Chinese new migrants in Suriname: the inevitability of ethnic performing
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ENGLISH SUMMARY

This study outlines the challenges to the local positioning of the Chinese community in Suriname in the context of the arrival of new Chinese migrants in the early 2000s. The main conclusion of this study is that the local in many ways takes precedence over the global; Chinese migrants freshly arriving in Suriname are not ‘Chinese’ yet, but they become so in light of Surinamese expectations of what being Chinese means, and in terms of pragmatic choices in securing a livelihood. As it emerges from this study, the positioning of New Chinese in Suriname mirrors that in South-east Asia and Africa, where the meaning of ‘Chineseness’ is either rearticulated under renewed immigration, or becomes a focus in political rhetoric.

Instrumental Ethnic Identification as a Result of Local Positioning

As a type of ethnic identification in Suriname, ‘Chineseness’ is instrumental and often strategic, and is therefore multiple and situational, and contingent on the particular agents articulating this identity, and the particular audience that is witness to the process of articulation. Chinese positioning in Surinamese society has been utterly pragmatic and relies on locally relevant notions of Chinese ethnic identity. Socio-economic positioning of migrants has produced a fairly stable and durable, albeit distinctly local and instrumental, Chinese ethnic identity in Suriname. Adaptive strategies produced an ethnic ownership economy, Chinese organizations (which at least initially were adaptive organizations of migrants), and entrepreneurial chain migration, all mutually reinforcing each other. The collective ethnic resources of Chinese migrants as an ethnic group help its members to overcome disadvantages of having the status of an outsider and they maximize the value of human and financial capital. This in turn creates the necessity to maintain and manage Chinese ethnic resources, and drives the development of ethnic communal activities, institutions (huiguan and shetuan as adaptive organizations of migrants), and elites.
Socio-political positioning produces a different type of Chinese ethnic identification. I propose that public articulation of ethnic identities of immigrants in Suriname is determined by apanjaht multiculturalism: consociational power-sharing and associated clientelism, and the ideology underpinning political power-sharing by determining who is to be included or excluded in the way multicultural Surinamese society is imagined. Apanjaht consociationalism is a type of ethnopolitics based on political power-sharing among a cartel of elites of a constellation of ethnic groups within the context of the formally non-ethnic liberal democratic Surinamese State. Surinamese political elites present diversity as a problem to be solved, and treat the nationalist ideal of the non-ethnic Surinamese State as fundamentally unachievable; apanjaht consociationalism is a way to manage diversity and thus legitimize elite dominance.

The ideological framework for the articulation of boundaries between pragmatic ethnic groups in apanjaht consociationalism is a response to the Creole-dominated nationalist view of assimilation. Apanjaht invokes the image of modular ethnic groups through a popular, commonsensical belief in fixed, primordial ethnic or racial categories, but does not actually require continuously and sharply defined ethnic boundaries, as quantifying changes in the number and sizes of ethnic groups could upset the consociational apple cart. Instead, recognition of ethnic group identity is framed within the popular Mamio (Sranantongo: ‘patchwork quilt’) stereotype. In the image of a multi-coloured checkerboard pattern mamio patchwork, ethnic groups are like equally sized and spaced pieces of cloth stitched together into a larger whole. The narrative of the Mamio Myth within apanjaht ideology provides the framework for performative ethnicity, especially with regard to politics of recognition. The positioning of collective identities within the larger narrative is quite literally articulated in public performances of ethnic pride, cultural variety, and ultimate national unity. Apanjaht ideology produces collective belonging through different, simultaneous representations of Suriname; Suriname exists because Surinamese imagine themselves as culturally varied within a territorially defined state.

Old and New Chinese

The Chinese presence in Suriname grew via chain migration from a core of indentured labourers in the late nineteenth century. They fairly quickly developed an ethnic ownership economy based on retail trade and established their own adaptive institutions. Even-
ually integration and assimilation produced a generational cleavage within the community between those born in China (tong’ap) and those born in Suriname or of mixed background (laiap). ‘Old Chinese’ migration to Suriname can be said to have transformed four different times: First there were the indentured labourers from Hakka villages in the Fuidung’on Region in the late nineteenth century; then Fuidung’on Hakka entrepreneurial chain migrants up to the first half of the twentieth century; next acculturated Fuidung’on Hakka chain migrants via Hong Kong in the second half of the twentieth century; and finally Fuidung’on migrants who left the People’s Republic of China after economic reforms and the abolition of restrictions on emigration in the late twentieth century.

