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Stephen Fitzgerald

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Introduction

The 'colonies' of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia which the Chinese Communist Party inherited when it became the government of China might have been useful to China's new rulers in a number of ways.¹ Yet it is now strikingly apparent that they have not been as significant in China's policies as was generally, and perhaps not unreasonably, expected in 1949; or at least, not significant in the same way. Seldom first in the order of external priorities, the Overseas Chinese have nevertheless been a fairly constant preoccupation for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), if only because it has been extremely difficult for the Party to work out policies which could both be consistent with its general objectives in Southeast Asia and promise some measure of effective implementation.

The establishment of the communist government posed a number of questions about Overseas Chinese, disturbing to the countries of Southeast Asia. What role did the new Chinese government envisage for them in the conduct of its foreign policy and the pursuit of its avowed revolutionary goals? Would China seek to exploit them as a vehicle for its propaganda and policies, a spearhead for infiltration, and a vanguard of armed insurrection? Was it possible that a communist government in Peking could leave the Overseas Chinese alone or abandon them to work out their own future in the countries of residence?

Perhaps the most common generalisation about China's relations with the Overseas Chinese over the last twenty years has been that they are potentially or in fact a 'Fifth Column'. In the theory developed in the 1950s of China's aggressive and expansionist designs and disruptive international behaviour, there was the proposition that the countries of Southeast Asia were threatened by this Fifth Column, that the CCP's Overseas Chinese policy consisted of a single-minded attempt to mobilise all Overseas Chinese in the political service of China and the pursuit of the Party's revolutionary goals. The 'Overseas Chinese problem' was seldom perceived as a 'problem' for the Chinese government, except in so far as China was believed to have encountered certain obstacles to political and economic exploitation of a relationship which appeared deceptively simple, and which seemed to offer very considerable advantages to the Chinese Communist Party.

This proposition was widely accepted, not only because it suited the purpose of Cold War polemicists. It seemed also to be the obvious position for a com-

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unist government in China to adopt, and it was easily credible in Southeast Asia, a fact which some nationalist leaders have sought to exploit for domestic political purposes. For suspicion and fear of the Overseas Chinese relationship with China was a problem which the CCP had inherited from its predecessors. It was bred by the attitudes and behaviour of the Overseas Chinese themselves, and nurtured by the policies of successive Chinese governments, in particular those of the Kuomintang (KMT).

The Fifth Column theory was never seriously tested, but it was an extraordinary oversimplification to say the least. Its essential weakness, of course, was that it rested on a combination of untested assumptions about the CCP's intentions, and generalisations about the behaviour and political attitudes of Overseas Chinese themselves. Yet the literature on the subject of the Chinese in Southeast Asia has shown that it is not possible to make generalised conclusions about all or even a majority of Overseas Chinese. To some journalists, Overseas Chinese are almost all merchants or usurers or at least petty capitalists; to the Chinese government, on a theoretical level, over 90 per cent are labouring class. Neither of these assertions is accurate, as sociological studies of Overseas Chinese communities have shown. And the political behaviour of Overseas Chinese, moreover, in itself tells nothing about the objectives of the Chinese government. To the extent that it might do so on closer investigation, there are unusual difficulties in conducting studies in Southeast Asian countries on such a politically charged question as personal attitudes to and relations with China or the Chinese government.²

The only, and one would have thought obvious, alternative is to examine the Overseas Chinese policies of the CCP itself, and that is the purpose of this study. The evidence which emerges from the CCP's policies contests the validity of the Fifth Column theory. It reveals a growing awareness on the part of the CCP that there were complex and intractable problems associated with its overseas population, both in the pursuit of foreign policies in Southeast Asia and in the very nature of the Overseas Chinese relationship with China. The Party's response to these problems is extremely significant, not simply for China's relations with the Overseas Chinese, but also for its whole approach to Southeast Asia.

