Asia? They can cover a whole gamut of cultural, political, economic and social aspects of their lives. The processes leading to change that occur as a result of contact between societies are complex

² G.W. Wang *China and the Chinese Overseas*, pp. 3-10.

³ *ibid.*, p.3.

and diverse. Dennis O'Neil describes some of these "processes of change" to include the following⁴:

1. Diffusion
2. Acculturation
3. Transculturation

Diffusion is the movement of things and ideas from one culture to another. When diffusion occurs, the form of a trait may move from one society to another but not its original cultural meaning. For instance, when McDonald's first brought their American style hamburgers to Moscow and Beijing, they were accepted as luxury foods for special occasions because they were relatively expensive and exotic.

Acculturation is what happens to an entire culture when alien traits diffuse in on a large scale and substantially replace traditional cultural patterns. After several centuries of relentless pressure from European Americans to adopt their ways, Native American cultures have been largely acculturated. As a result, the vast majority of American Indians now speak English instead of their ancestral language, wear European style clothes, go to school to learn about the world from a European perspective, and see themselves as being at least a peripheral part of the broader American society.

While acculturation is what happens to an entire culture when alien traits overwhelm it, transculturation is what happens to an individual when he or she moves to another society and adopts its culture. Immigrants who successfully learn the language and accept as their own the cultural patterns of their adopted country, have transculturated.

Over decades, especially in those areas where Chinese education has not been encouraged or emphasized, a different set of cultural traits diffuse and gradually replace traditional cultural patterns. An example would be the Peranakan Chinese who speak Malay, wear Malay dress, chew betel leaves and see themselves as part of the local community.

⁴ Internet article by Dennis O'Neil, Thursday, May 06, 1999,
<http://daphne.palomar.edu/change/glossary.htm#top>

Despite the relatively long association with the locals, discrimination against Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia has been evident. In the Philippines for instance, deep-seated Spanish suspicion of the Chinese gave way to recognition of their potentially constructive role in economic development. Chinese expulsion orders issued in 1755 and 1766 were repealed in 1788. Similarly, during the Second World War, while the Japanese occupied China and various countries of Southeast Asia, the Chinese were again, targets of persecution.

Largely because of the rise of nationalism in Southeast Asian countries after the 1st and 2nd world wars, the loyalty of Chinese immigrants has often been questioned.⁵ Yet, if one were to make a survey of intermarriages, it would be no surprise, in my opinion, to see that the Chinese in Southeast Asia probably have the highest number of interracial marriages than any of the other ethnic communities in the region.

The story of the Chinese in Southeast Asia is one of slow assimilation and brief episodes of bloody conflict. Despite the fact that they have been living in this region for many decades and generations, the question of their identity continues to be of concern to themselves as well as to the non-Chinese. They have carved a place for themselves and found success with small businesses. It is this same success that is a source of conflict for them. This is because even though there are estimated to be over 23 million ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, representing 5 percent of the total population, they control economic power that is disproportionate to their numbers.

Take for example, Indonesia, where Chinese immigrants account for only 4 percent of the population. They are reported to control 20 of the 25 biggest business groups in the country. In Thailand, although Chinese immigrants make up only about 10 percent of the population, they own 90 percent of the commercial and manufacturing capital of the country, and

⁵ There are many books devoted to the theme of nationalism in Southeast Asia being the root cause of discrimination against the Nanyang Chinese. Leo Suryadinata follows through this theme in his book, *Chinese and Nation-Building in Southeast Asia*, Thompson and Adloff also describe it in their book, *Minority Problems in Southeast Asia*, and Y.F. Wang discusses it in *The National Identity of the Southeast Asian Chinese*.

over half of its banking capital. These economic inequalities have raised considerable tension among the people of Southeast Asia, and are expected to continue to do so in the future.

How has the Asian Crisis and the so-called, "knowledge-based economy" affected the Chinese in Southeast Asia? It is interesting to note that the crisis in Asia occurred after several decades of outstanding economic performance. Annual GDP in the ASEAN-5 (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) averaged close to 8 percent over the last ten years.

