



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF THE
CHINESE SOUTHERN DIASPORA



Beyond China: Migrating Identities

EDITED BY
Shen Yuanfang
Penny Edwards



THE
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Introduction

Shen Yuanfang and Penny Edwards

This volume is a select outcome of the “Migrating Identities and Ethnic Minorities in the Chinese Diaspora” international conference held at the Australian National University in September 2001.* The conference aimed to stretch and probe the boundaries of “Chineseness” by exploring a hitherto underdeveloped area of overseas Chinese studies, the place of non-Han groups in the Chinese diaspora. Other “marginal” groups, including the Baba, the Peranakan and the Mestizos, names given to nativised groups of people of Chinese descent in parts of Southeast Asia, also featured in conference papers.

The term “ethnic minority” is highly problematic. In this volume, we use it alongside other formulations, such as the term “national minority”, with which we or our authors have rendered the official Chinese term “*shaoshu minzu*”. Our purpose here is not to reinforce or reify such concepts. Instead, it is simply to focus attention on the place within the Chinese diaspora of those people who originate from China and yet do not identify as Han Chinese. We hope to demonstrate how diaspora—in its official invocations and academic interpretations—has, paradoxically, come to replicate at least one of the features of a bounded nation-state in its mirroring of a majority ethnic consciousness.

In the Chinese context, the term “national minorities” is sometimes contested by non-Han opponents of Han chauvinism, a phenomenon that even the Han-dominated Communist Party recognises as a potential danger to its rule. However, in this volume we go along with this problematic concept, if only for the purposes of convenience.

Chiefly located in the Chinese geographical periphery, ethnic minorities have long featured at the core of state and party projects for the construction of a Chinese national identity. Once the “temporary edge of empire”, China’s land and sea frontiers now form fixed (though not necessarily undisputed)

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international boundaries that raise problems of control and citizenship regarding the incorporation of culturally “exotic” peoples (Clarke 1994: 221-222). Increased economic interdependence and improved information technology in Southeast Asia have, especially over the last two decades, increasingly softened China’s cultural as well as political boundaries (Lewis 1996: 270). Since 1979, China’s coastal periphery, for instance, has increasingly set the cultural agenda for the centre (Tu 1991: 12, 27, 28). At least one scholar has interpreted this shift as a sign that China’s national narrative is opening up to “non-Han peoples” (Friedman 1994: 71, 85).

Yet the borders of Chinese nationality and territoriality have always been elastic. The current boundaries of the People’s Republic of China were originally legislated during the early years of the Republic of China, which derived its national discourse from Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People”, which regarded every person of Chinese “race” as a Chinese citizen, including those born overseas. The articulation of a Han identity dates back to the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Chinese nationalists strove to yoke the political and financial capital of Chinese overseas to the Republican cause. At the same time, anticolonial ideology repositioned the Han against the “white” barbarian, shoulder to shoulder with Southeast Asian peoples and minority groups as members of a single “yellow” race (Dikötter 1992). New transnational flows of culture, capital and people further complicated such discourse (Ong 1999).

Even so, nearly all Chinese diaspora studies focus on the Han, usually said to comprise 94% of China’s domestic population (the exact proportions tend to vary from study to study). The conflation of “Chinese” and “Han” is reflected in the fashionable reduction of Chinese emigrants and ethnic Chinese outside China to a single Confucian stereotype, rooted in Han culture. New buzz terms in diaspora studies like “global majority”, “tribal nation” and “deterritorialised nationalism” also tend to construct migrants from China as a tribe whose borders are formed by Han bloodlines rather than Chinese landlines. This vocabulary excludes non-Han ethnicity and minority cultures from the Chinese diaspora.

The academic neglect of Chinese national-minority groups outside China is paralleled by the elision of ethnic-minority difference by both Beijing and Taipei. At least until recently, both Chinese governments projected the idea of a homogenised “Chineseness” and celebrated the territorial motherland while at the same time cultivating a worldwide constituency of patriots without borders. (The situation has been complicated, however, by the accession to power in Taiwan of Chen Shui-bian, who revived the issue of Taiwanese self-determination when he referred to China and Taiwan as “each one country on either side” of the Taiwan Strait. How the situation will now evolve remains to be seen.)

