

ETHNIC RELATIONS AND NATION-BUILDING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Case of the Ethnic Chinese

Edited by
Leo Suryadinata



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CHAPTER 1

Chinese Ethnicity in New Southeast Asian Nations

WANG GUNGWU

This topic is one that has been important for me all my life. The longer I live in this region, the more important this topic seems to be. In my experience, two of the most difficult words to understand are words such as “ethnic” and/or “race relations”, on the one hand, and “nation-building”, on the other. The important difference between the two is that ethnic and racial relations have been with us since the beginning of human history while nation-building is new. The concept of ethnicity, the evolution of culture and our self-awareness, the kinds of changes that enable different groups of people to communicate, live, and deal with one another in war or in peace, has a very long history. Nation-building, however, is a more specific phenomenon that has arisen in more recent times. Of course, there are many ways of defining the word “nation” and, in some older usages, it is difficult to distinguish “nation” from ethnicity and even race. But if we do not try to draw distinctions between them, we are really hard put to explain what building a nation could mean or even envisage how this is possible. Clearly, to avoid misunderstanding we must try to use these words correctly and consistently.

I cannot promise to clarify these concepts for everyone, but I will

say what I mean when I use the terms. I take the long view about culture being one of the key components of ethnicity. I shall not use the word "race" because I prefer to reserve the word for occasions when there is a need to stress physical differences.¹ It is, of course, possible to include the word "race" as another component in ethnicity, but that is not always the most important consideration. For me, ethnicity would normally be centred on culture, on the core of ethnic self-consciousness that manifests itself in the awareness of one's own cultural roots.² This is something ongoing and has been with us ever since human beings became aware of their cultural roots and began to think about the significance of having such roots.

The idea of "nation" in the specific context of the nation-states that we are encouraged to build and defend is something very new. It is different from the legal entity, the state, in that a nation that did not observe state boundaries would consist of people who lived in different states, and states could function and were recognized as such even if they included people who saw themselves as belonging to different nations. The bringing together of the two words "nations" and "states" as "nation-states" in a systematic way for all countries in the world only began in the twentieth century with the establishment of the League of Nations. Today the usage has the support of all the members of the United Nations. They may each consider themselves a nation-state in a distinctive way. The states are at different stages of nation-building. Some claim that their people are their nationals in the fullest sense while others admit that while their states consist of many "nations", they are in fact fully integrated. But all agree that they have one important feature in common: all are committed to behaving internationally as if they were all nation-states.

The nation-state is based on the modern phenomenon that first emerged in Western Europe about two hundred years ago.³ In its ideal form, it was defined to mean that every state should consist of people who believed that they belonged to a single nation. Such a nation of a united people would be the foundation of the state. Or, if a state already existed, then the people who saw themselves as being a nation would seek to determine the proper borders of that state. The coming together of the words "nation" and "state" became the model for new states that