

Class Differentiation and Social Restructuring of Overseas Chinese in Late Qing Southeast Asia: A Historical Sociology Study

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ABSTRACT

This study re-examines the social differentiation and restructuring of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia during the late Qing period (1850–1911) through the lens of historical sociology. Departing from the prevalent "contributionist" narrative that homogenizes overseas Chinese history, this paper argues that the overseas Chinese community was not a monolithic entity. Instead, its internal class divisions were a complex result of the interplay between pre-existing class affiliations and new colonial power structures. This research systematically integrates Marxist class theory with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to build a "Class-Colonial Interaction" analytical model. Through a comparative historical analysis of three distinct cases—British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and Siam—the study reveals how varying colonial policies influenced the remaking of Chinese class structures. The findings show that the gentry and merchants successfully transformed their cultural and social capital from China into economic and political capital in the colonies, quickly ascending to become compradors and industrial capitalists. In contrast, a large underclass of laborers, subjected to brutal exploitation, converted their traditional folk beliefs into symbolic capital for collective resistance through secret societies. Colonial authorities, in turn, exploited these internal class and dialect-group tensions to strengthen their rule through "divide-and-rule" or "middleman" strategies. This study not only addresses the traditional neglect of class differentiation in overseas Chinese studies but also offers a new theoretical framework for understanding the complexity of diasporic Chinese communities. The findings have profound implications for understanding the path dependency of social stratification and identity among contemporary Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS

Overseas Chinese; Class differentiation; Historical sociology; Colonialism; Cultural capital; Southeast asia; Late Qing

1 Introduction

During the late Qing period, millions of Chinese laborers and merchants migrated to Southeast Asia, becoming a crucial workforce that drove the colonial economy and established intricate economic, political, and cultural networks. This mass migration offers a vital entry point for understanding China's modernization process and its global interactions. However, for a long time, the study of overseas Chinese has been dominated by a "contributionist" paradigm, which tends to portray the community as a homogeneous whole and emphasizes its "dual contributions" to both the ancestral homeland and the host countries. This grand narrative obscures the deep-seated class contradictions and structural differentiation within the overseas Chinese community. It overlooks the inherent class differences and the role of colonial power in reshaping the social structure of the Chinese population.

This singular perspective fails to explain why, in the same historical current, the overseas Chinese community experienced vastly different life paths and destinies. The traditional "contributionist" framework, with its overly simplified collective narrative, is unable to account for the unequal distribution of resources and power within the community, or the structural conflicts that resulted. By treating the Chinese diaspora as a uniform and selfless group, this paradigm inadvertently erases the agency and history of collective resistance of most working-class migrants, rendering their struggles invisible and preventing a deep analysis of the exploitation and oppression that were prevalent within the colonial economic system.

To overcome these limitations, this paper proposes an innovative "Class-Colonial Interaction" model, designed to provide a more precise analytical tool for understanding the complexities of the overseas Chinese community. The model integrates Marxist class theory with Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. Marxist theory is used to analyze the position of overseas Chinese within the new colonial relations of production, revealing the formation of new classes such as compradors, industrial capitalists, and indentured laborers, as well as the "trans-oceanic chain of exploitation". Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is used to analyze non-economic factors—specifically the gentry's examination culture, merchants' clan networks, and laborers' folk beliefs—and how they were transformed into new forms of power. This study aims to demonstrate that class differentiation among the Chinese in Southeast Asia was not a random occurrence, but a result of their original class affiliations being selectively amplified, reshaped, or suppressed within the new colonial relations and power dynamics. The paper will first systematically review the limitations of existing studies; then, in the analytical section, it will explore the mechanisms of class restructuring and the transformation of cultural capital. It will also provide a comparative analysis of British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and Siam. Finally, it will summarize the findings and discuss their implications for the path dependency of contemporary Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.

