

BEING CHINESE

Voices from the Diaspora



WEI DJAO



Being Chinese

Voices from the Diaspora

Wei Djao



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Preface

On the last day of a very pleasant stay in Yogyakarta, central Java, several years ago, our tour guide took us to her office to confirm our international flight out of Indonesia the next day. On the way, she mentioned that the agency owner, Mrs. Kala M., would probably be at prayer, because it was just about noon then. As we made sure that travel arrangements for the next day were all in order, Kala finished praying and came out to greet us. After an exchange of pleasantries and after she had learned that my family and I were Chinese from North America, she simply said that she could not speak Chinese well. That was the first hint at her Chinese ancestry; her employee, our tour guide, had no inkling about this until then. Our guide only knew that her boss was a devout Muslim from Sumatra who happened to have a lighter skin color.

In the course of our conversation, Kala revealed that her family, originally from Fujian Province, had been in Bangka, Sumatra, Indonesia, for about seven generations. According to her, there were so many Chinese in Bangka in the past that whole villages were Chinese-speaking. Her father's grandmother was a *Hakka* (a subethnic group of the Han; see chapter 22). Kala's father could speak Chinese, but she could say only a few words. She declined to say them in front of us, claiming that it was village speech. She married a Javanese. Both she and her husband studied in the Netherlands and could speak Dutch fluently. In fact they still speak Dutch to each other sometimes. One of Kala's sisters married a full-blooded Chinese from Bangka, and they now live in Jakarta. Her father at one time told her that once the blood of a merchant was in you, you would always be a merchant. Kala knew that the merchant's blood was in her.

This rather unexpected encounter with Kala stirred up my curi-

osity. I was unable to ascertain whether she was *peranakan* (offspring of Chinese and native Indonesian marriage) or Muslim Chinese. That was not quite as intriguing as how it came about that someone so thoroughly acculturated in another way of life still retained an awareness of her Chinese ancestry. Obviously, it was a self-perception that she did not broadcast to the world every day; nonetheless, it was genuine and a source of self-respect.

That curiosity lingered, and the only way I could satisfy it was to ask people of Chinese ancestry living in non-Chinese societies how they were Chinese. To understand that question and its answers, it would be necessary to hear them describe how they live. This was how I started on this journey that took me to various countries and—this is the best part of my quest—the far more enchanting inner landscapes of the hearts of those who graciously answered my questions.

As I listened to my interviewees, their descriptions of life experiences and their sense of being Chinese struck familiar chords in my own mind. My father was born in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China. My mother, my siblings, and I were all born in Shanghai. Our family moved to Hong Kong in the 1950s, and then immigrated to Canada in the 1960s under circumstances very different from those of earlier Chinese settlers in North America. By the 1970s I realized that no matter what my birthplace, education, or other accidents of life were, I had crossed the invisible line from being Chinese to being Chinese overseas, that is, an ethnic Chinese living in a non-Chinese society. I never liked the term “ethnic Chinese” and still bristle at it. But I came to embrace the legacy of endurance and bravery left behind by the early Chinese immigrants who often lived the life of the bachelor community, and worked in the mines, railway construction, laundries, plantations, grocery stores, restaurants, and in other occupations too menial for the dominant groups of various societies. My biological ancestors did not do these things, but my ancestors in the new land did, and I was proud of them. Moreover, since my daughter is a fourth-generation Chinese Canadian, this is her heritage in the full meaning of the word. It is fitting, therefore, that a collective tribute is paid to all the ancestors of the Chinese diaspora in the

words of their descendants. They are descendants in both the literal and figurative senses because many, many Chinese migrants to different parts of the world in the period 1842–1949 died without issue.

The narrators really create the book. Without them this book could not have been written. My heartfelt gratitude goes to each one of them. The opinions and views given in the narratives are those of the people I interviewed. My interpretation and analysis are in part 3. It must be emphasized that the narrators and I do not necessarily agree with each other's ideas or conceptual frameworks. All the same, it was an immense pleasure and an inestimable honor for me to listen to their experiences and thoughts as they opened their hearts and minds to me.

There were other Chinese overseas whom I interviewed but whose life stories are not included in this book. I am deeply grateful to them too because each one of them enriched my understanding of the phenomenon of the Chinese diaspora.

