UNIT 4 CHINESE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit concerns itself with the history of Chinese immigrants in South-east Asia. After reading it you should be able to:

- describe how extensive were the early contacts between the China and South-east Asians.
- explain why after 1860 there was a spurt in Chinese immigration.
- show the impact of nationalism, Japanese subjugation and policies of the Chinese government on Chinese immigrants in South-east Asia.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

China's links with lands to her South were established in distant antiquity. As Chinese culture spread in the last millennium before Christ from its birth place on the banks of the Yellow River, it encountered cultures indigenous of South-east Asian region. The Thai, Lao and Vietnamese peoples, for example all have their remote roots in regions which for long have been under the Chinese politically. As the frontier of Chinese settlement was advanced, enclaves of peoples destined to become ethnic minorities were bypassed. Other people in Southern and Western China were absorbed by the Chinese in a process which probably continues even today.

Below the line of Chinese settlement, South-east Asian societies have grown. Since China's imperial unification by the Chin dynasty in the third century B.C., the cultural and political lines of demarcation between China and South-east Asia have been sharpened. Only in Vietnam did Chinese colonial rule cause Chinese influence to achieve paramountary for more than ten centuries. Although freedom from Chinese political control was won by the Vietnamese a thousand years ago, China's cultural supremacy survived. South-east Asia was historically divided into three spheres: Vietnam, where Chinese culture dominated; the arc of lands running South-east from Burma to Indonesia, where Indian currents were powerful; and the relatively remote Philippines, where weaker influences from both China and India were felt. Islam becan a strong tide in the region about five hundred years ago, and spread mainly to the maritime lands, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Southern Philippines.

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A Survey of more than twenty centuries shows that Chinese ties formed with South-east Asia were at first tenuous and later substantial. Dynastic records show that diplomatic and commercial exchange existed almost from the beginning of China's long imperial history. Tribute missions from South-east Asia were frequent bearers of respect for the Chinese emperor and exotic goods for the Chinese market. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Mongol emperor of China was able to dispatch an armada to the Indonesian archipelago. Although the invasion was a failure, it may have left behind deserters and stragglers, who may have become the first permanent Chinese settlers in the area.

During the fifteenth century, the Ming dynasty of China sponsored a series of great naval expeditions to South-east Asia and far beyond. The Chinese court, however, not driven by crusading zeal, international rivalry and fiscal hunger to build an empire upon maritime foundations abandoned exploration; but a private Chinese commercial empire was already taking shape overseas. When the first Portuguese came to South-east Asia in the beginning of the sixteenth century, Chinese traders were there to greet them.

Western colonialism in South-east Asia began with the Portuguese capture of Malacca in 1511. Since then the Chinese in the region sought to accommodate themselves to the changing order in South-east Asia. Sometimes tolerated and on occasion savagely attacked, the overseas Chinese learned to live under Western rule. For three and a half centuries, the Chinese population of the region grew at a moderate pace; there were simply not enough opportunities in a slowly developing economy to attract multitudes of immigrants.

4.2 CHINESE IMMIGRATION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

About the middle of the nineteenth century, South-east Asia entered a period of quickened transformation. The decline of mercantilism had heralded the death of the Dutch and British Company rule, conditions hospitable to free trade appeared. Corresponding with the opening of greatly expanded opportunities for private investment was a growing demand for South-east Asian products to feed Western industrialisation. The whole process of development was speeded by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, possibly the most significant date in South-east Asian economic history. Tin, Tobacco, and later, rubber production doubled and redoubled. So rapid was economic expansion that chronic labour shortages appeared. Peasants belonging to that region were, by and large, reluctant to have their villages to work under the disciplined and often harsh conditions of large-scale mining and estate agriculture. Labour had to be recruited outside the region. Many came from India but many more were sent from China.

