

Voluntary Organizations in the Chinese Diaspora

Edited by

Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Evelyn Hu-Dehart

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— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

Voluntary Organizations in the Chinese Diaspora

Hong Kong University Press thanks Xu Bing for writing the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy for the covers of its books. For further information, see p. iv.

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Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Evelyn Hu-Dehart
December 2005

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Introduction: The Chinese Diaspora and Voluntary Associations

Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Evelyn Hu-Dehart

The Chinese Diaspora: The Concept and the Phenomenon

During the past decade or so, when speaking of Chinese outside China, the words “Chinese” and “diaspora” in Anglophone literature have been linked like conjoined twins, coexisting by necessity and hard to separate without risking injury to the other. Another way of looking at it is that the process of “Chinese immigration” has practically given way to a seemingly open-ended, circulatory movement called the “Chinese diaspora,” the “Chinese immigrant” and even the “ethnic Chinese” rendered as “diasporic Chinese” or as “Chinese in the diaspora,” while the well-worn term “overseas Chinese” seems hopelessly old-fashioned. When exactly the notion of the Chinese diaspora was first articulated and by whom is not clear, but it was used as early as 1960, when University of Chicago-trained Chinese American sociologist Rose Hum Lee described Chinatowns as “communities in diaspora” (Lee 1960). In that same decade, the eminent China scholar Maurice Freedman of the London School of Economics and Political Science, in his seminal piece on Chinese voluntary associations in nineteenth-century Singapore, also alluded to the Chinese diaspora (Freedman 1967).

At the same time, although this conceptual and terminological shift from immigration to diaspora may be patently obvious in English publications on the subject, it does not appear in Chinese-language publications, for the simple reason that there is no word or easy phrase for the idea of “diaspora,” suggesting that it does not yet exist as a well-formed concept in Chinese and for China-based scholars. To be sure, the familiar couplet “*luo-di-sen-gen, luo-ye-gui-gen*” (落地生根·落葉歸根) captures the key essence of diaspora, in that, indeed, migrating Chinese do put down new roots where they land but prefer to return to the original roots when life ends, even if many do not do so in fact. But much of what happens between and afterwards is left unsaid. Even so, the China-centered perspective of global Chinese migration has had to take into consideration the diaspora phenomenon,

whether a term for it in Chinese exists or not. And concomitantly, the necessarily transnational approach to diaspora is played out against the background of China as perceived, experienced and imagined, and always, implicitly if not explicitly, as one of the nodes in the circuit of interaction.

We do not propose to explore and debate the validity of the Chinese diaspora as a phenomenon in this volume — we accept it as a given — so much as to contribute to the dynamic ongoing project of clarifying its boundaries, primary characteristics, changes and continuities *over time and space*. We recognize that, fundamentally, diaspora argues for a comparative perspective on the experiences of those who have left the homeland and settled elsewhere to work, live, build communities and even entire societies and new nations; to procreate and reproduce themselves as collectivities while forming and redefining relationships as well as confirming and re-articulating identities. In adopting the use of this concept and term, we are interested in exploring cultural commonalities and variations within and among the different and diffused Chinese communities, exploring common threads and variations of ideologies, cultural and religious practices, rites and rituals that bind them together and portray them as distinctively Chinese. We are also mindful that diasporas transcend national histories while always interacting with them.

In the Chinese case, over the course of three to four centuries of migration and resettlement across the globe that continues to this moment, for the most part migrants and their descendants have not abandoned attachment to some form of ethnic or subethnic Chinese identity. Equally impressive, many have maintained ties — emotional, financial, physical and otherwise — or seek to recreate those ties, with ancestral villages and regions (Sinn 1997; Louie 2004). At the same time, communities in the diaspora invent and express new varieties and variations of Chinese culture and identity as they interact with natives and other immigrant groups inhabiting and contesting for place and power in the same space. It is through such identities and identifications that we speak of the phenomenon of the Chinese diaspora. We can identify certain other distinctive features of the Chinese diaspora, especially in comparison with other great and enduring diasporas of human history.