In his paper "A Survey of Studies on Ethnic Minorities *Huaqiao-Huaren* in the People's Republic of China (1980-2000)", Li Anshan estimates that there are more than seven million "national-minority" Chinese overseas, drawn from nearly 30 ethnic groups. This surprisingly large total represents a far greater proportion of Chinese outside China than that formed by the ethnic minorities inside China. These people in the Chinese diaspora deserve close attention.

China's ethnic minorities, like the southern Han Chinese, have been migrating into Southeast Asia for several centuries. Many have participated in the global movement of population and capital overseas, even though this phenomenon has been seen largely as a Han Chinese one (Tapp). Their existence in diaspora flags the flaws in analyses that present the Chinese diaspora as culturally homogeneous and ethnically unified and that play up the common ambition of wealth accumulation and common belief structures as unifying.

This volume sets out to explore the tensions and contradictions between the paradigms that construct overseas Chinese as a "global majority" and the existence of "ethnic minority" elements within the Chinese diaspora. A parallel analysis of the geographic and conceptual position of ethnic minorities and remigrants "with tags", the Peranakan and the Mestizos, within both the Chinese diaspora and Chinese identity discourse, will help to demarcate the discursive boundaries of Chineseness.

This volume presents papers that tackle the issue of identity of four groups of culturally and ethnically diverse "Chinese" in diaspora: the Hmong, the Peranakan, the Mestizos and the Russians from China. Linking these papers is not only a shared interest in non-Han identities but a concern with the dynamics of displacement, location, relocation and localisation.

In his paper "Diasporic Returns: the Sociology of a Globalised Rapprochement", Nicholas Tapp analyses the Hmong homecomings and diasporic consciousness. The Hmong (or "Miao" in China) group have lived in southwestern China for centuries. During that time, some Hmong people migrated out of the area and settled along the frontier between China and countries of mainland Southeast Asia. From there, a small minority migrated to other parts of the world, including North America. However, they still tend to look back to China as their motherland. In recent years, many have returned to China to seek their "cultural roots". Diasporic returns inevitably impact on cultural constructions and reconstructions of the homeland, imaginary or real. As Tapp explains, ethnic minority peoples like the Hmong "in an important sense *are* the borders of China themselves, inasmuch as these have historically been formed through the forging of essentialised differentiations".

Tapp stresses the need to see ethnic minorities as an integral part of China's diaspora and to create a new "phenomenology of locality" in diaspora studies. In

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his view, attachment to place is as characteristic of shifting as of settled cultivators, and place-making should be understood "...not in the sense that such places were traditionally assumed as the sites of culture by anthropologists, but as pivots and magnetic points of return for diasporic departures and dispersals".

Considerations of both place and race also feature in Richard Chu's chapter in this volume, which opens in a particular site of identity construction in contemporary Manila—a museum sponsored by the same Angelo King who bankrolled the *Encyclopaedia of Overseas Chinese* produced in Beijing ("Huaqiao Huaren baikequanshu" Bianji Weiyuanhui 1999–), as briefly explored in Li Anshan's paper given at the conference (but not in the article in this volume).

Any attempt to reduce the Mestizos to a single type in Philippine history is impossible. As Chu shows, those categorised as Mestizo in the Philippines performed multiple identities, and might variously identify and be identified as Chinese, Philippine or Mestizo depending on factors including the immediate environment and their standing in the community. In revealing the processes by which "Chinese" identities continue to be cast and re-cast in Chinese diaspora, Chu's paper offers an important re-evaluation of Mestizos in the Philippines, challenging previous assumptions about the extent of their merging into indigenous society. His suggestion that Mestizos were more culturally hybrid than earlier studies allow promises to stimulate rethinking not only of Chinese identities in the Philippines, but also of the notions of "assimilation" deployed by Edgar Wickberg, William Skinner and William Willmott in their work on Chinese in the Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia.