The story of the first great waves of nineteenth century Chinese immigration is horrifying. The 'Coolie trade' as it came to be known is described briefly below. Typically villagers were recruited by agents, known as Coolie Crimps. Sometimes false promises lured men to sign away their freedom. Other men in effect sold themselves to pay off their debts. The recruits were assembled in ports and lodged in barracoons. (This has striking similarities with the slave trade between Africa and Europe.) Packed aboard vessels, the coolies sailed for new lands. Many, of course, died on the voyage. Upon arrival, say at Singapore, the semi-slaves were normally kept on board their ships until brokers serving either Chinese or European enterprises, contracted for their labour in a process colloquically referred to by the Chinese as "buying pigs". The healthy and the skilled commanded the highest prices; the sickly were unwanted. Once ashore the men worked out the years of their contracts; and if they made the grade and lived, they became free settlers or sought to return home.

As the nineteenth century advanced the voyages from China grew smoother; crude vessels and junks were replaced by steamships. Victorian humanitarianism and the Peking court's growing concern for its emigrant sons brought an end to the coolie traffic. Migration and settlement abroad no longer meant humiliation and hazard.

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Three characteristics were common to the millions of Chinese who arrived in South-east Asian countries during the flood-tide of immigration roughly between 1860-1930. One was that almost all of them were poor and the other that very few of them were women. These two characteristics are common to many other immigrant communities. But the characteristic that set the Chinese immigrants apart from most others who had left their homes for newer lands was their enduring nostalgia for the homeland. China was more than the old country. It was the only country worthy of respect and capable of being understood. The rest of the world was worse than alien. Success abroad could be measured by the strength of a man's ties to China. Sending money back to relatives in the old village was an obligation borne by all except the destitute. Prosperity permitted a man to bring a wife from China. Those who became wealthy would decorate their houses like rich native Chinese. Ideally, hard work and thrift abroad were rewarded by retirement and repatriation, or less ideally, by shipment back to China for burial. There have been men who sailed from China never expecting to return, but there was none who cheerfully hoped for permanent repatriation. Uprooted immigrant herds could not be controlled by the thin ranks of colonial bureaucracies. Colonial administration of earlier periods had hit upon schemes for the supervision of the Chinese through the medium of various headmen, often assigned quasimilitary titles. In return for the prestige and perquisites of his office, they served as intermediaries between the Europeans and the Chinese. The system worked as long as the Chinese communities were fairly stable in size and placid in conduct. Before the huge influx of immigrants, the Chinese quarters of the cities and towns were not trouble spots. The Europeans and the Chinese normally complemented one another in their economic endeavours; both groups appeared content with the system of headmen.

The old serenity was shattered by the flood of immigrants. The members of rootless, restless, men were too great to fit into a pattern of administration resting upon the headmen's control through business connections, kinship and patronage. The enormously expanded Chinese population, especially in mining and estate areas of rapid development, had to fend for themselves in improving a political order of sorts. The tradition of the secret society provided the techniques required.

Secret societies have deep roots in Chinese history. Starting as heretical expressions, these societies inevitably assumed a politically subversive character, for in imperial China charismatic emperor enjoyed divine ordination i.e. he ruled with the mandate of heaven. To challenge any part of the harmonious order was to threaten the whole. The clandestine brotherhoods imported into South-east Asia displayed the religious orientation of their forerunners, and voiced rebellious slogans like: "Overthrow the Manchus, Restore the Ming".

In effect, secret societies had to give protection and order to the immigrants. Membership brought a man into a circle of brothers who could assist in the process of survival abroad. Companionship, employment, relief and defence were all supposed to be had within the order. The brotherhoods thus sought to substitute for families left in China. Acknowledging no law but their own, the secret societies turned to crime; but lawlessness was not their fundamental purpose. The profits of crime were in the nature of revenues for the underground governments of the immigrants. As other form of organisation gained strength in the nineteenth century the secret societies lost vitality and prestige. Today the brotherhoods have deteriorated into gangster mobs; but for a time, a century or so ago, the societies played a positive role in the resettlement of immigrants.

