6 China in East Asian and world culture

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Despite the comment that China is ‘overrated as . . . a source of ideas’, culture is not something that Gerry Segal explored in any depth in his article on ‘Does China Matter?’. That article was of course not centrally concerned with either China’s cultural interaction with the rest of the world, or even the politics of that interaction, but was primarily an argument cautioning other governments and government agencies about the need to ensure some perspective in dealing with the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). All the same, to that end Segal’s article stated that ‘China does not . . . matter in terms of global culture.’ Specifically it argued that China has had limited cultural reach not only compared to ‘the dominant West’ but also in comparison to Japan; that during the last 20 years the government of the PRC has spent more effort in resisting and controlling the domestic impact of external cultural influences than in attempting to create any specific external influence of its own; and that China does not play as great a role for Chinese around the world as does India for the Indians.

Not all these arguments confront established orthodoxy by any means. During the last 20 years the PRC has retreated from its role as a purveyor of world revolution and has devoted considerable effort to the domestic management of ‘Western’ cultural manifestations. At the same time, the argument about the relative strengths of Chinese and Japanese influence and authority outside their borders is clearly more contested. Japan, it is true, has had considerable impact in East and Southeast Asia during the twentieth century, both because of its colonial programme in the 1930s and its later economic development programme. However, China has an even older, and longer sustained cultural influence in the region that might still be said to run deep. On the surface at least, Segal’s argument about the ‘Overseas Chinese’ would seem to be even more necessarily contested. It is often asserted that the Chinese outside the PRC constitute a significant social, economic and even political force in their own right; and moreover that there is considerable potential for these ‘Overseas Chinese’ to ally with the PRC to create a new future Chinese superpower.
In considering each of these three arguments, this chapter has two aims. The first is to examine in greater detail the points being made by Segal. The second is to attempt to go beyond the original position about how the rest of the world should approach its engagement with the government of the PRC to consider Chinese culture’s wider interactions with the external world. In undertaking this analysis it draws on and highlights additional perspectives on China’s cultural influence.

Segal’s article is concerned primarily with the international politics of the government of the PRC as seen from the Atlantic Community, for whom it was written. It has been absolutely the norm for Chinese governments during the last hundred years to equate Chinese society with the Chinese state, specific governments and even political parties, and this equation is reflected in Segal’s article (Fitzgerald, 1994). All the same it is clearly possible to distinguish between the party-state of the PRC as a source of cultural activity, and Chinese society more generally. In similarly deconstructive mood, China’s cultural influence in Europe and North America is almost certain to be different from its influence in East and Southeast Asia, and countries where a significant proportion of the population may be Chinese. It is important to ask ‘to whom’ China matters as a source of cultural influence, as well as to what extent.

Essentially this chapter highlights two crucial aspects of China’s cultural politics for the future, which do not always pull in the same direction. The first is the role of East and Southeast Asia in China’s worldview. East and Southeast Asia are China’s principal region of influence, in cultural terms no less than in economics and politics. Moreover, there is a clear, if sometimes less tangible relationship between, on the one hand, any PRC claims to world leadership and its role in its immediate region, and, on the other, China’s claims to leadership of East and Southeast Asia and the influences of Chinese culture. The second is the contradiction between the cultural goals of the government of the PRC and the current political system’s ability to deliver progress towards those goals. As in economics and politics, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to see China acknowledged as a cultural superpower. At the same time, the CCP’s role in the determination of cultural production makes this extremely unlikely: there is often an inherent contradiction between narrow political nationalism and the wider appreciation of Chinese culture.

China as a world culture

Segal’s contention that China has limited influence and authority, not only by comparison with Europe and Atlantic cultures, but also in comparison with Japan, seems puzzling if not downright perverse. There is of course no gainsaying the universal impact of American culture, as Coca Cola, McDonalds, MTV, TV soap operas and Hollywood bear more than
adequate witness. European influences are also apparent not only in the widespread acceptance of democratic liberalism, nationalism and capitalism, but also in the appreciation of food and wine, music and literature, especially as standards of living and real disposable incomes rise.