Writing of China, W. J. F. Jenner has emphasised the homogenising effect of historical records whose "single, unifying script" inhibited the past development of "local linguistically defined loyalties" while limiting contemporary "perceptions of past ethnicities", notably in their rendering of most non-Han personal names as either Chinese or very nearly so (Jenner 1992: 226). In her analysis of Batavia's Kong Kuan Archives, Li Minghuan demonstrates a reverse process among Chinese in the Dutch East Indies. Scrutinising changes in naming practices and language, and the gradual replacement of ink-brushes and Chinese script used in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century as the principal language of records in the Kong Kuan with pens and Malay from 1915 to 1960, Li charts the shifting ethnic identifications of Chinese immigrants from Chinese to Peranakan. Li reads these developments, intertwined with successive waves of settlement and intermarriage, as part and proof of an "unavoidable" process of "localisation". This emerging idiom of Peranakan identity, while locally coined, was forged at the interstices between ethnic Chinese, indigenous Malay culture, and Dutch colonial officialdom (Anderson 1992: 122-123, 132-133). Similarly, Chinese Peranakan identity, through

the ordeals of exclusion and integration, is constructed and reconstructed over time in a continuous process of mix and adaptation.

In her analysis of a people who came from China but were not ethnically Chinese—Han or otherwise, Mara Moustafine demonstrates the salience of geography in identity-formation. Her “The Harbin Connection: Russians from China” offers insights into an unusual minority, the “Chinese” Russians, or “*Harbintsy*”, who were cruelly oppressed on all sides—by Russia, China and Japan—and became diasporic. These people came from China, yet they were not “Chinese”. But were they Russians? In emigration, China became the defining element of their Russian identity. The complexity of their identity makes nonsense of any attempt to define them in essentialist terms.

To those who hold steadfastly to the idea that some people are irredeemably “Chinese” and others are not, our inclusion of non-Han groups within the Chinese diaspora will be provocative and conceptually confusing. Our aim is precisely to cause such confusion by disrupting the essentialist conceptualisation of Chineseness and of the Chinese diaspora. These peripheral peoples, the disadvantaged minorities and other “marginal” groups, have so far been excluded from positions of dominance usually equated to “Chineseness”. So in what sense are they part of the Chinese diaspora? More fundamentally, how should we define “Chineseness”? The ethnic heterogeneity, cultural diversity and social stratification of China’s southern diaspora suggests a string of “Chinese” identities socially constructed, historically defined and changing over time.

By locating ourselves on the boundaries of Chinese civilisation, Wang Gungwu once wrote, we can enrich our “understanding of China as viewed from its periphery” (Wang 1995: 103-104). We present the five chapters in this volume in the same vein: as messages from the edge, designed to decentre the dominant, Han-centric paradigm of Chinese diaspora.

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Diasporic Returns: the Sociology of a Globalised Rapprochement¹

Nicholas Tapp

Introduction

I start with some reflections on the extraordinary number of studies of “overseas Chinese” there has been in the last fifty years, emanating from the works of George Skinner, Wang Gungwu, and Maurice Freedman who claimed that by comparison with the Jewish diaspora, the Chinese diaspora was a relatively recent phenomenon which might soon fade away (Freedman 1974). Clearly this hasn’t happened. Events like Chinese economic reform, 4 June 1989, and the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule in 1997, contributed not only to the flow of emigrants overseas, but also to an increased interest in the Chinese diaspora. This meshed well with the theoretical interest, throughout the 1990s, in processes of globalisation and transnational flows of people, capital and signs.²

But why, I have been asking, has there been so little interest in the ethnic minorities who inhabit large parts of China, some of whom, like the southern Chinese, have been migrating into Southeast Asia for several centuries, and many of whom have participated in the global movement of population and capital overseas which has been largely seen as a Chinese phenomenon?

There are three reasons for this, I would suggest. One is the inevitable Sinocentrism of many scholars of China, for whom the ethnic minorities of China tend to be invisible, and who tend to submerge discussions of the ethnic minorities of China in debates focusing on ethnically Chinese society. Another is the fact that Chinese ethnic minorities do only account for a small percentage—not beyond 9.8%—of the population (1992 Census). A third reason is the shyness of many Chinese ethnic minorities overseas, who tend to “pass” as Chinese, or Vietnamese, or Lao, or Thai, for which, as we shall see, there are historical reasons.