Operating in the open were other kinds of organisations to serve the settlers. The so-called territorial associations recruited members on the basis of place of origin or language. Kinship associations served those sharing the same surnames and thus claiming descent from common ancestors. The blood tie might be more imagined than real, but the feeling of kinship among members was likely to be genuine enough. Trade and craft associations, later joined by chamber of commerce and labour unions, brought together men of like occupations and economic aims. All these open organisations were actively supported. As the administration of south-east Asia sought means of supervising and communicating with the Chinese, the open associations often received semi-official recognition. The chambers of commerce in particular tended to be regarded as agencies to transmit Chinese desires to the government and to broadcast and interpret official

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policies to the Chinese communities. The imperial and republican governments of China used the Chambers of Commerce similarly.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Chinese increased not only in numbers but in economic power. The process leading to Chinese domination of the bulk of south-east Asia's commerce presumably began at some unknown date far back in history when the first Chinese immigrant trader opened for business. The development from the time of mass immigration was thus new in degree but not in kind. From about the middle of the previous century, Chinese moved toward economic mastery with greater speed and in larger numbers than ever before. As western capital stimulated the production of primary products for export, there was more for the Chinese intermediary trader to do. As relative prosperity came to some areas, there were more customers for the Chinese retailer. As pacification and direct administration of hinterlands progressed, the Chinese merchants ranged farther afield. There remains, however, the perplexing question of why the Chinese rather than some other people saw and seized the new economic opportunities.

Except in Burma, where the Indians enjoyed ascendancy in business, and in Cambodia and remote Laos, where the Vietnamese approached similar success, the Chinese were little challenged in their economic rise. Industry and thrift have already been known as priceless, hard to explain, Chinese gifts. Organisational ability and communication systems also served the Chinese settlers. Further more, it is true that the immigrants reached the right place at the right time.

The very fact of immigration was perhaps more decisive. Torn away from traditional pursuits and ancient restraints, the overseas settlers could move into activities rarely accessible to their kin folk in the home villages. Heavily peasant in background; the immigrants did not normally seek to farm in South-east Asia. Laws against land alienation, the scarcity of capital for investment in farm steads, and the near absence of wives and children to help work in family farms, all were obstacles to the establishment of Chinese peasants in the region. More important, it seems, was the fact that the Chinese migration was more than an international transplanting of people. It was in the pattern of movement from the farms to the cities that has been a feature of all modern economic growth. The Chinese left not only the country but the countryside as well. Working as miners or estate labourers for a time after reaching the tropics, most overseas Chinese gravitated toward urban areas and city occupations. The indigenous peoples living within social structures of only two levels, peasant and noble, for the most part remained rooted to their traditions and were unprepared for economic adventure.

Engaged in occupation alien to the indigenous peasants, performing tasks beneath the Westerners and the South-east Asian nobility, the Chinese occupied middle rung on the economic ladder. Thousands of them worked in light industrial and service jobs, but vastly more vital were those involved in trade. The internal commerce of most countries was in Chinese hands, by and large. The great Western trading firms could not have reached the means of indigenous producers and consumers without the Chinese intermediaries nor could local goods flow between rural and urban areas have attained much volume in their absence. Virtually no transaction was too petty for the immigrant trader; and, as time went, few endeavours were too large to be attempted by the Chinese management and capital.

4.3 RISE OF NATIONALISM

Near the end of the nineteenth century, there began an overseas Chinese political awakening that has continued through decades of change to the present. The start of the process is usually referred to as the birth of nationalism among the Chinese abroad. The reasons for the shift in attitude from a comparatively passive sentimental attachment to the land and culture of China to a dynamic, sometimes even aggressive, identification with the Chinese nation are many and complex. Here it is appropriate simply to record the fact that for nearly seventy years the Chinese abroad, like their compatriots at home,

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have been caught up in the nationalist side of the present era. China came to be viewed not merely with cultural home sickness, the Chinese nation, including its overseas members, was believed to be the entity through which individual and collective hopes were to be realised.

Recognition of the Chinese as a national struggling among other nations rather than as the sole civilised people in a global sea of barbarism came swiftly. The change was first prompted by those dynastic officials who sought to revitalize China. The dispatch of imperial missions to foreign lands and the establishment of consulates and legations abroad generated an awareness in Peking of overseas Chinese problems and strength. The revenue producing potential of the settlers abroad was especially impressive to the Manchu court. Close on the heels of the court nobility came conservative reformers to enlist the overseas people in the cause of national salvation through modernization. Shortly, the revolutionaries under Sun Yat-sen appeared and assumed leadership.