All the same, in his haste to argue, Segal did not interrogate the complexity of the ‘global culture’ that he criticized China for having failed to engage. The description of ‘global culture’ can of course be limited to an Atlantic eye’s view of the spread of the influence of the United States. Alternatively, global culture might be seen in more pluralistic perspectives, recognizing the development of other (if less dominant) cultural influences on the world as a whole. There are after all manifestations of Chinese culture – traditional medicine and exercise regimes, literature and films, not to mention the variety and impact of Chinese cuisine – to be found almost universally. Moreover, some cultures have greater influence in some countries and on some parts of the world than others. This wider appreciation of global culture would seem a particularly wise strategy in this case, given that in the long term China is always more likely, not least for linguistic reasons and the relatively greater ease of communications, to have greater impact within East and Southeast Asia.

While there is no denying the twentieth-century impact of Japan on East and Southeast Asia, first through its colonial expansion and then later since the 1950s through the scale and extent of its economic activities, Chinese culture seems more certainly to be at the heart of regional activities in a number of ways. Confucianism or at least Confucian traditions are often regarded not only as the major characteristic of China but also of East Asia, and some parts of Southeast Asia – especially those where Chinese migration has been considerable. Difficult as it is to identify and generalize about culture, where Japanese culture is usually regarded as inward looking and only interested in Japan itself, not least by the Japanese themselves (Hendry, 1987) China sees itself fundamentally as a world culture.

Segal’s comments about the lack of influence of Chinese culture certainly stand in stark contrast to received wisdom. Even when acknowledging the limits to the generalization, almost every other commentator since Fairbank has long identified East Asia in terms of the common elements of Chinese cultural heritage (Fairbank et al., 1960). Indeed, for many, the apparent economic success of the early 1990s was at least in part attributable to this background. In its triumphalist report of 1993, the World Bank hailed the ‘economic miracle’ of an East Asian development characterized by ‘rapid growth and decreasing inequality’ (World Bank, 1993). While the World Bank did not explicitly mention the importance of cultural factors, other commentators making similar arguments and later building on the World Bank Report quite explicitly emphasized the role of Confucianism in the emergence of regional economic success (Levy
Although there was some variability in the Confucianism identified in this way, common characteristics tended to include a stress on social order and the family.

Imperial China was certainly the source of considerable cultural, as well as political, influence throughout East Asia. It contributed elements of Confucian statecraft and a popular Confucian religion, as well as Confucian ethics in family and personal relations, to the surrounding states. Buddhism came to Mount Wutai in North China (in today’s Shanxi Province) from India, and moved from Shanxi to Korea and Japan. Unsurprisingly, given the role of texts in both Confucianism and Buddhism, Chinese characters became a common script, and as in China, being able to read and write Classical Chinese became the mark of the educated throughout the region. Trade among the countries of East Asia was at times extensive, leading among other things to shared cultures in paintings and ceramics.

Segal’s article does not deny these earlier Imperial cultural influences, and neither is there anything in his other writings to suggest that was the case. His argument in ‘Does China Matter?’ is that China no longer continues to exert such influence and authority in the region. He had a constant aversion to the China exceptionalism sometimes associated with academic observers of China. This was a discussion that could never be resolved. Segal was talking about China as the government of the PRC: while sometimes the China-experts might accept that equation, often they differentiate between Chinese society and culture on the one hand and any particular state or government on the other.

In the twentieth century it is undeniable that the influence and authority of the Chinese state declined under Empire, Republic and (perhaps more variably) the PRC. However, this did not always lead those in the East and Southeast Asian region to reject the influence and importance of Chinese culture. Necessarily, in the era of modern nationalism, the previous and sometimes much earlier regional position of Imperial China led later to both resentment and resistance. At the same time, even where political contestation between states resulted, this did not lead to the total rejection of Chinese culture. For example, while there has been a noticeable decline in Japanese appreciation of Chinese culture during the last 20 years, the attraction for things Chinese remains strong, including not just material culture but also religious ideas and influences.

Even at the level of more popular culture there would appear to be little to support Segal’s contention. Every visitor to the countries of East and Southeast Asia relatively rapidly comes up against various manifestations of Chinese culture, if only because of the apparent ubiquity of the migration chains across the region that started in about 1000 AD. There are Chinese communities across the whole region, including not only the more obvious commercial classes of Southeast Asia, but also the substantial
and more recent Chinese communities in Japan, and to a much lesser extent in Korea.