OVERSEAS CHINESE POPULATION

China's Overseas Chinese policy is concerned almost exclusively with the Chinese in Southeast Asia, since it is in Southeast Asia that they present the greatest obstacles, and the greatest potential for the advancement of China's foreign policy interests, and also because that is where more than 95 per cent of them live.³ With a few exceptions, the Chinese in other parts of the world have not influenced the policies of the Chinese Communist

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Party.⁴ The Chinese Nationalists estimated that of a total of 18,301,126 Overseas Chinese in June 1969, 96.02 per cent, which includes the Chinese of Hong Kong and Macao, were in Asia.⁵ Estimates of the number of Overseas Chinese have varied according to the definition applied, and even the best attempts suffer from lack of statistical information. Surprisingly, however, authorities working from different criteria tend to arrive at roughly similar conclusions on the total figure. The Chinese Nationalist estimate might be expected to be high, since the concept of *jus sanguinis* to which they adhere means that any person of all or part Chinese parentage is included in their total.⁶ But by subtracting the figures for Hong Kong and Macao which only they count as Overseas Chinese, the Nationalist total is close to a widely accepted figure of between 12 and 13 million for Southeast Asia.⁷ While the Overseas Chinese taken together constitute only five per cent of the total population of Southeast Asia,⁸ they are still a significantly large communal group. A table of estimates of the Chinese population in Southeast Asia is given in Appendix A.

Peking's present estimate of the Overseas Chinese population is not known. In the national census of 1953 the Chinese government produced a figure of 11,743,320, which included Chinese students abroad,⁹ and this is the only precise figure it has published. According to the official release, it was calculated by 'indirect investigation', and frequent references to pre-1949 KMT estimates in the official publications of the period suggest that it may have been derived from projections of old KMT estimates.¹⁰ Subsequently, Peking settled on a round sum of 'over 12 million', or 'approximately 13 million'. By 1965, however, when official figures for the population of China still referred to the 1957 estimate, no figure at all was given for Overseas Chinese.¹¹ This may mean that the government was uncertain how far the dimensions of the problem had altered since 1953, which is suggested also by its failure to increase the number of Overseas Chinese deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC) when the total number was increased in 1964. The reason for the uncertainty probably lies in the fact that since the 1953 census the CCP has made sweeping changes in its policy on Overseas Chinese nationality, which make it more difficult to define what is an Overseas Chinese or to measure how many might come within that definition.

In 1968, I was told by an official of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (OCAC) in Peking that the Chinese government did not know how many Overseas Chinese there were, and that there had been no attempt to compile statistics, even in countries where China had diplomatic representation.¹² While the second half of this statement is open to question, the first is probably true, given the difficulties experienced by other authorities.¹³ Moreover, since the Chinese government does not have direct jurisdiction over the Chinese abroad, an approximate total would be sufficient for most purposes. More specific estimates would be necessary only for solving

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immediate problems like repatriation, or surveying the potential for such things as Overseas Chinese investment.

The status of the Chinese in Hong Kong and Macao is ambiguous. Statistically, they are not included within Peking's category of Overseas Chinese.¹⁴ They are referred to as 'compatriots' (*t'ung-pao*), and where they appear together with Overseas Chinese they are clearly designated as 'Hong Kong and Macao compatriots'. In speeches, documents, and press articles covering twenty-one years of the People's Republic of China, it has not been possible to find one instance in which the Chinese government referred to them as 'Overseas Chinese'. Nevertheless, they are treated as Overseas Chinese for administrative purposes: 'although the compatriots in Hong Kong and Macao cannot be regarded as Overseas Chinese, their position is similar to that of the Overseas Chinese and the various Overseas Chinese policies can generally be applied to them'.¹⁵ In laws and regulations concerning Overseas Chinese they are sometimes included, sometimes not.¹⁶ When they visit China, they use the Overseas Chinese Travel Service, they enjoy some of the privileges accorded to Overseas Chinese dependants, and they are included in programmes arranged for visiting Overseas Chinese. Their relatives in China may be given Overseas Chinese dependant status if they receive regular remittances. Their status, therefore, appears to lie somewhere between Overseas Chinese and ordinary Chinese citizens temporarily under British or Portuguese jurisdiction.