As overseas Chinese nationalism was ardently directed toward pulling China out of her backwardness, Sun Yat-sen's vaguely phrased programme for social and economic advance appealed to the Chinese. Money went into revolutionary treasury and cells of the revolutionary party were founded throughout South-east Asia. It would not be wrong to argue that without the support of the Chinese abroad, the destruction of the dynasty would have been achieved later and possibly under different auspices. The 1911 revolution, quite unlike that of 1949, was in great measure an expression of nationalism of the overseas Chinese. Until World War II, Sun Yat-sen's party, now called the Kuomintang, was the focus of overseas Chinese loyalty.

Two twentieth century developments, one the result of another, were instrumental in the emergence of revolutionary nationalism among the overseas Chinese. The modernised school system, dating from the beginning of the present century, and the growing use of Mandarin Chinese as an immigrant lingua franca have been the cradle and vehicle of nationalism. Nothing has been more central to the nationalist mobilization of the South-east Asian Chinese than the political recruitment conducted in the classrooms. Boycotts, demonstrations and even violence have originated in the schools; and the language of overseas Chinese nationalism has been the mandarin learned there. The Chinese have been most forceful politically in those places in South-east Asia, such as Malaysia, where their schools have flourished.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: 1) Give answers in the space given below.
2) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) In which South-east Asian country did Chinese colonial rule last for very long?
   a) Indonesia
   b) Thailand
   c) Vietnam
   d) Cambodia

2) Western Colonialism began in South-east Asia with the Portuguese capture of
   a) Singapore
   b) Malacca
   c) Movocco
   d) Penang

3) Describe in brief the effect of Coolie trade on Chinese immigrants.

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4.4 UNDER JAPANESE SUBJUGATION

Since most Chinese in South-east Asia had direct and daily contact with western colonial rule, semi-colonialism in the ancestral land was particularly offensive. As expatriates hoping to obtain dignity and protection from a reborn China, the overseas people were especially alarmed by the Japanese menace. Men looked to the Kuomintang to rescue the nation through combat with imperialism and defence against Japan.

For some Chinese in South-east Asia, intense hostility toward imperialism and alarm over Japanese expansion led to receptiveness to communism. The recruitment of Communist cadres among the virulently nationalist overseas Chinese youth, especially in Singapore and Malaya, progressed and there were efforts to use the developing strength of the labour movement for Communist ends.

Japan's conquest and rule of South-east Asia struck cruel blows against the Chinese. The colonial order under which the immigrants had advanced and the world trade upon which they ultimately depended for their livelihoods were destroyed. Wartime isolation stagnated the economy of the region. The Japanese military administration was inept, and, worse, its actions were unpredictable. Bad government and economic deterioration were not the only disasters to affect the Chinese in South-east Asia during the war. The Japanese singled out the Chinese settlers for markedly harsh treatment. Thousands of Chinese were massacred by the Japanese. Money was forcefully taken from rich Chinese. Persons suspected of underground occupation were rounded up, tortured and murdered. Chinese guerrilla bands, like their Filipino allies, were pursued and fought. The occupation brought suffering to all and death to many. Chinese collaboration with the Japanese was generally uncommon because the settlers were for the most part committed to the cause of Chinese national salvation and because the Japanese had little need for and less faith in the Chinese.

Japanese mistrust of the overseas Chinese was far from unfounded. The settlers had contributed enormous sums to the Chinese war chest against Japan. No other Chinese population was more dedicated to national defence as those in South-east Asia. Until late in the war, the Chinese and the Filipines were only peoples in South-east Asia to offer major resistance to the Japanese. In Malaya where the proportion and nationalism of the Chinese was the greatest, the fight against Japan began as the invaders moved down the peninsula and continued throughout the years of occupation. The most effective guerrillas were organised and led by a tightly-knit Chinese Communist minority of a few thousand. Veterans of that force returned to the jungle to fight the colonial power in 1948 and attempted to dislodge Malayan authority after 1957.