These communities have developed Chinese schools, Chinese temples and Chinese shops. In many cases they have developed their own local Chinese literatures, and their presence has often led to linguistic and culinary influences. Every capital city has a Chinese district, as do many smaller towns and cities, and there are both Chinese language media and even social and political organizations. Of course, the degree of Chinese cultural manifestation is variable. There are countries, such as Indonesia, where it is only during the last few years that open Chinese public behaviour has once again become possible.

In contrast, manifestations of Japanese culture are considerably more limited. Despite the massive scale of Japanese investment in the countries of East and Southeast Asia, there seems to be only a limited purchase for Japanese culture. Certainly the cuisines of Korea and more particularly Taiwan bear clear influences from the era of Japanese colonialism. In Taiwan’s case this remains even celebrated to some extent, reflecting the extent to which many local and indigenous people in Taiwan feel (particularly in retrospect) that Japan brought liberation as well as conquest. Certainly, too, a number of Japanese cartoon characters, most notably Hello Kitty, have become fairly widespread throughout the region, especially among the young. For the most part though, Japanese cultural manifestations are limited and tend to be celebrated (including in China) only in themselves rather than leading to a wider influence for Japan.

On the other hand, Segal’s contrast of China and Japan is useful in helping to understand the scope and role of Chinese culture. In a number of ways, it could be argued that there is no meaningful Chinese culture, or at least not in the ways that countries like Japan, currently have national cultures. Since the late nineteenth century and the Meiji Restoration the Japanese state has constantly intervened to create a national consciousness and identity, and this codification of Japanese culture was an essential part of post-Second World War reconstruction with the development of new ‘nihonjinron’ (theories of Japaneseness) (Nakane, 1986). In contrast, the concept of ‘Chinese culture’ has always been and remains one of limited utility – lacking in coherence and essentially contested (Shih, 2002), particularly in the last 20 years within the PRC (Guo, 2003). The explanation of this phenomenon lies in the relative novelty of ‘China’, unresolved debates over the meaning of Chinese nationalism, and last, but by no means least, the size and scale of the area ruled by the Chinese state.

Despite claims by the CCP and the PRC, in their constitutions and other foundational statements, to present solutions to problems faced by ‘the Chinese people’ and ‘China’s sovereignty’ during late Imperial China as a result of ‘foreign capitalist imperialism and domestic feudalism’ (Hu, 1991: 1), these are essentially ex post facto rationalizations of events.
‘China’ did not come into existence until the establishment of the Republic, and the various terms for it in Modern Standard Chinese (most notably Zhongguo and Zhonghua – both referring to the ‘Central Plains’ which were the location of pre-modern moral authority) are late nineteenth-century neologisms. Before the establishment of the Republic, the Empire was designated only by the ruling dynasty. There was no sovereign Chinese state. The Empire was the world, ruled over by the Emperor – the ‘Son of Heaven’ – and defined not by boundaries but by allegiance to the Emperor (Shih, 2002: especially 2 ff.).

Neither were there any ‘Chinese people’, let alone citizens, before the twentieth century. The idea of a nation was an anathema to an Empire that had prided itself on its social and cultural diversity (Hevia, 1995). The inhabitants of the Empire spoke different languages, had a variety of belief systems, ate vastly different diets and cuisines, and lived different life-styles. This variety should be no great surprise, given the size and scale of the Empire. Although China is often implicitly compared to a European nation-state, the more appropriate comparison might be with Europe itself. One result is that there was a far stronger individual identity to native place and locality than to the Empire, which became apparent as the political system began to change at the beginning of the twentieth century, and with the emergence of a strong provincialism (Levenson, 1967a: 158). Another result is that there was both an Imperial Culture and a series of local cultures. The Imperial Culture centred on the Court and the arts related to education (necessary for Imperial service): essay and poetry writing, calligraphy and painting. Material and social cultures (including language) were essentially localized.

The movement to recognize and develop a Chinese nation dates only from the first decade of the twentieth century, and is usually attributed to Zhang Taiyan, who sought to encourage feelings of solidarity to override the country’s intense provincialism (Rankin, 1986; Wong, 1989). It coincides with the first tentative attempts to create and use a standard colloquial Chinese language, seen by its promoters as essential in educating people and bringing them together. The nationalist project gained momentum with the collapse of the Empire, the establishment of the Republic, the May Fourth Movement of 1919, and the subsequent establishment of both the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party. In general, its success is seen in the extent to which people across the various provinces now privilege China rather than their own locality (Goodman, 2002) and have in the process absorbed public beliefs about the longevity of the Chinese nation, the Chinese state and the Chinese people, all in only about 80 years.