2 Limitations of traditional overseas Chinese studies

Traditional overseas Chinese historiography, exemplified by the classic works of scholars like Zhuang Guotu and Yen Ching-Hwang, established a research tradition centered on economic networks, political participation, and cultural adaptation. These studies made significant contributions to the discovery of historical materials and the construction of historical narratives. For instance, Zhuang Guotu's work on remittance networks revealed the economic significance of Chinese merchants by analyzing the *qiaopi* (overseas remittance letters) financial system established by merchants from Fujian and Guangdong in the 19th century, which maintained economic ties between China's southeastern coast and Southeast Asia. Yen Ching-Hwang highlighted the financial support provided by the overseas Chinese bourgeoisie to the 1911 Revolution, shaping a collective image of a "patriotic bourgeoisie" through his analysis of their donations to the *Tongmenghui* and *Nanyang Ribao*.

However, this paradigm suffers from two key blind spots. First, it views the Chinese as a homogenous group, ignoring the vast differences in migration trajectories and survival strategies among different classes such as merchants, gentry, and laborers. For example, while Zhuang Guotu's research revealed the immense scale of remittance networks, it failed to differentiate between the resources of impoverished small traders and large monopolistic merchants, nor did it explain why only a small number of laborers were able to send money home regularly. Second, it downplays the role of colonial power in reshaping the social structure of the Chinese community, failing to analyze how colonial policies exploited and exacerbated internal class divisions. For example, Yen Ching-Hwang's work on the contributions of overseas Chinese to the 1911 Revolution overlooks how the British colonial government's "divide-and-rule" policy leveraged the class opposition between royalists and revolutionaries to suppress Confucian movements within the Chinese community.

In the last two decades, some scholars have begun to move beyond this single perspective, attempting to use new theoretical frameworks such as diaspora theory and transnationalism. While these studies have brought attention to the diversity and transnational mobility of the Chinese community, they still have three major limitations. First, on a theoretical level, there is a lack of an integrated model that effectively combines class analysis with diaspora and transnational theories. Second, on a methodological level, existing studies rely too heavily on elite sources such as chamber of commerce archives and official documents, neglecting the systematic excavation of bottom-up materials (such as laborers' letters and court testimonies), which results in an "elite bias" in the research. This elite-centric historiography, which ignores the historical sociology emphasis on broader social processes and "ordinary people", cannot answer why the Chinese community experienced such different destinies in the same historical context, nor can it explain the structural inequalities behind class differentiation. Finally, on a comparative level, there has been little systematic comparison of the mechanisms of class differentiation under different colonial systems (British, Dutch, and Siamese). This paper's analysis aims to overcome these limitations by providing an integrated research approach that combines class theory with comparative historical analysis.

3 Analytical framework: the class-colonial interaction model

To address the limitations of existing research, this study is grounded in the integrated application of Marxist class theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. According to Marx, class is not merely an occupational category but is based on an individual's position within the relations of production. This paper will distinguish between the Chinese community's *class in itself* (in feudal China) and their *class for itself* (in colonial capitalism), and will use the theory of surplus value to explain the exploitation of indentured laborers by compradors and industrial capitalists. Overseas Chinese capitalists played a complex dual role in the "trans-oceanic chain of exploitation": on one hand, they were exploited by colonial authorities through policies like the 17% tax on remittances imposed by the Singapore colonial government in 1890; on the other hand, they were the appropriators of the means of production and surplus value in their relationship with Chinese laborers.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides an analytical tool that goes beyond economic determinism. It expands the concept of "capital" to four dimensions—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic—to explain how non-economic factors are utilized by different classes. This paper will focus on analyzing three forms of cultural capital: the *embodied state*, which includes the internalization of Confucian scholarship and dialect customs as *habitus*; the *institutionalized state*, which transforms diplomas and guild positions into credentials of power; and the *objectified state*, which represents material culture such as classical texts, ancestral halls, and temples as symbols of class status.