The ability of the Communists in Malay to mobilise military threats for nearly two decades is a measure of their resourcefulness and discipline rather than of their numbers. Presumably pre-war year of clandestine operation had equipped the communists with the communication and intelligence techniques needed to support guerrilla forces. It is believed that funds and supplies were obtained in part through intimidation, from urban Chinese. Food, local intelligence, and sometimes shelter were available from Chinese peasants on the edges of the jungle. The economic decay of the occupation period had driven many to subsistence farming on unclaimed land away from urban centres. Known as squatters, because of their unlawful occupancy of farms, they were invaluable to the Communists during the war against Japan and later against British colonial and Malayan authorities. By relocating the squatters to deny food and information to the guerrillas, the British and Malayan authorities could defeat them.

4.5 THE POST-WAR YEARS: EARLY PHASE

Victory over Japan brought new uncertainties to the overseas Chinese. The revolutionary bursting of South-east Asian nationalism, touched off by the war, endangered many and dictated readjustment for all. Antipathy toward the Chinese in their midst had long

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smoldered among many indigenous South-east Asians. Colonial administration had been largely content and relieved in the pre-war plural societies to have Chinese settlers serve as immediate targets of native vexation. The Japanese consciously exacerbated intercommunal ill-will. Strife between the Chinese and their neighbours was never more severe than in the period of anarchy between Japanese collapse and the re-establishment of law-enforcement. In Malaya and Indonesia, the Chinese suffered most acutely.

South-east Asia's nationalist revolutionaries called for both liberation from colonialism and economic advance, while they held the Chinese to be the agents of Western exploitation and obstacles to material progress for native South-east Asians. Vengeance against the Chinese was most brutal in Indonesia, and in other areas repression was less violent. In all the colonies, it was hoped that end of Western rule would help loosen the commercial grasp of the Chinese. It has been seen that indigeneously economic nationalism in some form plays a role in all the political programmes of independent South-east Asia; and throughout the entire region, the Chinese experience disabilities ranging from legislated discrimination, usually in transparent disguise, to pre-emptory confiscation of property and denial of opportunity.

Post-colonial South-east Asia brought to the Chinese a new situation requiring them to make readjustments in meeting adversity and in mastering the unprecedented. The independent governments uniformly sought to promote indigenous entrepreneurship. To the bulk of the Chinese community perplexity rather than opportunity developed. For some years the commerce of South-east Asia remained largely in Chinese hands. However, in this as in all other areas of overseas Chinese life, there are differences among the countries of the region.

4.6 THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC AND SOUTH-EAST ASIAN CHINESE

In the early years of its coming into being the government of the People's Republic of China, like the Kuomintang government, tried to generate support among the settlers abroad. Student and visitors were urged to go to China; ancient culture was respected, overseas capital was attracted; strong support for the overseas Chinese in their difficulties with host governments was promised. In Communist publications designed for overseas consumption, Peking laid heavy stress on appeals to Chinese nationalism among expatriates and also on China's growing economic and political strength. The claim that the Communists had liberated China from imperialism got more prominence than the fact that China was liberated from feudalism. This was so because landlordism was not a source of grief to the Chinese in South-east Asia. In fact it was traditional for Chinese expatriates to dream of an old age made serene and dignified through ownership of land in the native village. The Peking government was at first careful not to antagonize the overseas Chinese by redistributing their land holdings but eventually it had to follow a uniform land re-distribution policy making its intentions amply clear to the Chinese settlers abroad.

In the later years other methods have been used by the Chinese government to reach out to Chinese people in other lands. Radio programmes broadcasted to South-east Asia were introduced. News, commentary and music were broadcast and in addition lessons in Mandarin Chinese for those ignorant in the language were given through radio. Similarly China's achievements in various areas, in particular science and technology, have been given prominent coverage. In other words, the Chinese government had made an all out effort to see to it that Chinese expatriates continue to love their homeland.