Cross-border ethnic minorities in China

While figures which show that ethnic minorities in China account for less than 10% of the population but occupy more than 62% of the land may serve a political purpose, they do serve to emphasise the importance of these populations who now

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number in excess of 100 million.³ Among China's officially recognised 55 ethnic minorities, the more populous and cohesive groups who maintain important political or cultural relations with members of the same cultural group outside China, such as the Mongols and the Tibetans, the Russians and the Koreans, the Uyghur and Uzbek, Tatar and Tajik, Kazak and Kyrgyz who are represented in former autonomous Soviet republics and even as far afield as Afghanistan, are fairly well known outside China. But many of the smaller transnational groups, such as the Jing on the border with Vietnam, or the Daur, Hezhen, Oroqen, Xibe and Ewenki (who reach as far afield as Siberia), and the smaller Tibeto-Burman speaking groups along the Nepalese and Burmese borders, remain relatively little known (Tapp 1995). We need more research on such peoples, who in an important sense *are* the borders of China themselves, inasmuch as these have historically been formed through the forging of essentialised differentiations (Wade 2000, Wang 1999).

In southwestern China, historical processes of displacement and marginalisation from scarce land and water resources, the kind of processes which define the nature of ethnicity itself (Cohen 1969), have led to a number of widespread cultural groups who now occupy not only parts of China but also parts of Myanmar and the northern mountains of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Perhaps most prominent among these groups are the Dai (Tai), known as "Thai" in Thailand, who have for over a thousand years, like some Yi groups, established petty chiefdoms, principalities and kingdoms across the Shan States of Myanmar, northern Laos, Vietnam and, of course, Thailand.

Besides the more dominant Tai-speaking peoples there have been smaller, less visible cultural groups, often shifting cultivators of the mountain ranges, who have slowly migrated out of southwestern China where large numbers still remain, over the course of several centuries, and settled at the peripheries of the Tai states established in these Chinese borderlands with mainland Southeast Asia. I am thinking here of the Lisu and Lahu, the Akha and the related Hani, the Yao, and particularly the Hmong people.

The Hmong

The Hmong, classified with two separate cultural groups as "Miao" in China, live in Sichuan, Guangxi, Guizhou and Yunnan provinces of China.⁴ They number nearly half the Miao there, who altogether number over nine million people. Traditionally they have been shifting cultivators of upland wheat, barley, corn and rice, and, following the Opium Wars, specialised in the production of opium for Chinese middlemen until very recently since the crop cycle for the opium poppy fitted well with that of dry rice and corn (Geddes 1976). For probably 200 years they

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have also inhabited the higher altitudes of the mountains of northern Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. The Hmong are people with a particularly rich oral tradition—they have no traditional form of writing for their language, but there are legends about how they lost a form of Hmong writing owing to persecution by the Han Chinese (Tapp 1989)—and their language is a unique one in Southeast and East Asia.⁵ As opium cultivators, mountaineers, and borders people, the Hmong, like the Yao, were crucial to the various powers that struggled for the control of these hinterlands during the 1950s, and until the 1970s. In Vietnam, they have fought on both sides of the Chinese border, and in Laos, as well as Vietnam, they were exploited both by the Communist Parties and the French or American-supported resistance forces and, one may say, divided and shattered as a community by 30 years of almost ceaseless warfare. In Thailand, Hmong communities have been able to lead a more peaceful existence, although there too they were caught up in the armed struggle of the Communist Party of Thailand against the Thai Government and their villages were torched and bombed in the 1960s. Their history, insofar as we have it from written Chinese records of the “Miao”, colonial and missionary archives over the past several centuries, and their own oral traditions, has been one of flight, resistance and rebellion, primarily against the Chinese colonisers of the Southwest, but also against the colonial and other authorities during the last century in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Uprisings, often associated with messianic movements and the return of the lost form of writing, have occurred periodically in response to exploitation and extortion at the hands of local authorities.⁶

Not only traditionally transnational in an important sense, since their settlements reached and reach across the borders of Myanmar, China, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, as shifting cultivators the Hmong have been a displaced people in the sense that they look back to China as their motherland, from where their great-grandfathers may have originated, and have ritual stories and legends of dispossession and “exile” from the lands of *Tuam Tshoj Teb*, or the “Great Dynasties” (Tapp 1989).