This theoretical integration is crucial. While Marxism is effective at analyzing production relations and economic exploitation, explaining why merchants became capitalists and laborers became proletarians, it struggles to explain why overseas Chinese with similar economic backgrounds (such as impoverished examination failures and poor peasants) ended up on vastly different paths. This is where Bourdieu's theory provides a critical entry point. Traditional non-economic factors, such as the gentry's Confucian cultural capital, the merchants' clan-based social capital, and the laborers' collective folk capital, were revalued and transformed in the colonial field. The colonies were not a neutral ground but a dynamic "field of power" that selectively amplified, reshaped, or suppressed different forms of capital. This dynamic interplay shows that pre-existing capital (e.g., Confucian culture) not only influenced individual actions in the

colonies, but the new colonial structure also determined which forms of capital were most valuable. While Marx's theory reveals the "production" process of new classes, Bourdieu's theory illuminates how pre-existing capital either facilitated or hindered this process. The combination of both is necessary to fully illustrate the complex picture of class re-creation among the overseas Chinese.

4 Class re-creation and the transformation of cultural capital

4.1 Class re-creation under colonial relations of production: From "class in itself" to "class for itself"

The original class structure of late Qing Chinese society primarily consisted of gentry and landowners, peasants and artisans, and merchants. The great wave of overseas migration cast these individuals from different classes into the new capitalist relations of production in Southeast Asian colonies. In the tin mines and rubber plantations of British Malaya and the sugarcane fields of the Dutch East Indies, the colonial powers' urgent demand for cheap labor created a new economic arena centered on the exploitation of surplus value, thereby systematically reshaping the class structure of the overseas Chinese.

In this process, the pre-existing merchant class rapidly ascended the social ladder. For example, the so-called "Rubber Kings" Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian first made their fortunes in pineapple canning and rice milling. They then leveraged their keen business acumen to invest in rubber plantations and manufacturing. By monopolizing trade channels, they not only reaped huge profits in the circulation sphere but also became owners of the means of production, transforming from mere circulators into appropriators of surplus value. This change in economic status enabled them to evolve from a relatively marginalized "class in itself" into a core "class for itself" within the colonial capitalist system, becoming the new industrial bourgeoisie.

In stark contrast, large numbers of landless peasants and urban poor were systematically bound by the "credit-ticket" and indenture systems, reduced to commodified "labor power". They were burdened by the debt of their passage to Nanyang, and endured high-intensity, high-risk physical labor in mines and plantations, suffering from brutal exploitation. These laborers were unable to accumulate sufficient surplus to achieve social mobility, leading to the formation of a vast proletarian class. Notably, Chinese capitalists in the colonial economic system played a complex dual role. On the one hand, they were exploited and squeezed by colonial authorities through tariffs and various laws, such as the 17% tax on remittances imposed by the Singapore colonial government in 1890. On the other hand, in their relationship with Chinese laborers, they were the owners of the means of production and the extractors of surplus value. This dual identity led to their wavering political stance: they might support nationalist revolutions to escape colonial oppression, or they might collaborate with the colonial authorities to protect their economic interests within the colonial system. This duality is a clear manifestation of the complex class relations within the overseas Chinese community.