By the early 1990s, renewed Chinese migration in the context of new globalized migration became noticeable in Suriname. The ‘New Chinese’ as they were soon called in Suriname, are associated with a sudden and remarkable increase in Chinese immigration in the 1990s. New Chinese Migrants are literally found all over the globe as part of renewed migration after almost thirty years (between the founding of the PRC in 1949 and the relaxation of emigration barriers in 1978). Compared to earlier Chinese migrants, New Migrants (xin yimin) typically have new types of transnational ties with the PRC as their homeland, through modern mass media and mass transit. The New Chinese in Suriname have come from every imaginable region in the Chinese world, but the vast majority arrived from the coastal provinces of the PRC, from Hainan in the south all the way to Liaoning along the North Korean border. The largest New Chinese group is from the southern part of Zhejiang Province. With the arrival of New Chinese, the linguistic and cultural situation within the Chinese segment of Suriname became unusually complex.

The available evidence indicates that the bulk of Chinese migration to Suriname basically remains sponsored migration based on privately owned businesses of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs. New Chinese migrants have adopted a wider range of survival and adaptive strategies upon their arrival in Suriname, but also carved out a separate niche in the Surinamese retail sector and have developed an ethnic ownership economy that competes with the Chinese ethnic ownership economy of the ‘Old Chinese’ (commodities versus foodstuffs, with an overlap in non-food daily necessities). In this system, migrants develop transnational business networks that exploit the drive of privately owned businesses in Zhejiang Province to increase exports, and the need for self-employment among New Migrants who as outsiders in their host societies face limited oppor-
tunities for socio-economic advancement. The New Chinese ethnic ownership economy is thus based on access to migrant networks that link Zhejiang Province to various migrant destinations abroad, including Suriname, and it is fundamentally a migrant self-help strategy for New Chinese who find themselves excluded from the Fui-dung’on Hakka ethnic ownership economy.

It is debatable whether globalization of the PRC economy drives migration to destinations like Suriname or whether it is New Migrants from China who are introducing PRC products to new markets. In any case, New Chinese socio-economic positioning had a clear impact on the image of Chinese in Suriname, as the new supermarkets came to represent the most concrete sign and outcome of New Chinese migration and of the growing influence and power of the PRC in the Caribbean and Latin American region. The Surinamese public tends to misunderstand the PRC’s presence in Suriname in terms of globalization and geopolitics and conflate the PRC, Chinese migrants survival strategies and ethnic Chinese as ‘China’ / ‘Chinese’. This has two major consequences. On the one hand, non-Chinese in Suriname - the general public as well as individual agents in the apparatus of the state - base their perception and approach of the PRC and Chinese migrants on such misunderstandings. On the other hand, Chinese migrants and ethnic Chinese in Suriname need to choose their positioning strategies with the general image of monolithic Chineseness in mind, in which ‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ are inextricably intertwined.

The current relationship between the PRC and the Republic of Suriname is based on the goals of PRC policy in the region: recognition as the only true undivided Chinese state (‘pocket-book diplomacy’ in the context of the One-China Principle, since the 1970s), and access to natural resources (since the 1990s). Untransparent links between resource extraction (usually logging) companies and the PRC government may be passively or actively misrepresented as development programs, usually by Surinamese counterparts. As a result the general public never fully understood the exact role of the PRC and made up its own minds about it through patriotic rhetoric of decolonization: the Chinese were replacing the Dutch as the new colonizers and exploiters. As in the rest of the Caribbean, PRC technical cooperation projects in Suriname are not real PRC outward FDI but are generally intended to elevate the prestige of the PRC. PRC multinationals are not actually directly investing their own capital in Suriname, but are indirectly funded by PRC government loans to Suriname. PRC resource extraction projects in Suriname are commercial projects to harvest and process
timber for the purpose of supplying the Chinese market, organized through transnational Chinese personal and business networks.