Altogether writing this book has been a delightful experience. However, I am sure my spouse, Tony Chan, and daughter, Lian, might have wondered at times what madness possessed me to be chasing interviews in the far corners of the world. They were with me when the taxi driver got lost in the bewildering traffic of Jakarta. They trooped along halfway across London on the hottest August day on record in forty years. They drove me in search of Chemainus up Vancouver Island when all the water of the Pacific Ocean seemed to be dumped on us. They drank endless cups of tea in Singapore while I tried to interview yet one more person. It is therefore very much a family project and, on their part, truly one of patience and dedication.

I would like to thank North Seattle Community College for granting me a sabbatical leave during the spring 2000 quarter. It was spent in revising the curriculum of two courses: Pacific Asia and the Global Society. Some of the material I found then is incorporated into chapter 1 “Leaving China: A Brief History of Emigration” and chapter 23 “Being Chinese Overseas.”

Many other people have given immeasurable assistance. I thank my many colleagues and friends who assisted me in my research, read

various iterations of the manuscript, and offered invaluable suggestions: Jerome Chen, Edith Wollin, Adrienne Chan, Steve Wong, Marcia Barton, Rose Wu Liang, Doreen Indra, Hayne Wai, Bobby Siu, Rochelle de la Cruz, and Dia Mamatis.

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My sister Irene Chu wrote the Chinese calligraphy of the book title for which I am both proud and grateful.

Finally, my loving thanks to Tony and Lian for being with me always.

Introduction

The Chinese Overseas

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma, martial arts stars Michelle Yeoh and the late Bruce Lee, former president of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew, architect I.M. Pei, business tycoons Lien Sioe Liong (Sudono Salim) and Mochtar Riady (Li Wenzheng), Hollywood actor Anna May Wong, orchestra conductor Helen Quack, and entrepreneur Aw Boon Haw (Hu Wenhui) of Tiger Balm fame all have one thing in common. They are part of the Chinese diaspora. Yet besides these famous people, the world knows little about large numbers of Chinese outside of China. Estimated at nearly 37 million in 1990, they are scattered over 136 countries (Poston, Mao, and Yu 1994).

In this book twenty-two Chinese living and working outside of China tell us something about their lives and what it means to be Chinese. They are the people of the Chinese diaspora whose ancestors came from China. They were born and raised, or have lived most of their lives, outside of China. They are the *huayi*, the descendants of Chinese, referred to as the “Chinese overseas” in this book. This book is not about the famous people. It is about ordinary men and women doing ordinary things. For this very reason it is fascinating. The life stories told in this book are centered on two questions:

- How do the Chinese overseas live?
- How are they Chinese?

This book lets the Chinese overseas speak for themselves. In their own voices, men and women of Chinese ancestry describe their experiences living in Australia, Canada, Cuba, Germany, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, the Philip-

pines, Singapore, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Zimbabwe. Many who tell their stories have roots, several generations deep, in their countries of residence. They let the reader take a look from the inside: How do the Chinese overseas in different countries feel, think, and act? And how do they see themselves as Chinese in the world?

In a sense, this is a personal book. It delves into the feelings of being Chinese. It bares the yearnings, disappointments, despair, aspirations, and triumph buried in the inner recesses of the hearts of the Chinese overseas. Yet these qualities are also the “stuff” that makes up the universal human condition. The Chinese overseas express in some distinctive patterns what they have in common with all humanity. What emerges is a picture of the Chinese overseas who are unequivocally different from and yet, at times, subtly or astonishingly similar to the people in China.

Several narrators in the book are of mixed ancestry; a few do not even look Chinese. But appearance is deceiving. As shown in the book, being Chinese is a state of mind and a feeling. The sentiment is at times vigorous, at other times fragile, and quite often deeply sustaining to those who feel it. Such a feeling is not jingoistic nationalism, for it transcends political allegiance, as many in the book will be only too ready to emphasize. They are not pro–People’s Republic of China or pro–Republic of China in Taiwan. The feeling is one of identification with a place, a history, some elements of Chinese culture, a few motivating and guiding principles, or simply an awareness of whence they came. Their identity of being Chinese, and the elements of Chinese culture they have inherited and spread around the world, make up the global heritage that they in turn give to the world. Such a heritage needs to be recorded and cherished. That is the purpose of this book.

