

## Problematics and Paradigms in Historicizing the Overseas Chinese in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Straits and Burma

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### Introduction

In my recent fieldwork in Lower Burma and the Straits of Melaka, I found that the standard approaches to studying the 'Overseas Chinese' in western Southeast Asia have several important weaknesses. One weakness has been the failure to problematize the tendency to structure analyses of Overseas Chinese along the contemporary boundaries of contemporary nation-states (i.e. "the Chinese in Burma," "the Chinese in Thailand," and so on). This reflects not simply an easy way of dividing a large research project, but also pays homage to the perceived power of the nation-state and thus the peculiar existence of migrant groups within each different nation-state. Often, studies of an ethnic group that transcends, historically, contemporary state boundaries will be approached more carefully, but with the same boundaries of state affecting analysis through the division of chapters according to a nation-state checklist or a narrative heavily coded by its relation to the nation-states in the analysis (Suryadinata 1997). Furthermore, Overseas Chinese communities 'within a state' often have internal divisions that are invisible to the state-centred narrative. This is true, for example, of the Yangon (Rangoon)-based 'Chinese in Burma' who stress that they and the Yunnanese in Upper Burma have few interactions and a different socio-economic place in Burma and certainly cannot be considered as one community.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the pervasive energies of globalisation and transnationalism have helped to encourage historians to look beyond the boundaries of the nation-state and to elucidate connectivities that are severed or bifurcated by the nation-state 'cookie cutter.' These studies, however, tend to dwell on marginal spaces and over-generalities, producing some of the same kinds of clichés that they intended to interrogate in the first place, or else to generalize and produce a historically undifferentiated and essentialist Overseas Chinese identity. In this paper, I will approach the Overseas Chinese in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lower Burma and Penang from a non-state-centred perspective, in order to see how this approach can explain the phenomenon of continued connectivities between the Overseas Chinese of Penang and Lower Burma after Penang was eclipsed by Singapore and how this reflects on Overseas Chinese identity in Lower Burma and the Straits Settlements.

This paper is structured as follows. I will first describe the phenomenon of continued connectivities between the Overseas Chinese of Lower Burma and Penang. Following this, I examine recent theoretical approaches by Takeshi Hamashita and Wang Gungwu to understanding the Overseas Chinese in a broader historical framework. I then turn to my case study of Penang-Lower Burma Overseas Chinese interactions. My conclusion will draw together the theoretical approaches and empirical data in order to draw both into broader theoretical discussions of the Overseas Chinese.

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