This centrality of the PRC in relation to renewed Chinese identifications is an important reason why Chinese ‘groupness’ evokes negative images among non-Chinese audiences in Suriname. Immigrants from the PRC and people with an ethnic Chinese background in Suriname are guided and limited in their articulation of identity by the way Chineseness is viewed by non-Chinese. Historically, such ascribed Chinese identity has been articulated instrumentally by elites in local media as a reaction to perceived competition by socially mobile Chinese migrants, although recently it is articulated by non-elites as a form of anti-government (anti-establishment and to a certain extent anti-globalist) protest. Anti-Chinese sentiments are fundamentally anti-immigrant sentiments that arise in the local context of civic discourse, which defines and binds Surinamese in a community of victims of inept rulers, and locate specific phenomena such as migration in the context of governance failure.

Anti-Chinese sentiments cannot be separated from anti-establishment protest; any social or political issue related to the idea of Chinese identity or China becomes symbolic of perceived government failure, either consciously in naïve monarchic resistance or unconsciously in an anti-government conspiracy theory. This is embedded in a framework of stereotypes (both negative and positive) about ethnic Chinese in Suriname. These stereotypes also inform the specific anti-New Chinese stereotypes that provide the performative content for ‘Surinamese-Chinese’ identity. In this way, anti-Chinese sentiments in Suriname - generally anti-Chinese or specifically anti-Chinese immigrant - reveal the limits to situational and performative Chinese identity. In the narratives which are constructed around Surinamese anti-Chinese sentiment, Chineseness implies membership of a closed community, the unwillingness or inability to integrate, the eternal orientalist Other. The Tong'ap response to the negative image of Chinese in Suriname had been to retreat from public view as much as the marketing requirements of their economic niche would allow. The Laiap power brokers responded by shifting negative imagery onto New Chinese as outsiders, and rearticulated the idea of ‘Surinamese-Chinese’ as the only legitimate Chinese in Suriname.
Socio-political Positioning and Participation

Chinese elites could hope to acquire a share of political power either through politics of recognition to access apanjaht consociationalist grand coalitions, or by being recognized as ethnic representatives by acquiring governing positions in Chinese adaptive organizations. For effective politics of recognition, Chinese ethnic identity needed to be articulated in line with the narratives of apanjaht ideology. Elites wishing to participate in apanjaht consociationalism still need to legitimize their claim to be ethnic representatives to the general public as well as to their coethnics. The general public needs to recognize the constituency of the new elite as a legitimate ethnic group: tied to this place, authentic, ancient. Elites need to articulate this narrative of their ethnic identity to their constituency and position themselves to their constituency as representatives of the ethnic group striving for emancipation of their social group, against the hegemony of other political factions established in the political arena. In this way apanjaht consociationalism is not just the result of ethnic pluralism but also the generator of ethnic identity; in other words in order to participate, one cannot but be ethnic.

To be useful for ethnopolitization, Chinese group identity would have to be fundamentally and very publicly performative. Chinese ethnicity was already allocated a niche in the national Mamio myth, though this ethnic identity was performed through orientalist stereotypes and not in ways that signalled modernity, for example, either in terms of citizenship in the Republic of Suriname or in relation to the power of the Chinese homeland. Unlike Chinese ethnic resources in the Chinese ethnic ownership economy, which were defined within the community and generated by the requirements of Chinese migrants, Chinese identity in apanjaht ideology would have to be articulated towards non-Chinese Surinamese as well as serve to define and mobilize an ethnic Chinese constituency of voters. By the start of the millennium members of the ethnic Chinese elite realized that there would soon be unique opportunities to use Chinese ethnic identity to position themselves in the centre of power; in October 2003 it would be 150 years since the first Chinese indentured labourers arrived in Suriname, and in May 2005 elections were to be held for the new Assembly and government. The symbolic capital which would be produced during the Commemoration would strengthen the claims of the Laiap elite to leadership within a larger Chinese community as well as force public recognition of Chinese ethnicity by the state through the logic of the Mamio Myth.
The Celebration was in many ways a clear success. The creation of a ‘Chinese ethnic group’, or at least the image of a unified, essential and important Chinese ethnic group instead of the reality of fragmented groups and undefinable ethnic labels, was the political goal of the organizers of the Commemoration, and that goal had been achieved. The Celebration was also a success as a response to the anti-Chinese sentiments linked to illegal immigration and the controversial Chinese transnational construction and logging companies. There were also concrete results with regard to Chinese ‘infrastructure’ for future use in apanjaht multiculturalist discourse; the Chinese had confirmed their recognized status as one of the Surinamese ethnic groups, and had acquired the props (Chinese markers in the Surinamese landscape, and new iconic cultural items such as a dragon for dragon dances) to negotiate their position in multiculturalist discourse (i.e. the Mamio Myth). Outsiders were generally unaware of alternative New Chinese claims in the parade; Tong'ap observers at least were now acutely aware that Chinese cultural identity in Suriname was no longer exclusively Hakka, Hongkongese, or even the homogenized Chineseness of globalized Chinese culture.