At the same time, Chinese nationalism has achieved nowhere near the unanimity of purpose achieved in Japan. From the beginning, the conceptualism of Chinese nationalism has been a domestic political issue, argued
over by political parties, groups and associations – each of whom claimed to be the authentic Chinese voice, equating the fate of the Chinese nation with their own fate (Fitzgerald, 1994). During the Republic there was an uneasy relationship between nation and region (Gillin, 1967; Kapp, 1973; Fitzgerald, 1998) that still largely remains unresolved. In the era of Mao-dominated politics, the PRC tried to minimize regionalism in its explanation of Chinese nationalism, although, during the 1990s, considerably more pluralism has become recognized and to a considerable extent encouraged (Goodman, 2002: 853). Even more pertinently for the definition of Chinese culture, there has been an almost continuous debate on the extent to which Chinese heritage should be accepted or rejected in the definition of the nation, as well as about the precise content of that heritage. Paradoxically, in terms of the 1990s wider-world debate about an East Asian development model, interpretations of Confucianism have been extremely varied (Levenson, 1958; Louie, 1980) and issues of its significance and meaning for Chinese nationalism and the definition of Chinese culture have remained matters of intense debate in the eras of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (de Bary, 1991; Guo, 2003: 91).

The consequences of this history and practice are a definition of Chinese culture that is both complex and contested – not to say occasionally elusive. Contemporary Chinese culture inherits both the imperial imperative to be a world culture and the twentieth-century requirement of a more specific nationalism, with the two often in tension. Equally, there is a tension between, on the one hand, a political nationalism that seeks to emulate Japanese nation-building and emphasize a revolutionary break with the past (and indeed often the CCP’s revolution) and, on the other, a cultural nationalism that constantly refers to China’s past – if with little agreement about the content of that past. In addition, there is the somewhat circular attempt to define Chinese culture in terms of the practices and beliefs of those who are now taken generally to be ‘Chinese’ – the descendants of those whose origins can be traced back to having lived under the rule of one of the imperial dynasties, regardless of their current place of residence. In among all these competing influences there is also the discourse of race, that seeks to define Chinese culture in terms of the Chinese people and their civilizing influence (Dikotter, 1992).

The party-state and culture

Segal’s argument about China’s cultural engagement with the world is that, in the period since 1978, the government of the PRC has been more concerned to limit external cultural influences coming in than with the development of its own external influences outside its borders. It is certainly the case that in the post-Mao Zedong reform era the PRC ceased its
attempts at the export of revolution, perfunctory though those were at times. Equally it is the case that in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown of 1989, the CCP and the PRC held the Voice of America and the BBC responsible for inciting the youth rebellion that had preoccupied Beijing throughout May of that year. In the wake of June’s clearing of Tiananmen Square, the party-state took action to attempt to limit European and US media activities in the PRC. It is also the case that state authorities are anxious, and possibly over-anxious, about the impact that American and European culture may have on the PRC. The early 2003 request for the Rolling Stones to remove ‘Let’s Spend the Night Together’ from their repertoire, or alter the words, during a planned series of concerts (that eventually did not take place because of the SARS outbreak) is one trivial, yet clear and recent, example of such anxiety leading to action. More serious has been the system of Internet ‘blocking’ (exclusion of access to sites) introduced within the PRC since 2001 (Zittrain and Edelman, 2003).

All the same, it would be mistaken to draw the conclusion from these observations that, since the beginning of the 1990s, the PRC had either withdrawn into its shell, or significantly altered its belief in the need for external cultural outreach. The development and international promotion of the Chinese film industry (notwithstanding attempts at censorship), Beijing’s eventually successful bid to host the Olympic Games (after an initial defeat by Sydney) and the domestic promotion of the Chinese soccer team’s participation in the 2002 World Cup are all major events that suggest the PRC’s commitment to international cultural interaction.

Far from abandoning international involvement, the regime’s external promotion of China has simply changed, with the replacement of an agenda of international revolution by the more nationalist endeavour of acceptance as a major world power; and through the PRC’s supplementing Europe and the United States as its major focus of attention with activities targeting its interactions with East and Southeast Asia. In particular, the PRC has concentrated on the international promotion of Chinese culture, although that may be no easy matter, not least because of the tension between the goals of political and cultural nationalism.