Indeed, world history is replete with diasporas, starting with the ancient Greeks who gave us the name “diaspora” with their practice of intentionally planting colonies in other lands for cultural propagation and to advance trade relations. Diaspora has perhaps been most frequently associated with the traumatic forced expulsion of Jews from their ancient homeland of Israel and subsequent dispersal throughout the world. These dispersed communities in exile maintain a collective memory of and fierce loyalty to their original homeland, and pledge as their primary mission as a people and a culture to regain and return to that homeland and to restore it to its former security

and prosperity. In the Jewish Diaspora, many of these Jews might not have relationships at all with the homeland, nor can they all, as all evidence of their connection has long gone and the only thing that tied them to Israel is their sense of Jewishness. That desire of return has been further fueled by a troubled relationship with host societies that they feel cannot or will not fully accept and integrate them as social equals. Finally, this shared vision of themselves and their relationship to the homeland has created a unique "ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity" that links Jewish people everywhere and defines them as a diaspora (Safran 1991). This millennia-long Jewish experience can be seen as a prototype of diaspora that embodies key defining characteristics. At the same time, the fact that Jews have recaptured and re-established their homeland in modern Israel, and that troubled relationships with host societies and anti-Jewish discrimination and isolation have been significantly diminished throughout the world, does beg the question of whether the Jewish Diaspora, and has it ended? For, given this definition of diaspora, created in a specific historical moment of forced expulsion from their homeland and maintained for millennia by the drive to return, when that return movement attained its goals with the re-establishment of Israel after World War II and the Holocaust, then the diaspora should logically end with the return of all Jews, who had been yearning for a safe home of their own while in exile.

Of course, this is not happening, and Jews are not returning en masse to Israel, for too many have become, in fact, fully integrated in their respective societies and assimilated to different national cultures; nevertheless, despite some political differences with Israel, they support Israel financially and, most critically, lend the full weight of their political clout in the US and throughout the Western world to push for policies that ensure the survival of a beleaguered Israel surrounded by hostile neighbors. In this sense, the strong sense of co-ethnic identity and solidarity with each other and with Israel maintains the momentum behind the Jewish Diaspora.

The other great diaspora that most closely resembles the Jewish experience in its creation by a traumatic expulsion is the African diaspora, engendered by the forced removal of tens of millions of men and women of many ethnic groups out of Africa over four centuries, to be dispersed throughout the Americas as slaves. Unified initially by the dehumanizing regime of slavery and later reinforced by the demeaning regime of racism, descendants of slaves identify with each other through race as "black" people, and have created multiple expressions and meanings of blackness through culture — music, dance, art, literature — in their diaspora inspired by these common experiences. For the most part, they are not driven by a return-to-Africa movement but are more interested in dismantling anti-black racism and fighting for equal rights and civil rights in the multiracial societies they have engendered by their very presence.

In mapping the Chinese diaspora, we see that it shares some of the central characteristics of these large and persistent diasporas but also deviates from them in notable ways. If not among the oldest, certainly one of the longest, continuous and continuing mass migrations from one central location, the 25 million or so peoples of Chinese descent living outside China itself represent the Chinese diaspora. They and their ancestors cannot be said to have been forcefully expelled from China *en masse*, although severe hardships, violent conflicts and natural disasters have forced them to seek livelihoods and better economic opportunities beyond the confines of their own homelands. To be sure, when out-migration greatly accelerated around the mid-nineteenth century, the Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion and other local and regional peasant uprisings acted as push factors that drove many to leave China. These forces were probably secondary to floods, famines and the oft-cited demographic growth and subsequent pressure on the land that impelled so many to leave home; many others not necessarily in dire conditions left China in search of trade and business opportunities. Overall, it cannot be said that the Chinese were traumatically expelled from their homeland. Their reasons for leaving home were not materially different from those of the Irish, the Lebanese, the Japanese, the Italians, and South Asians of many ethnicities and religions (Cohen 1997). Undoubtedly, apart from disasters, the migrants suffered from traumas as a result of migration. The relationship between migration and traumas and disasters has been well documented (Van Hear 1998). In other words, the reasons for leaving home and staying away for long periods eventually extending into generations are many and varied; these global migrations have given rise to a "range of phenomena" that can be said to constitute diasporas (Clifford 1997).

The Chinese migrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consisted overwhelmingly of single men, although not necessarily unmarried and without families, for wives and children were usually left behind initially (Qing policy actually prohibited out-migration of Chinese women and children) and then later beckoned to join the migrant; or migrants formed families with local women. The majority of the migrants during this period were from the two southern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, primarily able-bodied men from rural villages ranging in age from sixteen to fifty; they went under the credit-ticket system or as contract laborers commonly called coolies, bound for five- to eight-year terms. These men were attracted to a variety of frontier and newly developing economic regions of Southeast Asia, California and the American West, to the borderlands between the US and Mexico, and to plantation societies of the Caribbean and Latin America. In all these environments, first labor and then business opportunities abounded.