Riven by the fighting in Laos, in which as many as a third of the estimated 300,000 Hmong living in Laos are thought to have died by 1975, in the 1960s large sectors of the Hmong of Laos became refugees within their own country, living in large settlements established by USAID and dependent on airlifts of rice. After 1975, with the triumph of the Pathet Lao and the success of the Viet Minh, tens of thousands of Hmong fled Laos and were settled in large refugee camps along the Thai border, from where over 100,000 have been resettled overseas, in places such as French Guiana, the United States, Canada, France, Australia and New Zealand. Some were even taken back by China. Since 1975, then, the Hmong swiddeners

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of the uplands of southern China and northern Indochina have truly become a globalised community, scattered and dispersed, as they see it, to the four corners of the world.

We may talk of “diaspora” with some meaning here perhaps, since this is how the Hmong themselves tend to see it, and there is a triple nostalgia associated with this. The first is for a mythical time in which the Hmong enjoyed power and sovereignty in China from which they were usurped by the Han Chinese, reflected in tales like that of the “loss of books”, then for a historical, but not personally recollected, time in which they lost even their residence in China over the past several centuries, from where, as they see it, they were driven into Southeast Asia, and finally for the mountain villages and poppy fields of Southeast Asia—for the older refugees a distant memory; for the younger an inherited social memory or imagination. In Robin Cohen’s terms, this is a classic “victim diaspora”, rather than a “labour”, “colonial”, or “trade” diaspora, and the Hmong have formed a “community of suffering” as well as a “moral” and an “aesthetic” community, to use Werbner’s (1997b) terms.

What is important here is that since the 1980s there have been significant and growing return visits of overseas Hmong to their Asian homelands, some periodically to Laos and Thailand to renew their acquaintance with their originary roots (*hauvpaus*), some to China where they have hoped to find the source of their cultural heritage and ancestral homelands. In many cases, these returns have been motivated by the sort of cultural nostalgia which was traditionally attributed to the returns of overseas Chinese to their *xiang*, but which also may be understood in terms of global economic shifts and instrumentalist aspirations (Ong and Nonini 1997).

Routes and roots: the cosmopolitanism of desire

The 1990s were characterised by a discourse on diasporas and diasporic communities which saw cosmopolitan transnationalism as a potential challenge to the essentialising identities of the nation-state.⁷ Clifford (1994), following Safran (1991), saw as the “main features of diaspora: a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by that relationship”. As he saw it, “the specific cosmopolitanisms articulated by diaspora discourses are in constitutive tension with nation-state/assimilationist ideologies”. However, Jonathan Friedman (1999) deconstructs the diasporic discourse of cosmopolitanism, pointing out that a concept of “hybridity” could hardly exist without countervailing notions of purity and essence, and lampoons the voice of the “diasporic intellectual” which claims “First you colonised

Me and I was dispersed and became transnational, and now I take on the identity that was bestowed upon me and use it as a weapon against essentialising discourses that were the core of the colonial era". In a similar context, Arif Dirlik (1997) pointed to the problem of disjuncture between cultural criticism and cultural politics; the way in which "the repudiation of essentialised identities and authentic pasts seems to culminate in a libertarianism which asserts the possibility of constructing identities and histories almost at will". These issues have concerned anthropologists like Hastrup and Olwig (1997) who point out that "while anthropologists are preoccupied with de-essentialising the concept of culture and deconstructing the notion of bounded, localised cultural wholes, many of the very people we study are deeply involved with constructing cultural contexts which bear many resemblances to such cultural entities". For Friedman (1999), the "discourse of hybridity" is itself a social fact which should be investigated, and located firmly "among certain groups, usually cultural elites...", and diasporic intellectuals themselves with pretensions of hegemony. This is the line I should like to take here.