The most recent changes in the PRC’s cultural outreach have been shaped by three events: the reform programme engineered by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 that resulted in significant changes in the relationship between politics and culture; the end of the Socialist Bloc in the USSR and Eastern Europe; and almost simultaneously the Tiananmen crackdown of 1989 and the various reactions abroad. Political reform in the late 1970s led first to a radical change in the system of censorship (from prior approval to the possibility of ex post facto condemnation) and the commercialization of publishing that gradually but dramatically opened up the space for representation of Chinese culture (Hendrischke, 1988;
By the 1990s, there was essentially an open discussion of the representation of Chinese culture, if confined largely to personnel within the party-state (Dirlik, 1996). Central to the discussion of Chinese culture has been the issue of whether national identity is to be conceptualized as a revolutionary break with Imperial China, or as a return to the essential (often moral) purity of the past (which might also in some senses be regarded as a break with the more recent revolutionary past) (Guo, 2003: 75).

One of the historical ironies during the 1990s was that whilst the party-state held external media responsible for the problems that it faced during May and June 1989 in Beijing, its longer-term reactions to those events eventually resulted in considerably greater external cultural influences, and especially on the young, being manifested within the PRC. The difference, however, was that these new external cultural influences came initially from the Chinese communities of East and Southeast Asia, and then more generally from that region, and were more immediately concerned with popular rather than political culture. During the early 1990s Cantonese popular music (Canto-pop) from Hong Kong and pop music from Taiwan flooded into the PRC. These were rapidly followed by other manifestations of youth culture from around the region, including magazines, clothes and music from Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and even Vietnam.

The cause of this sea change was at least in part the situation of relative isolation in international circles that the PRC found itself in following 4 June 1989. Western European states and America turned their backs on almost all interactions with the PRC for varying periods of 6 to 18 months. The USSR was in the process of removing the communist monopoly, both domestically and in Eastern Europe. Faced with the prospects of isolation, the PRC turned to improving its relations with the states of East and Southeast Asia. Relations with most of these (with the exception of Japan) had been poor or formally non-existent for some time before the 1990s because of the Cold War and those states’ concerns about communism and revolution, and the PRC’s role in their promotion around the region.

For a variety of reasons, this rapprochement would probably have eventuated sooner rather than later in any case. The PRC’s changed economic outlook after 1978, as well as its abandonment of its commitment to international revolution, the impact of changed PRC economic development policy on international investment in East and Southeast Asia, which was rapidly being perceived as a problem by several of the states of the region (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand) who felt that funds were being directed away from them and towards the PRC; and the collapse of the European Socialist bloc, all contributed to this development. Nonetheless, the events of 1989–1990 provided a catalyst for change in the PRC’s
foreign policy that also led to formal diplomatic relations with South Korea and several members of the ASEAN bloc, notably Indonesia and Singapore, and improved relations with others, including Malaysia and Thailand.

During the 1990s, trade and cultural interactions with the countries of East and Southeast Asia grew so significantly that several commentators started examining the porousness of the PRC’s borders and the possible consequences for the development of the Chinese state (Goodman & Segal, 1994). Somewhat paradoxically, given the hostility that used to characterize attitudes in the countries of Southeast Asia towards their local Chinese communities, the PRC’s appeal to the region has been based on its promotion of Chinese culture, as well as on trade. The obvious explanation of this paradox would seem to be the PRC’s (not inaccurate) reading that much entrepreneurial expertise in the rest of East and Southeast Asia was in the hands of Chinese business people.

Tourism within the PRC from East and Southeast Asia was an obvious starting point for the development of the promotion of Chinese culture, for all, but particularly during the early 1990s directed at encouraging Overseas Chinese to visit (and presumably invest) in their ancestral places. While tourism to the PRC from the United States and Europe eventually regained its pre-1989 levels and began to grow again, the expansion of tourism from East and Southeast Asia grew even more rapidly during the 1990s. Another channel for the encouragement of Chinese cultural influence in East and Southeast Asia has been the development of Chinese language publications, in particular the overseas edition of People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao): the CCP’s official daily. This has been remarkable not only for its open circulation in Southeast Asia, which well within living memory would previously have been impossible, not to say dangerous, in most cases, but also because the overseas edition of the People’s Daily is printed in the full-form Chinese characters (sometimes described as ‘traditional’ characters) that are still generally used to write Modern Standard Chinese outside the PRC. Given the CCP’s commitment to simplified Chinese characters – a potent symbol of political nationalism and the need to create a fundamental break with past practice – this represents a considerable compromise to the end of extending cultural influence.