Most of the destinations for Chinese migrants were still European colonies, or recently decolonized territories, where they were introduced as a deterritorialized intermediate sector between natives bound to their land

and villages, and colonial masters and administrators assigned to extract wealth and maintain control in the empire. Simply put, European and American capitalists needed large numbers of Chinese laborers and a small group of merchants and professionals as partners in their imperial enterprise. Although encouraged to feel superior by race and civilization to subjugate native populations, no matter how successful and prosperous they became, Chinese in the diaspora were never accepted as social equals and rarely accorded metropolitan citizenship by European colonial powers.

In European settler societies like the United States, Canada and Australia, which had long shed their colonized status and installed white supremacist social structures, Chinese and other Asian immigrants were denied the right to citizenship and other rights such as landownership, inter-racial marriage, access to education and high status, well-paid jobs and professions. In fact, Chinese and other Asian immigrants to the US were simply marked as "aliens ineligible for citizenship," a legal status not lifted until after World War II. The sum of these difficult experiences sheds light on one of the most common characteristics of why some migrations become diasporas: a tense, troubled, tenuous and tortuous relationship with all elements of the receiving society with whom they have to interact — the other peoples who inhabit it, the working class and the local *élite* with whom they compete as workers and business people, and the governing political system. When faced with this situation, Chinese migrant communities have developed ways of overt resistance but also accommodationist practices, all for the purpose of self-defence, protection, and survival. This common experience of rejection, marginalization, discrimination and oppression by host societies encourages diasporic Chinese communities to forge a strong sense of identification and empathy for each other's common plight, and develop mechanisms for quick mobilization in mutual support when one of them comes under vicious nativist attack (Cohen 1997; Clifford 1997).

For all of the nineteenth century and at least half of the twentieth, the inability to be fully accepted and integrated into host societies trumped whatever desire diasporic Chinese might have had to assimilate into another cultural and national identity, the only way that could have ended their sense of displacement and exile. For them, the final reference for home remains their home village and region, *qiaoxiang* (僑鄉) and eventually China itself, which was never occupied or destroyed. So, for diasporic Chinese, the return-to-China movement has had a very different meaning from the meaning for Jews, Africans, Palestinians, Armenians, who must first reconquer and re-establish a lost home to return to. Instead, Chinese return in order to compensate for their deterritorialization abroad by reterritorializing at home, strengthening their roots to *qiaoxiang* and nation.

Chinese migrants reconnect with China in another significant way. Shut out of political participation where they resettled, they became susceptible

to the siren calls of homeland politics in the twentieth century, beginning with the fiercely competitive factions of reformers and revolutionaries of the turn of the century, culminating with the long and bitter political rivalry between the KMT regime under Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan and the PRC regime in China. Such identification and involvement with homeland politics came at a high price for Chinese communities in the diaspora, for these practices clashed directly with rising new nationalisms in some cases and, in others, with the fear of losing control over national borders under late capitalist globalization. In both kinds of instance, even well-established Chinese communities are seen as disloyal, untrustworthy and undependable allies of the nationalist development project, and minimally suspected of harboring dual loyalties.

Chinese migrants, if they had the financial means, were always able to return home until the Communist regime closed the doors to movement of people and capital in and out of China for several decades after they took power in 1949, not to re-open until later in the twentieth century. At the same time, the fear of Communism has, to a certain extent, resulted in self-imposed exile for many have chosen not to visit the homeland. During this closed period, the world also changed dramatically, highlighted by further decolonization in the Western empires, the challenge of socialism in the Third World, the rise and fall of the Cold War, and the triumph of liberal democracies worldwide, including the dismantling of institutionalized racism and racially exclusive policies in white supremacist societies such as the US, Canada and Australia. This means that, for the first time in history, diasporic Chinese are accorded the rights of citizenship and belonging in societies of settlement.

Voluntary Associations in the Diaspora

Aiding and abetting Chinese migration and settlement abroad, in turn enabling the creation, expansion, maintenance and transformation of the diaspora, are a plethora of social organizations that the migrants brought with them as part of their individual and collective lived experience as men in the quite mobile, often volatile, frequently violent, and always competitive environment of south China, specifically the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. In this volume, we use the term "voluntary association" to refer generically to those associations that originate out of the migrant communities and are controlled by them, hence not official and non-governmental, even though many of these might have worked in collaboration with the colonial governments or the governments of the host country. Thus, we exclude such colonial institutions of direct social control as the *kapitan* in Dutch Indonesia or the *congregations* of French Indochina. As membership organizations open

to Chinese who meet the admission criteria, they are in principal non-coercive in that membership and participation is voluntary and optional.