DOMESTIC OVERSEAS CHINESE

The relatives or dependants of Chinese living abroad, returned Overseas Chinese, and Overseas Chinese students are referred to in this study as 'domestic Overseas Chinese'. Although the term is not used in Chinese, policies are invariably stated as applying at least to the first two categories, and in most cases also to the third. While each group has presented distinct problems, the Chinese government has regarded all, including the students, as permanent residents of China, and its general objectives have been the same for all three groups. There are approximately 11 million domestic Overseas Chinese; over 10 million relatives or dependants,¹⁷ between 400,000 and 500,000 returned Overseas Chinese, and between 60,000 and 70,000 students. Over 9 million live in the two provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien, and the remainder are concentrated in Kwangsi, Chekiang, Shantung, and Yunnan, with small numbers scattered throughout the rest of China.¹⁸ The dependants have consisted almost entirely of women, old people, and young children,¹⁹ and despite the financial assistance they received from abroad the CCP claimed that the ratio of social classes among them corresponded in the main with that of the general populace.²⁰

Figures published by the Chinese government for the number of domestic

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Overseas Chinese do not necessarily represent the actual number currently treated as being in this category. The number of dependants was assessed during land reform on the basis of those who were known to have relatives abroad, and a revised figure has not been published.²¹ Official totals for the returned Overseas Chinese represent only the number of arrivals since 1949; many have since merged with the category of Overseas Chinese dependants, some have left China, and some have become submerged in the Chinese masses. Similarly, Overseas Chinese students have tended to become indistinguishable from the Chinese masses once they have graduated.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Overseas Chinese problem, from whichever point of view, was not one which sprang into existence with the victory of the Chinese Communist Party. Just as indigenous Southeast Asians discovered an Overseas Chinese problem with the stirrings of modern nationalism, so also had Chinese governments for more than half a century been confronted with problems similar to those which faced the CCP. Some of their responses established precedents which the CCP was to follow. Some of their policies compounded the difficulties of the legacy they left to the CCP. Their policy options were all limited, and they have become more limited with the rise of Asian nationalism, the emergence of independent Southeast Asia, and the growth of China's interest and involvement in the region. But since the Ch'ing government first became involved with the Overseas Chinese, no Chinese government has found it possible to ignore them in relations with Southeast Asia. And a relationship between China and the Overseas Chinese carries with it a degree of involvement in the affairs of Southeast Asia and will have some effect, however minimal, on China's relations with the countries concerned.

The question of a policy towards Overseas Chinese did not arise until the end of the Ch'ing dynasty, when the growing wealth of the Chinese abroad and their involvement in domestic Chinese politics forced the Manchu rulers to acknowledge their existence. Because of problems with pirates and rebels, the Ch'ing government expressly forbade emigration and prescribed the death penalty for Chinese subjects who settled abroad. The first changes, like the reluctant abandonment of Manchu isolationism, were the result largely of pressure from the western powers. Written into the Unequal Treaties were clauses in which the Chinese emperor recognised first the fact, and then the right, of Chinese emigration. The motives of the western powers, of course, were to secure rights in China for themselves and freedom to exploit Chinese labour. But with a respect for international legal niceties not reflected in their actions, they drafted the clauses containing their demands so as to incorporate the principle of reciprocity. Hence, many of the treaties accorded the Chinese government the right to protect Chinese subjects

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abroad, but it was not until the 1880s that the Manchus began to exercise this right, nor was it until 1893 that the law preventing emigration was repealed.²²