All the same, there are clear limits to the extent to which considerations of a wider Chinese culture might take precedence over the narrower concerns of political nationalism in the PRC. A most obvious and recent example of this kind of contradiction was the award of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature to Gao Xingjian. Gao is primarily a dramatist and was well known in the PRC during the 1980s for Wild Man and Bus-stop, performed there at that time. He is also a painter and writer of fiction, including Soul Mountain, which bore the prize citation. Since 1987
he has lived in Paris, and is now a French citizen, although he writes all his plays and fiction in Modern Standard Chinese. While then Premier Zhu Rongji congratulated Gao as a French citizen, others within the party-state poured scorn on Gāo’s achievement as not representative of contemporary Chinese literature (citing other preferred writers still living within the PRC) or as a politically motivated attack on the PRC (BBC 12 October 2000; People’s Daily: 13 October 2000). A more enlightened cultural nationalism might have interpreted the award as a triumph for Chinese culture. That it did not, underlines the continuing place of the CCP’s own particular politics in the determination of Chinese culture.

The PRC and the Overseas Chinese

Segal’s argument that China does not play a significant role for Chinese around the world is at first sight a remarkably off-beat, unorthodox and provocative comment. Moreover, relative statements about the strength of India’s connections with Indians as opposed to China’s with the Chinese could really only have been made by someone living in Britain. In general, migrants almost always maintain connections to their country of origin, even if for long periods they may only be emotional or psychological, whether they be Chinese in Sydney or Indians, Pakistanis, Bengalis or Sri Lankans in Britain. In the UK, China does not loom large in the academic, let alone the public consciousness. Migrants and their descendants from the Indian sub-continent significantly outnumber any kinds of Chinese residents. Even so, there were politically inspired disturbances of political order in London’s Chinatown during the late 1960s that took their cue from Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. On the whole, elsewhere in the world where Chinese are the more numerous migrant community (of the two), the links with the PRC are more in evidence, if more recently for social and economic rather than for political reasons.

The 1990s saw two major stimuli to thinking about international networks of Chinese. The first was the sizeable out-migration of young Chinese from the PRC in the aftermath of the entry of the PLA into Tiananmen Square in June 1989, although not solely occasioned by that event. The second was recognition of the phenomenal growth of the PRC economy, fuelled by its international links, that led to considerable attention in both academic publications and the mass media on the varieties and extent of Chinese networks around the world.

In the early 1990s a number of commentators beyond the borders of the PRC seized on the importance of the Chinese living elsewhere – the ‘Overseas Chinese’ – as an important engine of economic growth. In a contemporaneously influential article, The Economist, for example, highlighted the leading roles of the 55 million (according to its calculations) Overseas Chinese in both their countries of residence and in the more
recent development of the PRC. The influence of these Overseas Chinese was identified not only in East and Southeast Asia, where they were (and remain) concentrated, but also in substantial numbers in the US (1.8 million) Canada (0.6 million) Australia and New Zealand (1.8 million) Latin America (1 million) and Europe (0.6 million) (The Economist, 18 July 1992, p. 21).

In their own countries of residence, these Overseas Chinese were represented as wielding disproportionate, significant and often controlling economic influence, while they were also identified as the vehicle of economic change for the coastal economies of the PRC (Baldinger, 1992; Yamaguchi, 1993). The latter function was most obviously demonstrated for those societies of East Asia that are predominantly Chinese – Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan – and where, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, whole industries moved from their original base into the PRC (Asia Research Centre, 1992). Elsewhere, the spotlight fell on the small Chinese populations in a number of different countries in Southeast Asia and their apparently much larger economic impact. In Cambodia, where 5 per cent of the population were said to control 70 per cent of the economy; in Indonesia where 4 per cent of the population were attributed with a 73 per cent economic control; in Malaysia where 29 per cent were said to control 61 per cent; in the Philippines where 2 per cent were regarded as responsible for 60 per cent; and in Thailand where 10 per cent were held to control 81 per cent of the economy (Goodman 1998: 143).