4.2 The transformation of cultural capital and the consolidation of class status

The class differentiation of the overseas Chinese was not only a result of economic restructuring but also a product of the revaluation and transformation of cultural and social capital within the colonial context. Bourdieu's theory offers a profound analytical tool for this process. Following the abolition of the imperial examination system in late Qing China, failed gentry scholars lost their traditional path to upward mobility in China, but their cultural capital—the mastery of Confucian classics and literacy—did not lose its value. In the colonies, they successfully converted this "old" cultural capital into a "new" monopoly over education. Chen Huanzhang is a prime example of this process. As the last *jinshi* (imperial scholar) of the Qing dynasty and a Columbia University Ph.D., he integrated Confucianism into a Western academic framework and founded Confucian societies and schools both at home and abroad. Through his teaching in places like Singapore, he transformed Confucian thought from an *embodied capital* into an *objectified capital* (e.g., schools and classical texts) that could be shared by the Chinese community. By acquiring titles such as President of the Confucian Association, he achieved the accumulation of *institutionalized capital*. This not only solidified his personal prestige but also made Confucian culture a tool for maintaining social cohesion and consolidating the gentry's authority within the Chinese community. Chinese merchants, on the other hand, leveraged their Chinese clan and regional ties (*Guanxi*)—a form of *social capital*—to build the foundations of their transnational enterprises in the colonial environment. Wealthy merchants like Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian used organizations like the Hokkien Huay Kuan to turn their dialect-based networks into channels for commercial trust and information flow, thereby monopolizing the rubber and pineapple trade. They not only accumulated immense economic capital but also converted this into cultural and symbolic capital. By donating huge sums to establish schools, they earned the reputation of being "the flag of overseas Chinese and the flame of the Chinese nation". This process of converting economic capital into symbolic capital enabled their families' social status to be legitimized and passed down through generations.

Unlike the elite's path of capital conversion, the underclass of laborers, lacking economic and cultural capital, transformed their traditional folk beliefs and regional ties into a form of "collective capital" or "symbolic capital" represented by secret societies. These societies, such as the Hai San and Ghee Hin, initially functioned as mutual aid organizations, offering protection and employment to indentured laborers and acting as a sort of "folk consulate". With

their strict organization and hierarchical structure, they were the nascent form of a "class for itself" spontaneously formed by the working class in the colonial environment. This collective capital was the only resource the laborers could rely on to survive in the face of brutal exploitation and a lawless society.

However, this path of capital conversion fundamentally differed from that of the elite. While the elite leveraged their pre-existing capital to achieve class mobility in the new colonial field, the collective capital of the laborers, despite being their only means of survival and resistance, was difficult to effectively convert into economic or political power. This was because the colonial governments actively defined these societies as illegal and suppressed them, or they were co-opted by Chinese merchants to control labor. This structural inequality led to an imbalance in the capital conversion mechanism: while the elite's social and cultural capital was revalued and institutionalized in the colonial field, the laborers' collective capital was marginalized and suppressed. This phenomenon reveals the deep-seated structure behind class differentiation, explaining why only a few individuals in the overseas Chinese community were able to achieve "American Dream"-like upward mobility, while the majority were trapped in a cycle of class stagnation.

5 Comparative analysis: the reshaping of class structure by colonial policies

Colonial authorities did not passively accept the class differentiation of the overseas Chinese but actively shaped this process through various policies. This section will compare the cases of British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and Siam to demonstrate the central role of colonial policy in the remaking of the overseas Chinese class structure.

5.1 The "divide-and-rule" strategy in British Malaya

The British practiced indirect rule in Malaya through the *Kapitan Cina* (Chinese Headman) system and, later, the Chinese Protectorate. This policy leveraged the rivalries between internal Chinese dialect groups and secret societies (such as the Hai San and Ghee Hin) to maintain social order and economic interests in the colony. This strategy legitimized Chinese merchant elites, like Yap Ah Loy in Kuala Lumpur and Chung Keng Quee in Perak, as agents of colonial rule, granting them the authority to manage Chinese laborers. While this legitimization strengthened colonial control, it also exacerbated the conflicts between merchants and laborers, as well as among different dialect groups.

5.2 The "Middleman" model in the Dutch east Indies

The Dutch colonial authorities positioned the Chinese as a "middleman" class, situated between Europeans and the indigenous population. Through the *Kapitan Cina* and tax-farming systems, they supported native-born Chinese elites, such as the *Peranakans*, as intermediaries of colonial rule, granting them monopolies on salt, tobacco, and opium. This model created a deep structural division between the native-born elite (*Peranakans*) and the newly arrived laborers (*Sinkeh*). The *Peranakan* elite became highly assimilated, often no longer speaking Chinese, while the *Sinkeh* were systematically exploited under the indenture system. The cultural, social, and economic gap between the two groups widened significantly.