The collective identity and ethnic belonging presented in the celebrations provided elements that people could make into a basic script: Chinese in Suriname are settlers, not foreigners, respectable citizens, not temporary residents; They are the descendants of the nineteenth century Chinese indentured labourers; Chinese are integrated into Surinamese society without losing their authentic Chineseness, which is reflected by the many things that are familiar in Surinamese culture that were introduced by Chinese; Chinese are also integrated because many Surinamese have Chinese ancestors, so everybody is invited to claim Chinese roots; Chinese are successful and organized, and so on. This script fits into the broader multiculturalist discourse: because Chinese in Suriname can trace their roots back to bonded labour, they too suffered under colonial rule as involuntary immigrants and so their presence in Suriname is equally legitimate as that of Afro-Surinamese (seen as descendants of slaves) or as East Indian and Javanese (also descendants of bonded labourers).

The following year saw a New Chinese elite challenge Fui-dung'on hegemony, by inviting State recognition of their role as representatives of an important source of support, albeit of non-voters. Non-naturalized Chinese immigrants do not have direct access to political power, but can organize themselves in the face of the Surinamese State in such a way as to be recognized as re-
representatives of an otherwise unreachable but important (through association with existing ethnic groups and therefore political blocs) ‘community’. When this happens, ethnicity becomes a political resource for these organizations; consequently ethnicity comes to be located and generated within the adaptive organizations. Laiap middle class elites have exploited their recognition by the Surinamese State as representatives of ‘the Chinese community’ to become ethnic power brokers via membership of the board of a huiguan, despite lacking the specific cultural capital necessary to be recognized as legitimately ‘Chinese’ by Chinese migrants.

In Suriname, there has never been a united Chinese institution in which a unified Chinese position could be developed and internal conflicts could be managed outside the public view. Instead, the Chinese institutions of Suriname form loose networks of personal platforms. Up to 2004 there were no specific organizations for New Chinese. This allowed the Fuidung’on Hakka huiguan establishment to present itself as gatekeepers to the New Chinese while at the same time marginalizing their participation. New Chinese elites copied this established strategy of setting up or joining a non-political and non-government group as platform for recognition by the State by founding a New Chinese socio-cultural association, first Zhejiang Tongxiang Hui in January 2004, soon followed by hometown associations for people from Hainan, Fujian, Dongguan, and Guangzhou, among others. Fuidung’on Hakka elites could now no longer dictate the views of ‘the Chinese community’ to the Surinamese State and the relationship between Chinese associations in Suriname came to be reinterpreted as reflecting various subgroups.