In the last two decades of the dynasty, there was a quickening of interest in the Overseas Chinese, prompted by their support for monarchist, revolutionary or constitutionalist factions in China, and also by a realisation that their wealth was more than just a few 'sands they have scraped together'.²³ This new interest was first demonstrated in the activities of Chinese Consuls in the Straits Settlements,²⁴ and it ultimately found legal expression in the Nationality Law of 1909. The Law adopted the principle of *jus sanguinis*; any person born of a Chinese father, or of a Chinese mother where the nationality of the father was unknown or indeterminate, was a Chinese citizen, regardless of place of birth.²⁵

Many of the considerations which the CCP was to face forty years later in framing an Overseas Chinese policy were either present in the circumstances surrounding the Ch'ing government's acknowledgment of the Overseas Chinese, or were the result of that decision. The possibility of tapping Overseas Chinese wealth has been of concern to successive Chinese governments. The Manchus were motivated by the prospect of financial gain well before they claimed the Overseas Chinese as citizens; the revolution of 1911 was financed partly by Overseas Chinese; remittances and investment were a major preoccupation of the KMT; and to the CCP also, foreign exchange from the Chinese abroad has been of great importance. When the political battles of China in the last years of the Ch'ing dynasty were carried into the Chinese communities abroad, Overseas Chinese were encouraged to identify with Chinese rather than local politics; and this in turn fostered the growth of Overseas Chinese nationalism which has remained to trouble the countries of Southeast Asia and complicate the CCP's policies in the region. It is partly for this reason also that, since 1949, the Chinese Nationalists have been able once more to carry the internal political battle into the Overseas Chinese arena, seeking among the Overseas Chinese moral and financial support in their opposition to the Communist government. The decade before the 1911 Revolution also saw the first efforts by a Chinese government to promote Chinese education among Chinese abroad, an objective which subsequently became a cornerstone of KMT policy, contributing to the growth of Overseas Chinese cultural chauvinism and separateness and inhibiting tendencies to integration. The Communists have taken a somewhat different view of Overseas Chinese education, but it has been a central issue in their policy. The principle of *jus sanguinis* itself created problems of dual nationality which have plagued communist China's relations with Southeast Asia.

Following the 1911 Revolution the KMT maintained the strongest interest in the Overseas Chinese, because it had begun virtually as an Overseas

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Chinese party and because it still looked to them for finance. But the string of Peking governments which ruled until 1927 did not ignore the financial and political potential of the compatriots overseas.²⁶ Between 1912 and 1919, they also attempted to promote and supervise Overseas Chinese education,²⁷ an attempt was made in 1917 to register all Chinese abroad, and from 1918 until 1922 there was a department for Overseas Chinese affairs within, significantly, the Ministry of Commerce.²⁸ From 1921, the KMT began to take a greater initiative in Overseas Chinese affairs, attracting more widespread support.²⁹ It established an Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau in Canton, which in 1926 became the first Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission. After the establishment of the National Government, it was undecided what to do with the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission. For brief periods it was placed under the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, and the Foreign Ministry, and for four years it was under the direct control of the Central Executive Committee of the Kuomintang. In 1932, with the independent ministries under the Executive Yüan, it finally assumed the structure which remains in Taiwan today, and which was the model for the Communist's organisation of the same name.³⁰

In 1926, the KMT laid down three basic objectives for Overseas Chinese policy: to devise ways in which the Overseas Chinese would have equal treatment in the countries of residence, to facilitate the return to China to study of the children of Overseas Chinese, and to give special guarantees to Overseas Chinese who wished to establish industries in China.³¹ The objectives of this first coherent Overseas Chinese policy are remarkably similar to those announced by the CCP when it first came to power, although the motives and interpretation have differed considerably. In February 1929, the new Nationalist government promulgated a Nationality Law, which adopted virtually unchanged from the law of 1909 the principle of *jus sanguinis*, and which is still in force in Taiwan.