The Economist provided perspective on the scale of influence of the Overseas Chinese by aggregating data:

> Overall, one conservative estimate puts the 1990 ‘GNP’ of Asia’s 51m overseas Chinese, Taiwan and Hong Kong included, at $450 billion – a quarter bigger than China’s then GNP, and, per head, at about 80% of the level of Spain or Israel.

According to The Economist, Overseas Chinese economic success was attributable to two factors. One was the ties of personal acquaintance, trust and obligation said to be at the core of Chinese society. The other was the high rate of savings of the Overseas Chinese: Worldwide, the overseas Chinese probably hold liquid assets (not including securities) worth $1.5 trillion – 2 trillion. For a rough comparison, in Japan, with twice as many people, bank deposits in 1990 totalled $3 trillion (The Economist, 18 July 1992: 21).

Building on this kind of analysis, other commentators claimed that the interactions of China and the Chinese in East and Southeast Asia had laid the foundations for a new economic ‘superpower’ to rival the US, Europe and Japan (Howell, 1992; Weidenbaum, 1993; East Asia Analytical Unit,
DFAT, Australia, 1995). Still other commentators went spectacularly even further, to argue that ethnic Chinese identity might supersede the need for states and lead to a reduced role for inter-state activity within the region (Ong and Nonini, 1997: 323). In the words of one author, there was every possibility that a ‘Chinese Commonwealth’ will emerge as a development from a China whose ‘very definition . . . is up for grabs’ (Kao, 1993).

These portrayals of the potential relationship between the PRC and the Overseas Chinese are the essential context to Segal’s related comment in ‘Does China Matter?’. Although undoubtedly overstated and probably somewhat misdirected, Segal pointed to the need for perspective and the danger of reading too much into the emergence of a ‘Greater China’. Such ideas are inherently interesting and challenging, but they fundamentally misunderstand the structures of Overseas Chinese transnationalism. The unity of the Overseas Chinese in East and Southeast Asia is a categoric construct, more a function of analysis than evident in their economic and political behaviour.

The concepts of either a Chinese Commonwealth or Overseas Chinese unity (with or without the PRC) may be useful devices for drawing attention to the processes contributing to the PRC’s economic development during the early 1990s, and may even have some appeal to certain kinds of Chinese nationalism. It may indeed be a particularly useful rhetoric for encouraging Chinese outside the PRC to invest or engage in other business activities there. In 1992, for example, Fu Yuchuan, Director of the Overseas Chinese College of Hainan University made one such attempt: ‘The chances are becoming greater for the 24 million Chinese who have attained citizenship in Southeast Asian nations to come to realize once again their common heritage and cultural traditions, as economic cooperation grows.’ (China Daily, 22 October 1992).

At the same time, there are clear social, political and economic limits to the notion of Greater China, which are sometimes too easily overlooked by many commentators. The social limits are acute, not least since there are many common (flawed) assumptions by Europeans about the homogeneity of ‘the Chinese’. The essentialization of the Chinese in the PRC as a single culture has, as already noted, more to do with the emergence of twentieth-century nationalism than with any social homogeneity. When the various Chinese of Southeast Asia outside the PRC are brought into consideration, the meaning of being Chinese in a social sense becomes very broad indeed. Many of the Chinese of the region speak no Chinese language at all and are significantly assimilated in their host societies, through state action and discrimination, no less than through length of stay. Migrating from the Chinese mainland, during the colonial era they rapidly became the business class of Southeast Asia – although it is hotly debated whether this was for cultural or structural reasons –
a settled minority in each country who effectively operated as the region’s domestic capitalists (Mackie, 1988). Earlier reservations from the host societies were compounded during the latter half of the twentieth century by political discrimination that resulted as a response to the establishment of a Chinese communist party-state.

To cope with hostile circumstances, the Chinese of Southeast Asia turned at a very early stage in their migration to more reliable particularistic ties requiring relationships of long-term reciprocity: common place of origin, shared language, family and kinship (Lever-Tracy et al., 1996). While these may be in a general way common characteristics of the Chinese in the region, in practice they necessarily reflect competition and division rather than any unity of action, purpose or mythical conspiracy. For each Chinese cooperation and interaction is within the security of shared reference groups, rarely moving beyond those boundaries to engage others described as ‘Chinese’. Such relationships with shared reference groups became particularly important during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the Chinese resident in East and Southeast Asia became involved economically in the PRC – preferring to interact with their families’ place of origin on the Chinese mainland.

