

Research on the Identity Differences of Diaspora Groups—Taking the Phenomenon of Group Differentiation in Southeast Asian Overseas Chinese Communities as an Example

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Abstract: *Focusing on the identity differentiation within overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, this study draws upon the theory of differential identity and a transnational perspective to explore the mechanisms of group differentiation within diaspora communities under the interplay of colonial legacies, state policies, and forces of globalization. Through a comparative analysis of the diachronic evolution of Chinese communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, the study reveals how institutional pressures, economic capital, and historical memory drive the formation of three distinct identity pathways: Re-Sinicization, Localization, and Transnationalization.*

Keywords: *Diaspora; Identity Differentiation; Overseas Chinese; Subgroup Formation; Southeast Asian Studies*

1. Introduction

As the world's largest settlement area for overseas Chinese, Southeast Asia, with its Chinese community exceeding 33 million, exhibits significant internal diversity rather than a monolithic cultural pattern.^[1] From Malaysian Chinese who uphold Chinese-language education and dialect traditions, to Indonesian Chinese whose cultural practices became more covert after experiencing forced assimilation, and Singaporean Chinese who developed a unique transnational identity within a 'unity in diversity' framework, this phenomenon of 'shared origins, divergent paths' (tong yuan yi liu) profoundly reveals how historical experiences, institutional environments, and socioeconomic status have shaped distinctly different paths of cultural adaptation and identity formation.^[2] This internal diversity—exemplified by differences in the perception of 'Chineseness' between Peranakan Chinese (tusheng huaren) and new immigrants in Indonesia, or the varying strategies formed by Malaysian Chinese in different regions based on dialect groups and economic status—not only challenges the assumptions of 'cultural homogenization' or a simple 'assimilation/resistance' binary found in traditional research, but also highlights the complex role of power structures in reshaping diaspora identities.

Academic research on the identity of Southeast Asian Chinese has undergone paradigmatic shifts, yet each theory possesses limitations in its explanatory power. Assimilation theory, represented early on by scholars like Skinner, could explain phenomena such as economic integration in places like Thailand, but failed to encompass the covert practices related to Chinese identity under political pressure in Indonesia. Subsequently, the multiculturalism perspective, exemplified by Wang Gungwu's theory of 'multiple identities', better elucidated the strategies employed by Chinese in places like Singapore and Malaysia to balance national loyalty and ethnic identity through negotiation, such as the Malaysian Chinese Education Movement. However, the fact that even deeply assimilated ethnic Chinese were not spared during the 1998 anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia exposed the theory's limitations when confronted with structural discrimination.^[3] More recently, prevailing transnationalism theories focus on elite cross-border networks and connections to ancestral homelands in the context of globalization. While explaining the transnational activities of certain groups, these theories often overlook the rigid constraints imposed by local policies on ordinary Chinese (such as street vendors in Kuala Lumpur) and their local survival strategies, thereby exhibiting a degree of class bias. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the identity issues facing Southeast Asian Chinese necessitates moving beyond singular theoretical frameworks to consider the complex interplay of multiple factors, including historical, political, economic, global, and local dimensions.

2. Colonial Legacy and the Historical Roots of Identity Differentiation (19th Century—1945)

2.1 Colonial Policy as the Root of Identity Differences

The identity differences within Southeast Asian overseas Chinese communities were not naturally formed; their roots are deeply embedded in the economic divisions and cultural segregation policies of the colonial era. British and Dutch colonizers employed a 'divide and rule' strategy, artificially segmenting the Chinese population based on occupational class and dialect group. This differentiation laid the structural foundation for subsequent phenomena of community subgroup formation.

2.2 Economic Division Exacerbates Community Fragmentation

The colonial economic structure exacerbated fragmentation within the Chinese population. In British Malaya, Chinese immigrants were viewed as resource exploitation tools, leading to closed communities divided by dialect: Cantonese primarily mined tin, Hokkien controlled commerce, and Hakkas were involved mainly in agriculture. This binding of occupation and dialect fostered exclusive 'dialect group-based societies' (bangquan shehui), which were distinguished from the Malay community through reinforced ancestral identity. Meanwhile, in the Dutch East Indies, colonizers seeking to control the sugar industry supported certain Hokkien Chinese merchants, leading to the emergence of a 'Peranakan Chinese' (tusheng huaren) elite class (like the Oei Tiong Ham family) who used Malay and Dutch, intermarried with indigenous people, and gradually distanced themselves from the Chinese cultural traditions of newer immigrants (xinke), causing disparities in economic status and cultural identity within the community.^[4]

2.3 Educational Segregation and Religious Choice Solidify Cultural Rupture

Colonial education policies and individual religious choices further solidified community differences and cultural ruptures. In British Malaya, a dual-track education system, comprising community-run Chinese schools and government-promoted English-medium schools, cultivated groups with distinct class backgrounds and cultural identities. Educational segregation was more pronounced in the Dutch East Indies: Dutch-Chinese schools (HCS) nurtured a pro-colonial, mixed-ancestry elite, while traditional private schools maintained the Chinese identity of the xinke, widening the gap in language and customs between Peranakan and xinke Chinese.^[5] Furthermore, some Javanese Chinese actively shed their Chinese identity by converting to Islam or Christianity (e.g., a Tan family changing their surname to 'Wiranata' and integrating into local religious practices) to assimilate into local society. This stood in stark contrast to those Chinese who adhered to traditional beliefs and ancestor worship, deepening the cultural divisions within the ethnic group based on differing faiths.