During the Cultural Revolution when China was going through an unprecendented political upheaval, the Chinese regime openly began to support insurgence and rebellions in other developing countries. Prominent among these were the South-east Asian countries where existence of large Chinese populations made the task easier. The Chinese regime in Peking not only exported the ideology of Maoism but expressed complete support for Maoist organisations attempting to wreck the existing governments

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in these countries. This not only strained relations between the governments of China and these countries but made the expatriate Chinese community suspect in the eyes of native South-east Asians; they came to be viewed as agents of the Chinese government. This further aggravated the ethnic tensions for quite some time. The Chinese within themselves were also divided over the issue of support or opposition to Communist ideology and the Communist government in Mainland China.

In the period of reforms in China i.e. since 1978, the Peking government has taken a moderate attitude towards overseas Chinese all over the world. From prospering business communities in South-east Asia particularly the ethnic Chinese the PRC government expects collaboration in the form of investments, technology transfer etc. Now that China seems to be in a rush to modernise its industry and management system, among other things, the support from overseas Chinese is more than welcome.

With prosperity and democratic reforms in most South-east Asian countries, ethnic tensions are gradually receding. This will obviously help the Chinese populations do better. With their economic strength and a sense of political security they should be in a better position to play a significant role in the development of then native land.

Check Your Progress 2

Note : 1) Use the space given below for Your answer.
2) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) In what ways did nationalism actuate the overseas Chinese?

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2) What was the main thrust of the Chinese government policy towards the overseas Chinese?

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

Since very ancient times China has influenced the region called South-east Asia. Except for Vietnam which experienced Chinese rule for many centuries, all countries of the region had a wide ranging commercial contacts with China. Chinese in small numbers, mostly among the merchant class, were found in South-east Asia when the Portuguese arrived there in the beginning of the sixteenth century. As South-east Asia entered a period of transformation in the nineteenth century, the demand for labour increased. Chinese in large numbers started coming to this region and between the years 1860 to 1930 there was large-scale Chinese immigration. They faced very difficult and often inhuman situations. Poverty and threat of starvation at home attracted the Chinese peasantry to do jobs in other lands. What was common among the Chinese immigrants was the attachment for the homeland. They formed their own organisations and sent money home to help poor relatives. Through sheer hard work the Chinese economic power increased and they began to dominate South-east Asia's commerce. The rise of nationalism in China awakened the overseas Chinese politically and they became a

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major source of support to the anti-imperialist, anti-Manchu forces operating within China. Both the Kuomintang (the Nationalists) and the communism received support from them. When South-east Asia came under the Japanese occupation, the Chinese were selected for special inhuman treatment. After the end of the Second World War colonialism faded away in South-east Asia and the Chinese had to readjust to a new situation. Ethnic strife in some of these countries hurt the Chinese. Policies of the Chinese government have also caused problems for them. However, with gradual democratisation and economic prosperity of the region, it seems that Chinese will continue to play a meaningful role in South-east Asia.

4.8 KEY WORDS

Millennium : a period of thousand years
Archipelago : group of many islands
Barracoons : tiny, unhealthy dwellings
Victorian : showing respectability as was characteristic
Heretical : opinion opposed to established views

4.9 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

1. Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in South-east Asia* (London: Oxford University Press) 1965.
2. Lea E. Williams, *The Future of Overseas Chinese in South-east Asia* (New York: Mcbrew Hill Book Co.) 1966.

4.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) c
2) b
3) See second para of section 4.2.
   1) Rural Chinese dominated among the immigrant Chinese.
   2) Coolies were nothing but slaves.
   3) Many of the Chinese, settled in South-east Asia, are descendants of the coolies.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Summing of section 4.5.
   1) Native vexation
   2) Japanese fuelled communal ill-will
   3) Rise of nationalism in the states of South-east Asia
   4) Post-war independent Governments' policies of indigenisation
   5) Immigrants are looked down upon as the flag bearers of imperialism.
2) See section 4.6.
   1) Chinese government supports the overseas Chinese mainly for economic reasons.
   2) Maoist China attempts to sell Maoism through overseas Chinese.
   3) Chinese government through media tried to integrate overseas Chinese with the culture and tradition of mainland Chinese.

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