Chinese new migrants in Suriname: the inevitability of ethnic performing

Tjon Sie Fat, P.B.

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EPILOGUE

The pattern of performative articulation of Chinese ‘groupness’ according to the logic of apanjaht ideology seems to have been set in Suriname. Despite the setbacks associated with political participation via Pertjajah Luhur in the 2005 elections, the fact that 2008 would be 155 years since the first ‘Chinese Settlement’ and two years before the 2010 legislative elections, was not an opportunity to be missed or ignored. But the 2008 celebrations were in many ways a truncated version of the 2003 celebrations. On Sunday 20 October 2008 celebrations started with a reception in the Presidential Palace. The next day a new memorial was unveiled by President Venetiaan in New Amsterdam in Commewijne District, to mark the landing of the first Chinese indentured labourers in 1853. The location of the second memorial ostensibly marked the spot where the first Chinese set foot on Surinamese soil. This second Chinese marker, in the shape of a white concrete column, was an initiative of the artist Paul Woei.

Though he described the memorial as a monument to integration as well as immigration, he repeated earlier chauvinistic civilizational claims, stating that “integration [of Surinamese society] was initiated by the Chinese” and claiming Chinese authorship of common elements in Surinamese society. This time round a book was produced, with old photographs and a text on the history of the Chinese of Suriname.1 Celebrations continued on Independence Square, with a food fair during the day and a cultural show in the evening, with the theme of ‘Cooperate for Prosperity and Stability’. The evening started with performances by local music groups such as South South West and the New System Brassband. When the President arrived, a choir of children from various ethnic groups sang the national anthem. This was followed by a mu su and a mu liung performance, and a ‘multicultural show’ which included a ‘Tibetan’ dance by students of the Chinese school and a performance of Suriname’s delegation to the Carifesta celebration in

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1 (De Ware Tijd 18 October 2008, ‘Monument voor immigratie en integratie’ (Monument to immigration and integration)).
Guyana. The celebrations were concluded with a 155 metre long string of Chinese fireworks.2

Now, however, ethnic Chinese elites will have to increase Chinese political participation while anti-Chinese sentiments seem primed to become a strong theme in populist narratives. In the current run-up to the 2010 legislative elections, new coalitions (the Mega Bloc and the Centre Bloc) have formed and old coalitions (New Front) are being renegotiated. In June 2008 opposition parties formed the Mega Bloc, also known as NDP-2008. It basically consisted of the NDP, its former splinter party DNP 2000, the Javanese KTPI, the East Indian BVD (the VHP splinter party), and PALU. In August 2008 smaller splinter parties joined together to form the Middenblok ('Centre Bloc', implying a middle ground between New Front and the Mega Bloc): New Suriname (NS), Alternative 1 (A-1), the National Development Party (NOP), the Progressive Surinamese People’s Party (PSV), and DOE. The goals of the Mega Bloc were framed in terms of national development and patriotism.3 The de facto chairman of the coalition, Desi Bouterse of NDP, called for an end to apanjaht consociationalism, which he called “a politics of hate, a politics of lies, a politics of deception.”4 The struggle, at the surface at least, is between the ‘old politics’ of apanjaht tradition and the ‘new politics’ of anti-apanjaht coalitions, and some predict the eventual electoral defeat of the established apanjaht grand coalition.5

Populism is on the rise in the absence of clear political ideologies. Surinamese civic discourse is currently framed in jingoistic anti-immigrant sentiments. KTPI, the rival of (pro-Chinese) Pertjajah Luhur for the ethnic Javanese vote, has picked up on and embraced the general anti-Chinese feelings. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of KTPI in November 2008, which doubled as a

2 (De Ware Tijd 21 October 2008, ‘Herdenking Chinese Immigratie met veel pracht en praal’ (Chinese Immigration commemorated with much pomp and circumstance); 21 October 2008, ‘155 jaar Chinese immigratie; Volle ondersteuning bij Chinese dag Onafhankelijkheidsplein’ (155 years of Chinese immigration; full support on Chinese day at Independence Square)).
3 De Ware Tijd 28 June 2008, ‘NDP 2008 popelt om regeermandaat Surinaams volk’ (NDP 2008 eagerly anticipates mandate to rule from the Surinamese people).
4 De Ware Tijd 14 October 2008, ‘NDP-regering gaat positie gemarginaliseerde groepen verbeteren’ (NDP administration will improve position of marginalized groups).
5 De Ware Tijd 2 October 2008, ‘Mega bloc wint ‘IDOS-verkiezing’ grandioos: Regering krijgt weer een onvoldoende’ (Monumental victory for Mega Bloc in ‘IDOS elections’: government receives bad marks again). According to the IDOS public opinion poll the Mega Bloc / NDP-2008 would win twice the number of votes as the New Front coalition if spot elections were held.
Mega Bloc event, KTPI chairman Willy Soemita warned that Suriname might be formally independent, “but will soon be a dependency of China.”\(^6\) The Centre Bloc addressed popular anti-Chinese sentiments more directly the following month. It accused the Venetiaan III administration of granting New Chinese preferential treatment, and demanded to know of any role the PRC might have in the issue. It further demanded that the ‘money flows’ of these New Chinese be investigated, that Chinese migrants be required to pass a citizenship test (the Dutch word *inburgeringsplicht* directly imported from Dutch discourse on immigration and ethnic diversity), and that New Chinese be required to undergo medical screening upon arrival to protect against ‘new and alien diseases’.\(^7\) After that the emotional patriotism and anti-Chinese themes of Surinamese civic discourse briefly surfaced in the Dutch daily De Volkskrant, where it blended with Western discourse of China as the new imperialist and colonizer, Dutch immigration discourse, and Dutch stereotypes of Chinese as the ideal minority group.\(^8\)