It is enlightening to look at the kind of things the KMT said about Overseas Chinese policy in its two decades of rule on the Chinese mainland, even though what it has said about this policy often corresponds more with its ambition and particularly since 1949 with its desperation to win the Chinese abroad, than with its actual performance. The manner in which it approved of chauvinism³² among Overseas Chinese and sought to discourage any weakening of traditional ties with China, was at least partly responsible for the initial suspicion in Southeast Asia of the Communists' Overseas Chinese policy. If the Nationalists could encourage such ultra-nationalistic tendencies, then the Communists must be even more extreme; and since 1949 the Nationalists themselves have actually fostered this belief in Southeast Asia. One of their reasons for doing so is that they appear to have assumed a far greater identity of motive and purpose between themselves and the Communists, particularly on 'nationalist' issues, than has actually existed.

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Yet just as there were other important issues on which they differed, territorial claims for example, so also was it mistaken of the KMT to assume such an identity of views on the Overseas Chinese. Moreover, Communist Chinese nationalism is conditioned to some extent by *realpolitik* and a measure of internationalism, philosophies which could not be said to have had significant impact on the thinking of the KMT. Whatever the situation, the KMT could have been expected to criticise the CCP's policy. But it is surprising how much of the comment from Taipei reads as though the KMT were simply imputing its own objectives or aspirations to the Chinese Communist Party.

From the very beginning, the KMT regarded Chinese education as the key; without that, the Overseas Chinese might begin to see their future in the countries of residence. From 1927 the Education Ministry, later assisted by the OCAC, instituted a programme for the registration and inspection of Overseas Chinese schools, the establishment of new schools, teacher training for Overseas Chinese, and education for Overseas Chinese youth in China. An instruction issued in 1938 stated that Overseas Chinese children 'should be directed to learn special skills which can be used in serving the homeland'; twenty years later, the CCP was to issue an almost identical instruction, in reference not to the homeland but to the countries of residence. Of 'Six Crises' for Overseas Chinese enunciated by the Central Executive Committee of the KMT in 1940, one was an 'educational crisis', the interference in Chinese schools by foreign governments. It was the duty of Overseas Chinese schools to 'concentrate on raising their nationalist consciousness'.³³ In 1946, emigration was proposed as a means of strengthening Chinese education, one of the rare occasions on which a Chinese government has even suggested official sponsorship of emigration. At the same time 'Overseas Chinese cadres' were to be trained at Chinan University to assist in spreading Chinese culture outwards from the homeland. So important was education in the view of the KMT, that it was written into the 1946 Constitution that encouragement and subsidies were to be given to Overseas Chinese educational enterprises.³⁴

If education was the crucial factor in preserving the close association between the Overseas Chinese and China, the purpose of maintaining this link was primarily financial. With every new pronouncement on education, there was either a call to increase the flow of money from Overseas Chinese, or a directive for greater effort to be made in protecting, not simply the persons of Overseas Chinese, but their 'wealth', their 'assets', or their 'material well-being'.

Throughout KMT policy there runs a theme of assertive and possessive nationalism, exemplified in the 'Six Crises' of 1940. There was said to be a 'crisis of national identity' (*min-tsu shang chih wei-chi*), arising from the fact that, since

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it is difficult for (Chinese) women to enter (the countries of residence) Overseas Chinese are marrying local women, and local births are increasing daily. Their blood is becoming mixed, their language, literature, customs and habits are being transformed by local and foreign influences, making it difficult to avoid losing their national characteristics.³⁵

What might perhaps be seen as a desirable trend by Southeast Asian countries, and even by many Overseas Chinese themselves, was regarded as a crisis of national identity by the KMT.