5.3 The royal co-optation model in Siam

Siam (Thailand) was never colonized, and its monarchy adopted a policy of "mild assimilation" towards the Chinese population. Unlike the colonies, Siam's *Sakdina* system, a feudal-like hierarchy, did not apply to the Chinese, allowing Chinese merchants to operate freely in commerce. The king co-opted wealthy Chinese merchants by granting them royal titles, drawing them into the bureaucracy and forging a common bond of interest with the monarchy. This model led to a strong identification with Thai identity among the Chinese elite, whose class status became closely tied to the Thai monarchy, creating a cultural and class divide with the lower-class laborers. Unlike the nationalist sentiments of the Chinese in the colonies, the political loyalty of the Siamese Chinese merchants was strongly inclined towards their host country.

5.4 Comparative summary

The following table summarizes the overseas Chinese class structures under these three different models:

This comparative table clearly shows how different ruling models directly or indirectly shaped the internal class

Table 1

Indicator	British Malaya	Dutch East Indies	Siam (Thailand)
Ruling Policy	"Divide-and-Rule"	"Middleman" Model	Royal Co-optation / Mild Assimilation
Elite Class Position	<i>Kapitan Cina</i> , Secret Society Leaders	<i>Peranakan</i> Elite	Royal Aristocrats, Bureaucrats
Laborer Class Position	Indentured <i>Coolies</i> , Secret Society Members	<i>Sinkeh</i> Indentured Laborers	Free Laborers, Small Traders
Core Institutions	<i>Kapitan Cina</i> System, Chinese Protectorate	<i>Kapitan Cina</i> System, Tax-Farming	<i>Sakdina</i> System (inapplicable), Title Granting
Class Relationship	Exploitation of gang rivalries, exacerbating internal conflicts	Structural division between native-born elite and new laborers	Elite highly assimilated, clear class separation

structure of the overseas Chinese community. It validates the feasibility of the "Class-Colonial Interaction" model and provides a macro-level analytical tool for understanding the complexity of overseas Chinese societies.

6 Conclusion: historical legacy and future research

This paper, by integrating Marxist class theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, has built a "Class-Colonial Interaction" analytical model to systematically study the class differentiation and social restructuring of overseas Chinese in the late Qing period. The study concludes that the overseas Chinese community was not a homogenous group but was marked by profound class divisions. This differentiation was a product of the complex interplay between their pre-existing class identities in China, the new relations of production in the colonies, and the colonial power structures. The gentry and merchants achieved upward mobility by converting their capital into economic and political power, while laborers struggled under brutal exploitation and developed a unique form of bottom-up collective capital.

The theoretical contributions of this study are twofold: First, it successfully moves beyond the limitations of the traditional "contributionist" narrative, offering a new analytical framework to understand the internal contradictions and complexities of the overseas Chinese community. Second, by comparing three distinct cases with different colonial policies—British Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and Siam—this paper systematically demonstrates the decisive role of colonial power in shaping the social structure of the Chinese diaspora, filling a gap in existing research.

The class structures and identity patterns forged during the late Qing period have been deeply embedded in the social stratification of contemporary Chinese communities in Southeast Asia through family inheritance, educational investment, and social networks, creating a "path dependency" that influences today's social structure. For example, in Malaysia and Singapore, traditional clan and regional networks continue to serve as important social capital for business and political elites. In Thailand, the high degree of identification with Thai identity among the Chinese elite is also closely tied to their historical class status. This historical inertia is a manifestation of "path dependency".

Future research can further utilize non-textual materials such as oral histories and physical culture (e.g., temples and guildhalls) to deepen our understanding of the "collective capital" and daily lives of the working-class Chinese. This approach can effectively remedy the "elite bias" of existing literature, providing a richer source of data for both historical and sociological studies. By systematically unearthing these neglected historical materials, future studies will be able to more fully portray the agency and history of resistance among the oppressed within the overseas Chinese community, thereby offering a new perspective on the complexity and structural inequality of the Chinese diaspora.

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