As Robbins (1998) has recently put it, "instead of an ideal of detachment, cosmopolitanism is a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance". Robbins is here partly following Ben Anderson who, in 1994, had pointed out the realities of "long-distance nationalism" among exile communities, quoting Acton on exile as the "nursery of nationalism". While the "localising strategies" (Fardon 1990) traditionally associated with anthropology, and colonial anthropological fieldwork, have increasingly been criticised (for example, Clifford 1992; 1997), there has recently been a renewed sense of the importance of place, and emplacement, which marks a shift away from the emphasis of Appadurai (1995) on deterritorialisation and the "production of locality"; cultures are *sited*, argue Olwig and Hastrup, and we should be inquiring into how this is achieved. Olwig put this very simply: "In the excitement about foregrounding movement and non-local relations we must be careful...not to overemphasise the global and transient character of human life on the loose" (Olwig 1997). Similarly, Lovell (1998) calls for a "phenomenology of locality which serves to create, mould and reflect perceived ideals surrounding place", be those places real or fictive! As Geertz (1996) puts it:

For all the uprootings, the homelessness, the migrations, forced and voluntary, the dislocations of traditional relationships, the struggles over homelands, borders, and rights of recognition, for all the destruction of familiar landscapes and the manufacturings of new ones, and for all the loss of local stabilities and local originalities the sense of place, and of the specificities of place, seems, however tense and darkened, barely diminished in the modern world.

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Since the emphasis on displacement and deterritorialisation as characteristics of the post-modern, since the “travelling cultures” and “ethnoscapes” of the early 1990s, then, there has been quite a lot of back-tracking. David Parkin’s introduction to the collection by Lovell, for example, remarks that “Movement within one or two generations rather than fixed settlement has generally characterised human populations, and the earliest anthropologists built this fact into their analyses”. What is new, he goes on to argue, is the awareness of belonging to a wider global community linked by rapid transport and communications and common access to consumer goods. Similarly, Friedman (in common with others)⁸ has stressed on a number of occasions that cultural and economic forms of globalisation are quite ancient, pre-capitalist phenomena, and that cosmopolitans too have been around for at least as long as commercial civilisations (Friedman 1997; 1999).⁹

I would stress the importance of building an understanding of power and agency into all our analyses of the global and the local. Certain traditional local mobilities or freedoms of movement may have been arrested by the transfixing essentialisms of the state or nation. We need to distinguish between displacements which are an aspect of the *lack* of agency, for example those of the victims of political persecution and natural disaster, which are characteristic of increasingly large sectors of the world’s population, and intrinsically connected with the establishment of national sovereignties,¹⁰ from the deterritorialisation associated with cosmopolitan elites, which may be a *sign* of agency or power. And in some cases, we need to look at how conversions of the one are made into the other—for example, how some among a displaced refugee population like the overseas Hmong, the victims of historical processes of marginalisation and recent political upheavals, may have transformed their lack of placed-ness into signs of agency rather than of its deprivation.

It is clear, from much recent theory, that we need to examine how the desire for roots and cultural authenticity which the transient nature of modernity seems to provoke, Baudrillard’s (1994) “loss of the real” perhaps, is actually matched or countered at the local level by forms of traditional mobility or hybridity; how, for instance, a kind of metropolitan conservatism may fly in the face of desires for radical change manifested by cultural or economic peripheries. Ironically, while the libertarian discourse of cultural critique clashes with the articulation of local “indigeneities” (Clifford 2001), so the middle-class search for roots and concern for cultural conservation often clashes with local desires to shed the trappings of culture and move into the utopian bliss of material plenty (Lisa Croll’s “Heaven”), and from largely economic forms of production to largely cultural forms of consumption (Tapp 2000). We do need to be able to understand how such forms of modernity and traditionality are mutually constituted, through an ironic and exploitative tension which plays itself out in *local* sites and arenas of contestation. And to do this, to