The 2005 Legislative Elections

By the end of 2003 the established Fuidung’on Hakkas and the New Chinese had both signalled that they could independently mobilize a substantial ethnic Chinese constituency and funds. For the Chinese elites in Suriname, Old or New, the status quo to be challenged in the face of the 2005 national elections was the absence of ethnic Chinese agents where it mattered, at the centre of political power in the Surinamese State. Ethnopoliticization of Chinese in Suriname – in the sense of mobilization of an ethnic Chinese constituency concurrent with the articulation of Chinese ethnic identity and ethnic resources – was very weak up to the 2005 legislative elections. As a small ethnic minority, Chinese in Suriname had very little success with their own political parties; small numbers
translated into a numerically weak constituency. Issues of representation in an ethnic Chinese group that was only as community-minded as their ethnic ownership economy would allow, and which was fragmented along lines of assimilation, also meant that it was very difficult to find candidates willing to stand for public office who were qualified as well as acceptable to all sides (Chinese as well as non-Chinese). In practice, the most successful ethnic Chinese bids for political power were orchestrated by elites who rose within the structures of Chinese adaptive organizations, and who stood a good chance of achieving political influence through collaboration with apanjaht parties.

Chinese participation via other apanjaht parties was no less a challenge, as Chinese could find themselves isolated within special Chinese wings of non-Chinese parties. In Surinamese elections no ethnic party achieved a clear electoral majority, and although the resulting grand coalitions basically reflected a balancing act between the two largest ethnic groups of Creoles and East Indians, the balance of power was multi-polar; the Javanese elites were the wild card, because they were virtually guaranteed a place in the grand coalitions by virtue of their position as representatives of the third largest ethnic group. New ethnic elites - i.e. the elites of existing minorities and migrant groups - are not automatically accommodated as they risk unbalancing the power-sharing system. As new ethnic groups that are too substantial to be ignored by the apanjaht parties are unlikely to arise unexpectedly, new elites really have only one realistic choice if they wish to participate, that is, they must move to one of the poles in the system. As apanjaht consociationalism is about carefully maintaining the balance of power, immigrants signal instability, as potential new ethnic groups or as extensions of existing groups. Especially against the backdrop of anti-Chinese sentiments in Suriname, this meant that Chinese were potentially dangerous for apanjaht parties to include.

In the run-up to the 2005 elections, a Javanese route was chosen by rivals of the Chinese wing of the Creole NPS; in return for the ethnic Chinese vote and material and financial support, an ethnic Chinese minister as well as an ethnic Chinese member of the National Assembly were virtually guaranteed. Probably for the first time a heated Chinese election campaign erupted in the huiguan-run Chinese language newspapers in Suriname to mobilize and reveal the actual strength of the ethnic Chinese vote, which pitted three Chinese views (associated with the Javanese Pertjajah Luhur, the Creole NPS, and the anti-apanjaht NDP) against each other. Though the Javanese route was successful and an ethnic Chinese
minister and member of the Assembly were installed, in the power-sharing negotiations following the 2005 elections, Pertjajah Luhur traded the post of Minister of Trade and Industry, which had been held by two ethnic Chinese in succession, in favour of a specially created ministry in charge land allocation. Not only had the limited size of the ethnic Chinese vote become apparent, but the Chinese agents at the centre of the power-sharing negotiations were shown to be at the mercy of its Javanese-led partner.

After the elections, Pertjajah Luhur overreached itself by challenging the One-China Principle in an attempt to persuade the PRC to raise the stakes in its dollar diplomacy, which alienated ethnic Chinese supporters in Suriname even further and diminished the standing of those who had worked to unify the Chinese vote during the 2005 elections. This would seem to indicate that Chinese ethnopolitics - the bid for structural participation of ethnic Chinese in Surinamese apanjaht politics beyond the established Chinese power bases - had failed. No matter how instrumental Chinese ethnic identity is evoked, and no matter what political entity will be prepared to host Chinese ambitions, reliable mobilization of a Chinese constituency will depend on what role ethnic Chinese agents will be able to play in specific contexts in the future. For example, realignment of Chinese identity with the PRC could unify Chinese in Suriname, but would likely hamper their political empowerment if they would come to be viewed as representatives of a foreign power. The majority of ethnic Chinese in Suriname - people of Fuidung'on Hakka heritage, whether Tong'ap, Laiap or New Chinese - could conceivably claim a public Surinamese-Chinese identity, but that would effectively mean foregoing Sinocentric Chineseness on which traditional notions of Chinese migrant identity are based. In any case, the logic of apanjaht ethnopolitics dictates that future Chinese participation will depend on public articulation of ethnic identity on specific occasions.