It would be hard for anyone to imagine that these changes have not escaped the Nanyang Chinese. The problem of urbanization where the younger and more educated flock to the cities for better paying jobs at factories affects everyone, including the Chinese. New technologies impact manufacturing costs and make it even more competitive to survive, and so Chinese businesses now have to compete even harder with more efficient and cost effective enterprises. With stock markets and exchange rates plunging, not only foreign equity investors, but also many overseas Chinese investors lost nearly three quarters of the value of their equity holdings in recent years. Restrictions on monetary flow, fluctuations of exchange currencies or sudden depreciation, severely affect many Nanyang Chinese, who have to remit money for their children studying in foreign countries like Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Many of their children return home, IT-(Information Technology) savvy, infused with new knowledge from these developed countries, and newly acquired tastes and habits. They often do well because of the high demand for their skills and expertise, and unlike their older and less educated countrymen, who are struggling to survive. The next generation are propelled to the forefront of newly created jobs, opportunities and wealth. The new South Asian Chinese elites join the ranks of the new sophisticated cultural consumers, whose families are smaller and whose diets are apt to contain as much bread as rice. They travel internationally. They watch CNN news broadcasts as avidly as they watch Hollywood movies. Intellectuals pack the concert halls to hear the music of Western composers, who are now as much a part of Southeast Asian culture as they are of any country in the West.

4. Personal Experience of a Nanyang Chinese

Born up North in Alor Setar near the Thai border, I attended the same school as the current Prime Minister of Malaysia. My father was a businessman who had a wine distillery but died as a Muslim, while my mother was a school teacher who followed the Buddhist Faith until her acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith years later. We spoke the local Hokkien dialect and Bahasa Melayu. I followed my mother everywhere to the temples and took amulets from Chinese mediums. When my father died, his cortege was taken into the oldest mosque in town, there for the first time as a little boy I thought I heard God speaking (it was actually the echo of prayers being recited). At the age of 13, I took a vow and became a young monk for a short three days at the Thai Theravada Buddhist temple. As a youth, I always felt and admired the harmony, beauty and peace of the Buddhist, Muslim and Christian faiths.

When I think of my youth, these are some of the pictures in my mind: "A group of elderly people with the Buddhist priests and one or two Muslim Hajis sitting at the temple verandah, smoking and chit chatting away. The soul stirring call of the minaret to prayers in the evenings. The chanting of the Pali scriptures by the monks. Eating at my Malay classmate's home in the village."

Years later, I was shocked to learn of politically motivated racial riots and religious fundamentalism that meant my Muslim brothers and I could not eat from the same plate or drink from the same cup. Even to this day, I feel very uncomfortable when any group of people, be they Chinese, Iranians or Afrikaans get too enthusiastic about their culture and beliefs. I remember an incident when a Malay couple whom I knew were talking about the racial undercurrents among the various races including the Chinese. They turned to me and said, "But you don't understand this! You are a Bahá'í!"

The shock of being an overseas Chinese came to me when I was a young student. I had left Sri Lanka to enter India in the 1960's via Talaimannar, the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. Although holding a Malaysian passport at the time, I was detained for a few hours because I was classified as "Chinese". On the other hand, when I was residing in Hong Kong in the 1970's for a short period of time, I was told how unChinese I

was when a Hong Kong shopkeeper in Kowloon said "You are Chinese and you don't speak Chinese". He chastised me because I couldn't converse in Cantonese! That was my enigma, too Chinese to the Indian and not Chinese enough for our Hong Kong Chinese.

It was therefore not difficult for me when I first heard about the Bahá'í Faith. I liked its fundamental concepts of the oneness of God, the oneness of religion and the oneness of mankind. Since religion is a very personal affair and acceptance of a faith and its philosophy is a major change, I thought it would be interesting to take a peek at the challenge of change of Chinese Bahá'ís living in the Southeast Asian region.

5. Random Sampling of Some Chinese Bahá'ís in the Region Through an E-mail Survey

Since the Chinese Bahá'ís in some of these Southeast Asian countries are a microcosm of the Chinese in this region, an e-mail survey was conducted to find out on a very small scale, what such a change means. While the sample size may be very small, it provided a glimpse of how one Southeast Asian Chinese groups responded to a change, in this case, a religious conversion amidst the many changes surrounding them over the recent years.

The survey set out to discover how the Chinese in Southeast Asia respond to the Bahá'í Teachings and how they see their role in the worldwide Bahá'í community. The following questions were asked in the survey:

What attracts the Chinese in Southeast Asia to the Bahá'í Faith?

What do they see as their contribution in the community?

What are some of the difficulties they face in the change?

Thirty-three responses were received. They were mainly from Malaysia and Singapore and almost 80% of them had ten or more years of membership in the Bahá'í community. One third of these people came from a Buddhist background.

