

Executive summary:

Ethnic Chinese and “Nanyang culture”

华人与“南洋文化”

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The term “Nanyang” was used by Chinese in the early 20th century till the 1960s to refer to the Malay Archipelago (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines). In the broad sense, “Nanyang” includes Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand too. Non-Chinese refer to the same as “Southeast Asia”.

Comprising ten countries, Southeast Asia’s culture is plural. Mainland Southeast Asia is most influenced by India and China’s culture, while maritime Southeast Asia (the Malay Archipelago, the focus of this article) is most influenced by Hinduism and Islam or Christianity. Western elements are present too.

While China influenced Vietnam culturally, India and Hinduism left a profound and lasting impact on every other Southeast Asian country despite the later influx of Islam and Christianity. “Nanyang culture” is a hybrid of these religions’ cultures with “primitive religions”. Varying geographic circumstances and languages produced distinctive “ethnic cultures” or “national cultures”.

Chinese people have a long history in Southeast Asia. Intermarriage between early Chinese immigrants and local indigenous women formed the “Peranakan”, which was highly “localised”. The later immigrants formed “Xinke” Chinese 新客华人 (literally “new guests”), which retained more of China’s culture.

Immersed in a multi-racial and multi-religious environment, Southeast-Asian Chinese culture exhibits “Nanyang colour”. Peranakan Chinese write in Malay / Indonesian. Although Xinke Chinese still write in Chinese, the Chinese literature of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines each displays a unique character different from China’s literature. Chinese painters adopted local styles in their painting techniques and subjects, forming a “Nanyang style of painting”.

Religion has absorbed Nanyang customs too. Some Chinese folk deities are worshipped exclusively by Nanyang Chinese. Confucianism in Indonesia is preached in Indonesian with a bible, missionaries, and churches.

Chinese composers and musicians have drawn nourishment from Nanyang culture, adopting melodies, musical styles and even instruments. Peranakan music bears a strong Malay flavour.

The localisation of Chinese culture is the integration of Southeast Asian culture into Chinese culture – the fusion of Chinese and non-Chinese culture while retaining a Chinese cultural identity. Southeast Asian Chinese culture is ever-changing, just like China’s culture, which have been absorbing from foreign cultures for millennia.

Most Southeast Asian Chinese took up citizenship after their countries of residence gained independence after World War II. From foreigners, they became co-owners of the land identifying with the emerging country and engaging in local political and social activities.

However, the Chinese mostly had to follow the indigenous peoples’ models of education and language. This accelerated the “localisation” of the Chinese. As countries became more democratic, they became more acceptive of Chinese culture. The Chinese often need to adapt to the broader environment. The only exception is Singapore, where the Chinese population forms the majority.

The “localisation” of Southeast Asian Chinese culture is a process of development that was initially natural but later influenced by human factors and further complicated by globalisation.

China rapidly transformed into an economic power producing cheap goods, posing a great challenge to Southeast Asia countries. These countries also cannot resist the culture of advanced Western countries and China. Their traditional arts face decline or obsolescence.

Globalisation poses a challenge for Southeast Asian Chinese culture. Its Chinese literature faces a lack of translation into English and Southeast Asian languages. The Peranakan Malay language has faded, and Peranakan literature and art have seen little development.

China’s expanding soft power led to a revival and transformation of Southeast Asian Chinese culture, but this is hindered by indigenous nationalism. Singapore is an exception as a multicultural and multi-ethnic immigrant country that is going global in music and art. Chinese composers in Singapore have absorbed local and Western music to create diverse works, achieving “localisation” and “globalisation” of Chinese music as a nascent form of “Singaporean Chinese music”. The Singapore Chinese Orchestra has also made bold innovations.

In this “global village”, Southeast Asia can no longer live in isolation. Through globalisation, Western culture has influenced Southeast Asian Chinese culture even more.

Singapore has adapted well to globalisation, while other countries are still adapting. Absorbing advanced technology, new thinking and new immigrants has changed the form and substance of Singapore’s culture and art.

Finally, to be accepted by Southeast Asians, Southeast Asian Chinese culture cannot lack the substance of “Nanyang culture”.