Overseas Chinese would appear to have been responsive to these policies, but this was as much due to the situation and attitudes of Overseas Chinese themselves as to any achievement on the part of the KMT:³⁶ their historical, and personal, link with the homeland, and the constant renewal of the link by continuing emigration, until the war and Japanese occupation intervened; the fact that in many parts of Southeast Asia the only education available to Overseas Chinese was that which they provided themselves; and the presence of colonial governments which kept a tight rein on local political activity and which tended not to encourage integration of Chinese with the local peoples. Despite the special relationship of some Overseas Chinese with the KMT it is probably the case that most Overseas Chinese who were and are concerned to preserve the link are concerned with China rather than political parties. This made it easier for some to transfer allegiance to the government which came to power in 1949; it also posed problems for that government.

THE INHERITANCE OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

When the CCP came to power in 1949, there were four general problems with which it had to contend, irrespective of policy priorities or specific objectives.

The first was that, in assuming responsibility for the Overseas Chinese³⁷ the CCP was immediately committed to involvement in Southeast Asia, through a relationship which, if not strictly colonial, in itself carried colonial implications but yet was not easily susceptible to manipulation. Secondly, there was the legacy of the KMT, whose Overseas Chinese policies had done little to engender trust or goodwill from indigenous Southeast Asians and whose position on nationality was to complicate the difficulties facing the CCP.

Thirdly, there was the relationship between Chinese and non-Chinese in Southeast Asia. In varying degrees from one country to another, the Chinese were an ethnically distinct, linguistically and culturally separate, and largely unassimilated minority, an object of resentment to indigenous Southeast Asians. They also belonged to the once dominant power in East Asia and were thought to be, and in many cases were in fact, economically dominant, racially arrogant, unwilling to identify with the interests of the countries of

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residence, and closely involved with the politics of China and China's supposed ambitions in Southeast Asia. There was, of course, some doubt as to how far these fears of 'the enemy within' were justified. But they were very real in the minds of Southeast Asians, with the result that 'Southeast Asian nationalism early developed an anti-Sinitic tradition which found more open expression as indigenous elites came to power'.³⁸

The fourth problem, subsequently admitted in the inaugural issue of the *Ch'iao-wu pao* (*Overseas Chinese Affairs Journal*) in 1956, was that 'the legacy in the Overseas Chinese affairs field amounted to almost nothing, so that in fact, Overseas Chinese work in New China had to grope its way from the very beginning'.³⁹ Before 1949, the Chinese Communist Party had almost no experience, and appears to have given little thought to an Overseas Chinese policy.

The KMT claimed that there was a threat to its own position from communist influence among the Chinese abroad. There was, of course, a degree of sentiment among Overseas Chinese which favoured the Chinese Communists,⁴⁰ and communist groups existed among Chinese in a number of Southeast Asian countries at the end of the Pacific War.⁴¹ But it is doubtful if the CCP was responsible for as much of this influence, or even gave as much attention to the Overseas Chinese, as the KMT thought. The Party had ample opportunities for contact with Overseas Chinese in China, through the first united front with the KMT, through its own contacts with Overseas Chinese families in Kwangtung and Fukien in the early 1930s,⁴² and again in the anti-Japanese united front through the KMT and the minority democratic parties which had close connections with Overseas Chinese.⁴³ Some Overseas Chinese managed to make their way to the liberated areas, and some Overseas Chinese funds reached the CCP. But the Communists were also fairly effectively isolated from the Overseas Chinese after the retreat to North China and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, which certainly restricted their ability to control such communist movements as did exist. They needed, moreover, to concentrate their resources for the struggle against the Japanese and the KMT, and for the administration of the areas under their control. They could not easily afford a costly operation among the Overseas Chinese unless there was some prospect of immediate and substantial material support. In post-1949 writing the CCP has tended to be vague about Overseas Chinese support in the whole Republican period, suggesting that it may have been minimal.

This is not to argue that the CCP totally ignored the Overseas Chinese. It did not. But to the extent that it had formulated a policy for Overseas Chinese, it seems to have been more concerned with soliciting financial assistance and mobilising support for the anti-Japanese struggle in China than with exploiting or communising them for purposes external to China. Official CCP programmes in the border areas included appeals to Overseas