Even in East Asia, there is little social homogeneity about the Chinese of either Taiwan or Hong Kong. Taiwan is the most obviously heterogeneous, with a major social division between ‘mainlanders’ who arrived with the defeat of the Nationalist Party on the mainland of China in 1949 and much longer Taiwan-based communities of Hokkien- and Hakka-speakers. That division has been the basis of politics since the early 1990s – although without an exact translation of support – which has certainly developed different attitudes to the meaning of Chinese identity. In Hong Kong, society and politics are more divided along socio-economic lines, but even in that case language groups and ancestral homes in China create recognizably separate communities, which are especially active in the business world. Despite, or perhaps because of, the dominance of Cantonese speakers, there are organized communities of Shanghaiese and Indonesian Chinese (those who fled Indonesia during the 1960s) who exercise disproportionate influence.

As these comments on social diversity suggest, there are clear political limits to the development of a Greater China. Hong Kong became part of the PRC in the middle of 1997, but Taiwan remains apart. Moreover, Taiwan’s political relations are not simply a function of the PRC’s domestic politics but also of its own, where significant sections of the population are unlikely to seek closer relations to a Beijing government of whatever persuasion, and others are hostile principally to a communist party-state. For their part, the comparative advantage of the Chinese of Southeast Asia would be lost through closer association with the PRC. They gain precisely because, as entrepreneurs, they are outside and separate from
the PRC. Chinese identity has clearly been important in a general way in the development of relations between the Chinese of Southeast Asia and the PRC, but the extent of divided loyalties can be easily overstated. To quote Lee Kuan Yew, in many ways the founder of Singapore, ‘We are Ethnic Chinese but our stakes are in our own countries, not where our ancestors came from’ (Cragg, 1996: 17).

Then too, the economic scale of Greater China is often exaggerated. The PRC is clearly a growing economy, if from a very low base which has led to impressive rates of growth for a very long period of time, with considerable potential. All the same, during the early 1990s the wealth of the Overseas Chinese was significantly overstated. The calculation of that wealth rested, without explicit acknowledgement, on only one part of the proposed Chinese Commonwealth, namely Taiwan, which contains more than 80 per cent of the aggregate domestic product of the hypothesized entity, and which is more usually (pace The Economist) not recognized as Overseas Chinese territory. Take Taiwan and Hong Kong out of the calculation of an Overseas Chinese Empire in the making, and what remains is a small but relatively buoyant Singapore economy, and a series of Chinese entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia, who speak individually for themselves rather than for the Chinese of Southeast Asia. Moreover, there is remarkably little economic integration among these various non-PRC constituent parts of a potential Greater China. Their major point of contact is in the PRC, where there are clear limits to the potential for further spectacular growth of Chinese Southeast Asian involvement.

Culture, the state and the region

The PRC would certainly appear to be more limited in its role in the determination of Chinese culture than its own self-view would sometimes seem to imply. Not least, this would seem to result from discussions and debate about the structure and dimensions of Chinese culture, and subsequent policy uncertainty. Moreover, the hyperbole surrounding the emergence of the idea of Greater China provides adequate evidence of the need for greater balance in assessing the role of the government of the PRC in regional, and, by extension, world affairs. By the same token, however, it also provides evidence of the impact and importance of Chinese culture beyond the borders of the PRC, particularly in East and Southeast Asia, and the significance of that region to the international position of the PRC.

The dynamics of cultural influence are such that, while the party-state may be divided on the definition of Chinese culture, and may not provide the only source of cultural authority, the PRC may still nonetheless both benefit from the wider appreciation of China and attempt to build on it.
to other ends. This usage of Chinese culture has clearly been an important part of the PRC’s strategy since the early 1990s – particularly in its dealings with governments and entrepreneurs in East and Southeast Asia. For their parts, governments and entrepreneurs have most of the time responded positively to the greater interaction. Entrepreneurs have found a degree of ease and possibly psychological comfort in dealing with more familiar partners in the PRC. Governments have found themselves in agreement with a PRC that, as the discussion over the emergence of ‘Asian values’ demonstrated, shares a common sense of regional community in many aspects of international politics. The key issue here is not the importance of the PRC to the societies and countries of East and Southeast Asia, but the extent to which it will in the longer term come to be regarded as the regional leader, and the consequences of that interaction for the PRC’s role in global politics.