The citizenship issue of the ethnic Chinese is a major problem in China-Southeast Asia relations. In the past, both the Qing dynasty and the Guomindang government declared that all ethnic Chinese born in China or abroad were Chinese nationals (citizens). The colonial powers in Southeast Asia also recognized local-born Chinese as their subjects. This is the origin of the question of dual citizenship status of Chinese overseas. The People's Republic of China (PRC), established in 1949, continued the old “overseas Chinese” policy, resulting in suspicions on the part of Southeast Asian governments of the motivation of Beijing.

Sensing the concern of the Southeast Asian governments, Beijing offered to sign a dual-citizenship treaty with Southeast Asian countries to resolve the citizenship issue during the Afro-Asian conference in 1955. Only Indonesia signed the treaty. In 1980, China unilaterally issued the first PRC “nationality law,” which recognizes only single citizenship. All Chinese abroad who have acquired foreign citizenship voluntarily lose their Chinese citizenship automatically. The issue of citizenship for the ethnic Chinese was thus settled.

However, with the rise of China as an economic power, the question of dual citizenship, considered to have been resolved, resurfaced. Interestingly, the ones who raised this issue were not Southeast Asians, but the Chinese in China. In 1999, a Chinese leader from the “Overseas Chinese Affairs Office” under the State Council stated during the National Overseas Chinese Affairs Working Committee Meeting held in Qingdao, Shandong province, that the dual citizenship status of Chinese overseas should be revived. In 2001, during the second session of the 9th People's Political Consultative Conference (PPCC), Chen Duo, Ye Peiying, and 10 other committee members suggested in a proposal (No. 2172) that “the dual nationality status of Chinese nationals should not be abrogated.” In 2004, during the second session of the 12th PPCC, another proposal (No. 0222) was made to the effect that the part of the Constitution of the PRC relating to the citizenship law be amended, so that Beijing “can selectively recognize the dual nationality status.” In response to such developments, Hong Kong TV channels and Internet websites hosted a debate on the issue of the Chinese dual citizenship status.
Professor Zhou Nanjing of Peking University, a prolific writer and chief editor of Huaqiao huaren baike quanshu (Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas), organized a bitan hui (written debate) on this important issue and subsequently compiled the materials resulting from the debate into the book under review here.

The book, consisting of 576 pages, comprises 6 sections. Section 1 includes PRC official documents and the position of Chinese leaders — including Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin — on the issue of dual nationality status of Chinese overseas. All were in favor of the single nationality principle and clear differentiation between Chinese nationals and non-Chinese nationals. Section 2 consists of research papers on ideas regarding the dual nationality issue, including a long article by Dr Wu Xiao An on the reemergence of the dual nationality (citizenship) concept, and the translation into Chinese of a book chapter written by Samuel Huntington on the citizenship law in the United States. Section 3 comprises documents and articles which are in favor of the “dual nationality” status for the Chinese, many written by Chinese officials or new migrants living in the United States, Canada and Europe. Section 4 comprises documents and articles by authors in favor of selectively awarding the dual nationality status and dealing with the issue flexibly. Such authors include Professor Liang Zhiming, a Chinese scholar specializing in Vietnam at Peking University. Section 5 contains documents and treatises supporting the single nationality law, including articles by mainland Chinese scholars such as Professor Cai Renlong, Professor Zhou Nanjing and Professor Zhao Heman, who are specialists in Southeast Asian affairs, and Go Bon Joan and Shen Zhenghui, who are based in the Philippines and Indonesia respectively. Interestingly, Professor Ling-chi Wang and Professor Shen Yirao of the United States are also in this group. This section is also the largest as it includes 19 items while the other sections have only 10 or fewer items each. The last section of the book consists of documents on various Chinese citizenship laws and their implementation.

It is clear that a small group of Chinese decision makers who are not specialists in “Chinese overseas” has begun to feel that China should follow the United States and Canada in introducing the “dual citizenship law.” They may have been influenced by new Chinese migrants (xinyimin) in Western countries who would like to have the “best of both worlds.” They seem to be unaware of the history of the dual citizenship law and the world situation, especially in Southeast Asia where 75 to 80 percent of the “Chinese overseas” live.

Nevertheless, the above Chinese view is not shared by older migrants or the local-born Chinese. A leading Chinese American scholar, Professor Ling-chi Wang, argues that, “restoring the dual citizenship law will harm both China and Chinese abroad.” Those Chinese who live in Southeast Asia and know the situation well still favor the single citizenship law as the so-called indigenous people still harbor suspicions against China and the ethnic Chinese. It is