This book has three parts. Part 1 sets out a brief history of Chinese emigration.

Part 2 is the heart of the book. People of Chinese ancestry—from Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Oceania—in different walks of life tell their life stories and explain what it is like being Chinese. Each narrative is vivid and personal, revealing to the reader their

experiences, thoughts, and feelings. There is no claim that these twenty-two individuals represent or speak for all the Chinese overseas. What they present is life in the diaspora as experienced by them, for the reader to savor and enjoy.

Part 3 is a discussion of the two questions posed in this project: How do the Chinese overseas live, and how are they Chinese? Findings of this study challenge the common view about Chinese identity in the diaspora.

It should be noted that China is a multiethnic society consisting of fifty-six nationalities (ethnic categories) today. The largest ethnic category is the Han, who make up over 93 percent of China's population. The narrators all have Han ancestry.

I use the Pinyin system of romanization for names of people and places in this book. The only exceptions are a few terms unique to some dialects, in which case they are romanized according to the local dialect pronunciation.

The Research Process

The narratives in this book are based on interviews conducted over a period of three and a half years. The narrators were selected because they were willing to talk about their lives and to explain how they were Chinese. The objective criteria in the selection process were 1) each narrator must either have been born outside of China, or have lived overseas most of his or her life; and 2) each narrator must have ancestors who migrated from China between 1842 and 1949. Consideration was also given to the narrators' geographical locations in the Chinese diaspora. All the continents where the Chinese immigrated are included. However, it is regrettable that people from many places with a long and rich history of Chinese immigration could not all be included.

The selection of narrators was not random as it should have been if it were a survey. Hence, there is no attempt to generalize from a small group to all the Chinese overseas living around the world. This is a case study in which a small number of Chinese overseas from different parts of the world describe how they live, how they feel

about being Chinese, and how, in some instances, these ideas and sentiments have come about.

The goal of a case study is not to make statistical generalizations, as from a sample to a population or universe. Rather it is to expand theoretical statements: to elaborate on the relationships between factors (for example, ethnicity and identity), and to elucidate the structure or formation process of that relationship. In other words, the case study as a research method seeks to produce “analytical generalizations” (Yin 1984:21). The observations presented in this book will help elucidate some aspects of how a people in diaspora live and how they see themselves. These observations may also clarify the relationships between existence and consciousness that have always intrigued social scientists.

The two basic research questions of the study—How do the Chinese overseas live, and how are they Chinese?—were put to each interviewee. A set of previously prepared questions and statements was used to explain the research questions or to probe specific topics. Generally the narrators simply told their life stories and described their views and feelings about being Chinese. It is important to note that each interviewee was asked two questions, but the answer, more often than not, was one. Many narrators talked about how they lived and how they were Chinese in the same breath. They described how they were Chinese by describing how they lived. Or vice versa. I seemed to be separating real-life experiences into categories that might not have made sense at all to the interviewees who were answering the questions.

The narratives varied greatly in length because some narrators were better storytellers or more forthcoming about the details of their lives. Others, even with probing questions, had less recall of details. Some of the interviewees had a lot to say about being Chinese. Obviously aspects of being Chinese and living in non-Chinese societies were something that they had often thought about, or perhaps talked about with others previously. My invitation to them to answer some questions was simply the lifting of a floodgate. They had much to share. It is for these reasons, I believe, that the narratives vary in terms of the depth of feelings.

I conducted all the interviews in Chinese (Mandarin or Guangzhou dialect) or in English. I recorded them on audiotapes. I transcribed the recorded interviews and rendered them into narratives with stylistic editing. Neither additional facts nor interpretations were inserted into the narratives. Any necessary explanation or clarification is given in parentheses following the term in question, or in a note.

As this book is not a history of the Chinese diaspora, it does not attempt to present the histories of the Chinese overseas in various immigrant societies. Such books already exist (see Zhu 1956; Chen 1991; Zhu 1994; Pan 1998; and others about individual societies). This book, therefore, cannot offer any analysis of differences among the immigrant societies.

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I

The Chinese Diaspora