Global developments also directly impact the local context in the current world economic crisis, and as the social position of ethnic Chinese in Suriname is so fundamentally tied to the promise of entrepreneurial success, they too are directly affected. Whether the specific pattern of New Chinese entrepreneurial chain migration will prove to be sustainable in Suriname remains to be seen. The current global economic crisis has strongly impacted the Chinese economy, with demand for cheap consumer goods evaporating.

\(^6\) De Ware Tijd 1 December 2008, ‘KTPI had altijd nationale opstelling’ (KTPI always had a national outlook). Apparently Soemita said: ‘…maar straks afhankelijk van China zal worden’ (lit.: “but will soon become dependent of China”).

\(^7\) De Ware Tijd 24 December 2008, ‘Middenblok wil parlementaire enquête over Chinese invasie’ (Centre Bloc wants parliamentary inquiry into Chinese invasion). With regard to the reference to disease, the exact words were: ‘Dit om van [sic] nieuwe ziekten die niet in Suriname voorkomen (zoals vogelgriep) te minimaliseren en of voorkomen.’ (lit.: “This in order to minimalize or prevent [the introduction] of new diseases that are alien to Suriname.”)

\(^8\) De Volkskrant 21 February 2009, ‘De Nieuwe Chinezen’ (The New Chinese). The feature by Stieven Ramdhari, a Dutch journalist of Surinamese origin, was placed next to another full-page item on the growing non-working class constituency of the Islamophobic, anti-immigrant Dutch politician Geert Wilders. The item on New Chinese included a photograph of Chinese-looking people standing in the doorway of Kong Ngie Tong Sang (the ‘Old Chinese’ *huiguan*), and illustrated the increasing New Chinese population with a graph containing rather misleading data on residence permits issued to PRC nationals by the Surinamese Ministry of Justice and Police. Though those numbers are clearly increasing, they do not differentiate between renewals and new applications, and therefore neither between ‘Old Chinese’ and New Chinese. Part of the increase may be explained by the Ministry clearing up a backlog of Chinese applications.
This has led to the closure of thousands of factories and exporting companies, and mounting job losses. Yiwu, which is completely dependent on the export of cheap, low-end, labour-intensive consumer products, cannot escape the effects of any global economic downturn, as well as domestic factors such as rising costs of production. In an April 2008 report, Tao Dong, chief Asia economist at Credit Suisse in Hong Kong, wrote: “The end of an era in terms of China’s mighty export industry has just begun.”\(^9\) In January 2009, the deputy mayor of Yiwu City, Li Xuhang, was quoted as saying that business has been slowing down since the end of the first semester of 2008.\(^10\)

Yiwu is unlikely to remain the same driving force behind Baihuo Business in Suriname, and New Chinese will need to either find another way to sustain chain migration or adapt their chain migrant network. Perhaps some will even move away from Suriname if the local market for Chinese goods weakens, which it inevitably will. Chinese migration might decrease, but the ‘Old Chinese’ networks might see renewed migration. 60% of PRC exports originate in the southeast coast of the PRC, which includes the Fuidung’on and Wenzhou areas. Average monthly wages in Dongguan, the largest manufacturing centre in the PRC, increased from RMB 1,284 in 2001 to RMB 2,594 by the end of 2006.\(^11\) But in the light of the global credit crisis and the ensuing global financial crisis, the demand from the USA and Europe has diminished, and this has severely impacted PRC manufacturing and exports. From January through October 2008, 15,661 enterprises in Guangdong closed. More than half closed in October.

Dongguan in the Fuidung’on Hakka heartland was particularly hard hit, with many thousands of factories closing under the impact of the global economic crisis and soaring production costs. Many local Hakkas lost substantial income from real estate and suffered job losses. The Dongguan government requested suspension of the national Labour Contract Law, which would allow a freeze of minimum wages and suspension of employers’ social-insurance

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contributions. Yet when enterprises started failing or relocating and job losses mounted, social unrest followed. In November 2008 about 500 workers rioted when 80 migrant workers were laid off at the Kai Da Toy Factory in Zhongtang in Dongguan. Police vehicles were wrecked and the factory offices trashed. With Fuidunghon Hakka once again facing problems in the qiaoxiang, who knows if the pattern of Hakka chain migration will be revived soon, and the new Chinese migrants of the future will be ‘Old Chinese’ once again.

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