The three reasons/factors which attracted the respondents to the Bahá'í Faith, in the order of their popularity were:

1. Spiritual, practical and relevancy of Bahá'í teachings (almost 85% chose this)
2. Sense of spiritual identity
3. Belonging to an international community of people which subscribes to the three oneness principles (God, Religion and Humanity)

Other reasons were:

Belief in the protecting powers of the Faith

Fellowship and love

How the respondents thought they could contribute to the Bahá'í Community in general were, again according to popularity:

1. Add to the cultural and spiritual enrichment of the community (72%).
2. Bring in more pragmatic and innovative ways of teaching the Faith.
3. Serve as a "bridge" between traditional Chinese and host communities.

The problems or difficulties that the respondents encountered in adjusting to their new Bahá'í beliefs in the initial stages were:

1. Fasting
2. Family / Parental objections
3. Peer acceptance

Some of their remarks about difficulties of adapting to the change were:

Consent for interracial marriage and the amount of time spent on meetings and travelling to meetings

Elders' fears that one is being drawn away from traditions

Peer pressure and ridicule in such acts as fasting, abstaining from alcohol

Living the life (not backbiting etc)

The Bahá'í Faith sounded obscure

Disbelief in the Bahá'í Faith being a religion

Obedience to the institutions and self-restraint

Lack of Chinese literature

Difficulty of practising consultation

Racial prejudices (from other non-Chinese in the community)

Based on this e-mail survey, it was found that Chinese Bahá'ís are a pragmatic group, looking at religion from very practical considerations, while at the same time, they value a sense of spiritual connectedness. They also like the idea of belonging to an international community and wish to contribute to it.

The problems that the respondents faced in adjusting to their new beliefs were mainly related to fasting, family objections and peer acceptance. Despite these considerable difficulties, they were able to adjust to the change. This brings me to the last part of my paper. What is the future of the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia? Will they become fully accepted as part of their country? How will they meet the new challenges of change?

6. Future Changes

In the political arena, successive generations of Southeast Asian Chinese will probably develop greater bonds with their respective countries of residence, particularly in countries where there is no obvious discrimination of race, culture or religion. They will integrate with the locals and develop some distinct characteristics of their own, such as the Peranakans.

The Chinese of Southeast Asia will never be "Chinese Chinese" in as much as Australians or Americans are not English. Except for those who are presently in their eighties, very few Chinese in Southeast Asia are expected to have any emotional attachment to Mainland China. Southeast Asia is now home for the new generation.

In the area of economics, the impact of E-economy will be further felt and with more business restructuring and trade liberalization, small and medium enterprises including those belonging to Southeast Asian Chinese will be severely affected. For those who have been fortunate in obtaining better education in these newer technologies, they will do well. As a result of decades of investment in education, hard work and resilience in their host environments, the Southeast Asian Chinese are expected to achieve even more economic success than they have already had. On the other hand, these new successes could again be perceived as a threat to the

locals. The resentment will not only come from the local non-Chinese, but also the Chinese in China, who do not necessarily welcome business competition from foreign Chinese businesses.

With improvements in the economy, there will be a corresponding increase in materialism and less concern with religious matters. However, not all will be benefiting from this wealth, and the gap between the haves and have nots will continue to widen. We will continue to witness the migration and draining of local Chinese talent throughout Southeast Asian countries to more developed ones elsewhere in the world.

There will be greater mobility in the future. For the younger and Western educated Chinese, whose parents or family may be in Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur, an employer may be in Hong Kong or Singapore, and project work may be anywhere in the Asia Pacific.

Many changes that we see now as external events, incidents or pictures in the media daily, will continue to grow in importance: Chinese shops burnt as a result of racial or religious riots, the gap between the very rich and poor among the Chinese will continue to widen, Chinese Karaoke lounge bars and triad societies will continue to proliferate, and so on.

Obviously, such conflicts will not go away overnight. It is easy to be pessimistic as we scan the present political and social scene not to feel anxious about the immediate present and future. The Asian crisis, the emergence of China as a superpower, all these factors are not helping to reduce the many dangers that threaten the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Thus, in my opinion, the many problems experienced before the Asian crisis will continue.

To conclude, I will outline how and why adopting a world vision helps the Chinese in Southeast Asia cope with their challenges. Changes are external. Transitions are internal. As the famous ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed, the only thing permanent is change. One could look to the past and analyze the socio-political and historical factors shaping the events changing and afflicting the Nanyang Chinese, or one could view the change as a journey of many stages.

To me, the biggest challenge facing the overseas Chinese is how to manage the transition. It is not what these changes are so much as how they should manage the changes which are under their control and their own perceptions of these changes. I believe the Chinese of Southeast Asia have reached a turning point, a crisis. The Chinese word for crisis is a combination of two words: danger and opportunity.