3. Identity Reconstruction during Nation Building (1945-1990)

3.1 The Establishment of Nation-States and the Choice of Chinese Identity

Following World War II, establishing new nation-states in Southeast Asia pushed local Chinese communities to an identity crossroads. Faced with assimilation policies aimed at forging unified national identities by the nascent regimes, Chinese groups, operating under varying political environments and pressures and drawing upon their economic capital and historical memory, primarily diverged into three distinct response pathways: resistance, adaptation, and concealment.

3.2 Covert Resistance under Forced Assimilation and Economically Supported Cultural Struggle (Indonesia and Malaysia)

In some countries, coercive assimilation policies triggered covert resistance or culturally focused struggles supported by economic strength among the Chinese. For instance, during Indonesia's Suharto regime, ethnic Chinese were perceived as a political threat and subjected to systematic 'de-Sinicization' policies, including forced name changes (e.g., Liem Sioe Liong becoming Sudono Salim), closure of Chinese schools, and suppression of Chinese cultural activities. In response, some adopted covert strategies like 'dual naming' to secretly preserve their cultural identity. Following the 'May 13 Incident,' the implemented National Culture Policy sought to unify education under the Malay language in Malaysia. The Chinese community, however, mobilized its economic capital in response, funding

Chinese independent high schools (e.g., Robert Kuok's support for Dong Jiao Zong - the United Chinese School Committees' Association and the United Chinese School Teachers' Association) and upholding traditional cultural practices (such as the Mazu procession at Kuala Lumpur's Thean Hou Temple). They waged a sustained 'Chinese Education Movement' and cultural struggle through these means, forming intergenerationally transmitted 'cultural enclaves'.^[6]

3.3 State-Led Identity Reshaping and Economically Driven Strategic Assimilation (Singapore and Thailand)

In other countries, the evolution of Chinese identity was more heavily influenced by state-led projects or the community's economic strategies. The Singaporean government, operating within a 'multiracial' framework and vigorously promoting the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign,' replaced various Chinese dialects with officially endorsed Mandarin. This aimed to forge a unified 'Singaporean Chinese' identity; while effectively integrating the community, it also severed connections to ancestral dialects and associated cultures for many. In contrast, the Thai Chinese often opted for economic pathways to gain political protection and social acceptance. For example, the Chearavanont family of the CP Group Thai-ized their surname and demonstrated loyalty by sponsoring royal projects, thereby downplaying their Chinese business origins. While such strategic concealment and assimilation provided relative security for ethnic Chinese during periods of anti-Chinese sentiment, it came at the cost of cultural transmission, evidenced by later generations' detachment from Chinese genealogy records.^[7]

4. A New Spectrum of Identity in the Era of Globalization (1990-2023)

Following the end of the Cold War, the sweeping wave of globalization and the rapid rise of China have jointly introduced new variables and shaping forces for the identity of Southeast Asian Chinese communities. Against the backdrop of increasingly close global connections, these diaspora communities are simultaneously influenced by a complex triad of factors: the growing cultural and economic pull from their ancestral homeland (China), the persistent pressure for local integration within their host countries (Southeast Asian nations), and new opportunities created by the free flow of transnational capital. Consequently, identity pathways within Chinese communities have further diversified, presenting a new, complex, and multifaceted landscape where three main trajectories—'Re-Sinicization' (re-embracing Chinese culture and ties to the ancestral land), 'Localization' (deeply integrating into local society and reconstructing local identity), and 'Transnationalization' (utilizing transnational networks to build new forms of identity)—coexist and intertwine.

Against this backdrop, the 'Re-Sinicization' trend manifests in some Southeast Asian Chinese communities as distinct cultural revival movements and strengthened ties with the ancestral homeland. In Malaysia, for example, Chinese independent high schools have continued to develop post-21st-century, not only incorporating contemporary Chinese elements like the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) into their curricula but also consolidating cultural identity through traditional cultural workshops and emphasizing classic Chinese literary works. Underlying this trend is cultural consciousness and economic rationality, forming a cycle of 'Chinese school education -> studying in China -> serving Chinese-funded enterprises.' In Indonesia, however, despite the official lifting of the ban on the Chinese language, attempts at Chinese language education and cultural revival still face limitations. Ethnic Chinese often express their cultural identity with a cautious premise of 'Indonesian citizen first,' demonstrating the complexity and boundaries of 'Re-Sinicization' within specific socio-political contexts.^[8]

Concurrently, other pathways demonstrate a deeper integration of Chinese identity with local cultures or an extension into transnational spaces. Some Chinese communities opt for deep integration into local culture, reconstructing dual identities through artistic and religious practices. For instance, films by Indonesian directors use the 'dual naming' metaphor to represent the identity dilemmas and fragmentation experienced by Peranakan Chinese. At the same time, temples in some areas juxtapose Chinese deities with local beliefs, maintaining ethnic memory through culturally syncretic rituals. Amidst the wave of globalization, capital flows and digital technologies have also reshaped community connections and identity forms. Organizations like the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan have fostered new identity performances by building transnational business networks. Meanwhile, the younger generation utilizes social media to create content blending multiple cultures. It constructs fluid 'digital clan associations' (shuzi zongqinhui) in virtual spaces, showcasing new modes of identity practice that transcend national borders.