7. Who am I? What am I?

There is a popular Jackie Chan movie called "Who am I?" It is about a Chinese soldier who is lost in an African country and suffers from amnesia after a plane crash. He lives among the local Africans, adopting their ways, and is eventually able to discover his true identity (and of course, helps thrash some bad people in the process).

The Chinese in Southeast Asia are like economic refugees who left their homeland, settled down, and are now victims of various social political and economic circumstances. They should be proud of their heritage without being xenophobic. A good guide to follow would be this quote from a Bahá'í international community statement:

"There is no question that one's unique cultural characteristics should be prized, and that pride in one's culture can be a healthy emotion that can motivate persons to achieve their full potential and reach out to others, both within and without their particular group. At the same time, if taken to an extreme, as it too often is, attachment to one's group can lead to mistrust of and enmity towards other groups. Unbridled pride in one's heritage then becomes an excuse for the venting of hate upon others, because they do not share the same culture, language or religion. Such attitudes contribute to the deplorable violations of minority rights that have occurred throughout this century."⁶

The many changes that the Chinese Southeast Asians are now facing and will be facing, may be viewed as a threat or an opportunity. The threats include: loss of identity, confusion, unknown future, and insecurity. These

⁶ Bahá'í International Community, *Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, 21 Jan. 1991, UN Document #E/CN.4/1991/NGO/9, BIC Document #91-0102.

threats may result in defensiveness, anxiety, and loss of confidence. The opportunities on the other hand, include: learning, creativity and more importantly, survival and recognition. For too long, the Chinese Southeast Asians have been the victims of change. In this new Millennium, they must rise up and be in the forefront of change, positive change agents in the progress and advancement of human society. To do that, they must view themselves as part of that inevitable movement toward a new order, a world commonwealth, which calls for sufficient flexibility to respond to the growing and ever-changing needs of modern society.

The fundamental principle they must now recognize is that man is spiritual and that "... the source of human rights is the endowment of qualities, virtues and powers which God has bestowed upon mankind without discrimination of sex, race, creed or nation. To fulfil the possibilities of this divine endowment is the purpose of human existence."⁷

The second principle is that "Minorities and majorities must embrace an expansive view of world society that sees all human beings as members of one human family, united in their fundamental aspirations, yet enriched by the precious variation in human thought, language, religion and culture. The development of such a universal and unshakable consciousness of the oneness of mankind is essential if the rights of minorities are to be fully realized."⁸

It is these two visions, that many Chinese Bahá'ís, enamoured by the love of Bahá'u'lláh, are working towards. It is that role that will prove to be the turning point and an example of successful living, which will be a model for the Chinese of Southeast Asia. As it is said in the Bible, Proverbs 29:18, "Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he."

⁷ The Bahá'í International Community United Nations Office, 1996 -- Bahá'í International Community, *Protection of Minorities*. BIC Document #90-0127 (c), UN Document #E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/NGO/1.

⁸ In the first paragraph of "A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights" presented to the first session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights at Lake Success, NY, USA., February, 1947.

8. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to describe the presence of the Chinese in Southeast Asia at the macro level, and look at some of the changes affecting them. Some personal experiences are shared of what it means to be a Southeast Asian Chinese in a changing environment. A small survey is taken of Chinese Bahá'ís to find out what attracted them to Bahá'ís beliefs, the difficulties they encountered, and what they feel they can contribute to their respective Bahá'í and Chinese communities. An attempt is then made to outline the future changes awaiting the Chinese in Southeast Asia and why a world vision helps.

Adopting a world vision may appear like a simplistic single prescription approach to solving the ethnic problems of the Chinese. While there are undoubtedly other important factors, such as education, human rights legislation etc, I maintain that the single most important challenge for the overseas Chinese is to give up their traditional exclusivity, and become partners and co workers in the formation of a world society. It will not come immediately. It will take courage, humility and faith to let go of the past and embrace the uncertain future, just like our forefathers did when they left the shores of China. Success this time, will not be measured in terms of material gains, but spiritual value. Just as our forefathers were driven by the dream of a better life, our dream should be to bring about a better world.

I believe that the magnificent Chinese adaptability to change, and their eclectic approach to life, will make them succeed and thrive once more in the new millennium. It is this very same pragmatic attitude and philosophy of life, as demonstrated in the past by them embracing one of the world's great spiritual traditions, Buddhism, for example, that led to the further blossoming of Chinese civilization. Similarly, I believe that the Bahá'í Faith will contribute in no small measure to a renewal of civilization not only among the ethnic Chinese but also among all the people of the world.

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