5. Structural Dynamics of Group Differentiation

5.1 *Institutions, Capital, and Memory: The Triple Drivers of Identity Differentiation*

The phenomenon of subgroup formation within Southeast Asian Chinese communities is not accidental; rather, it is the inevitable outcome of the complex interplay among three driving forces: institutional pressure, economic capital accumulation, and the selection of historical memory. These three core factors constitute a fundamental framework for understanding how diaspora groups form differentiated identities, profoundly shaping the diverse identity spectrum we observe today.

5.2 *The Spectrum Effect of Institutional Pressure*

The intensity, nature, and direction of state policies constitute the most direct external disciplinary force acting upon the identity choices of Chinese communities. Different countries exhibit significant variations along this dimension. In Malaysia, the government's strategy of providing limited space for Chinese education—one of 'tolerance but not support'—has paradoxically spurred the Chinese community towards a confrontational path, engaging in sustained struggles through legal challenges and other means to defend their cultural rights.^[9] In contrast, the harsh forced assimilation policies during Indonesia's Suharto era compelled ethnic Chinese to widely adopt survival strategies of identity concealment, such as using Indonesian names and language in public while secretly maintaining Chinese customs and beliefs in private spheres. Thailand offers another example, where a relatively lenient assimilation environment allowed Chinese elites to trade loyalty to the monarchy and integration into the upper echelons of society for political security and economic opportunities, often accompanied, however, by the gradual fading or even forgetting of cultural identity. This continuous spectrum, ranging from confrontation and concealment to active integration, reflects the dynamic interactive relationship between institutional pressure and the coping strategies of Chinese communities.

5.3 *Economic Capital and Memory Politics*

Within the institutional framework, Chinese communities' economic strength and ways of handling historical memory further shape specific identity choices and strategies. Economic capital acts like a double-edged sword: In Malaysia, substantial business power enables Chinese merchants to 'feed the economy back into culture' (e.g., through significant donations to Chinese schools or constructing prominent landmark temples), thereby consolidating cultural confidence and community cohesion. In Indonesia, however, the wealth of Chinese businesses has sometimes triggered envy and violence (as seen in the anti-Chinese riots during the 1998 financial crisis), compelling some Chinese to adopt strategies like asset dispersal and economic invisibility for self-preservation. Accompanying economic status is the political construction and transmission of historical memory. The Malaysian Chinese community actively transforms historical traumas like 'May 13' into resources for resistance, ensuring intergenerational transmission through public commemorations, oral histories, and visual documentation. Indonesian Chinese, conversely, may face the silence of official history, relying on unofficial channels like underground comics to reconstruct and pass on collective traumatic memories. In Thailand, some Chinese elites might opt for active forgetting or even destroying ancestral historical records, establishing loyalty to the current state as a new historical starting point. These internal factors—economic foundation and historical narrative—profoundly influence Chinese communities' survival wisdom and identity construction within different institutional environments.^[10]

6. Conclusions

The identity differences among overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia result from the combined effects of history, policy, and globalization. The colonial period sowed the seeds of differentiation through economic divisions and educational segregation – for instance, the British dividing Chinese groups by dialect in Malaya, and the Dutch cultivating a mixed-ancestry elite in Indonesia, setting Chinese communities on divergent paths. Post-independence national policies further fueled this: Indonesia enforced name changes and suppressed Chinese education, Malaysian Chinese persisted culturally by running Chinese schools. At the same time, Singapore's 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' abruptly severed dialect transmission. In the era of globalization, the situation grew more complex. Some re-learned Mandarin spurred by China's rise (like Malaysian Chinese schools adding 'Belt and Road' courses), others blended local identity through art and religion (like Indonesian Chinese directors making films about

dual identity), and business people built new circles through transnational ventures (like Singapore's Hokkien Huay Kuan global investments). These changes demonstrate that overseas Chinese identity is never fixed, but constantly pulled and reshaped by state policies, economic opportunities, and historical memory. For those governing multi-ethnic nations, this implies that caution is needed to prevent economic disparity from turning into cultural discrimination (like the resentment towards wealthy Chinese merchants in Indonesia), and flexibility is required in policymaking for different groups (e.g., supporting Malaysian Chinese schools, ensuring Indonesian Chinese security). Of course, the complete stories of Chinese communities in the Philippines and Vietnam have not been told yet. New trends like youth using TikTok to create virtual clan associations also warrant further observation. However, at least one thing is clear now: the diversity within Chinese communities has never been just a cultural issue; it is an ongoing contestation of power and survival strategies.

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