Internal Chinese migrants from at least the fifteenth century who travelled to Beijing to take imperial exams, or to other big cities for trade and business, or when driven by natural or human-made forces to move and relocate elsewhere, gathered around voluntary associations, called *huiguan* (會館), there to seek hostel, credit, information, companionship, a piece of home away from home (Ma 1984; Ng 1992; Wickberg 1994; Cole 1996; Honig 1996). These self-help, mutual aid organizations were transplanted abroad as soon as enough *tongxiang* (同鄉) had arrived at any one location.

As numbers grew and destinations spread, variations of *huiguan* appeared, organized along clan (surname), lineage, district, region, or dialect lines, whichever appeared most logical and practical to serve the needs of new migrants making the transition to an alien and often hostile place and a new life (Hicks 1996). If necessary, several clans or contiguous districts could be combined to form one *huiguan*, which needed a certain size to be viable and competitive with other *huiguan*. As migrants are typically men arriving without kin or family, that is, wives and children, these *huiguan* become in effect their families away from home, their survival strategy (Lai 1987; Wickberg 1994). But because of this singular and consistent characteristic until late in the twentieth century when a few women finally became members and elected officers, *huiguan* historically have been patriarchal organizations in a very gendered space. *Huiguan* work because they bind members together into a "moral community" in which members share a sense of duty and obligations (Liu 2000: 106, citing Gary Hamilton). They are structurally hierarchical, controlled by wealthy merchants and governed in an authoritarian, top-down fashion. In this respect, *huiguan* also reflect class divisions and strive to contain class conflicts within the community. To minimize competition among them, which could become fierce and mutually destructive, the different *huiguan* might federate into one umbrella organization with an overarching governing board — rotating presidents among them for harmony and stability — typically functioning under the benign name of a benevolent society, such as San Francisco's Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, CCBA, also known as the Six Companies (although it actually comprised seven *huiguan*), or Peru's *Sociedad de Beneficiencia China* (Ng 1992; Lai 1987; Ma 1991). So, it can be seen that *huiguan* was an adaptive mechanism for Chinese migrants and an adaptable institution.

To local governments, these *huiguan* became the primary mechanism for internal social control of the Chinese community. The head of San Francisco's CCBA, for example, was informally known as the "mayor of Chinatown," expected to mediate conflicts among Chinese and resolve other political issues without having to resort to local authorities. Recognized thus as the unofficial government inside the Chinese community, *huiguan* federations became the

de facto ruling strategy of the colonial or national state (Chin 1996; Heidhues 1974; Lai 1987).

In time, *huiguan* activities expand and fall into six broad categories: (1) economic, to advance and protect members' commercial and financial interests; (2) political, administrative and judicial, to lobby local officials and settle disputes among members without outside interference and often with the blessing of the local authorities; (3) educational and cultural, to provide lodging, credit, and schools for the children; (4) social and entertainment, to organize performances, banquets and other large community social functions; (5) religious, to maintain temples and halls dedicated to the clan, lineage or native place deities and thus promote group solidarity; and (6) philanthropic, for charitable giving to burials, emergency aid for natural disasters, building roads and schools (Cole 1996). As these activities clearly indicate, as a diasporic community becomes more established and prosperous, the diverse and ubiquitous *huiguan* expand their roles beyond satisfying immediate migrant needs to identifying ways to help the clan, lineage or native place. In the present era, when most diasporic Chinese are no longer marginalized outsiders but active citizens and aggressive business people, *huiguan* networking has become global, as Hakka *huiguan* around the diaspora organize international reunions, Teochew *huiguan* hold international conventions, and, not to be outdone, Fujian *huiguan* support their own world conventions. Similarly, twenty-two clan/surname-based Guan *huiguan* have held their own World Guan Association meeting. These global *huiguan* networks in turn facilitate transnational practices of postcolonial, postmodern diasporic Chinese capitalists of the Asia-Pacific, once again demonstrating *huiguan* as an adaptive mechanism and its adaptability to changing environments (Liu 2000; Nonini 2001; Hu-DeHart 1999).

Another type of association that accompanied the Chinese migrants overseas is commonly known as Triads or secret societies, also identified historically by the terms *kongsi* (公司), *tong* (堂) and *hui* (會) (Ownby and Heidhues 1993; Ownby 1993a and 1993b; Ma 1991). Basically, these are fraternal organizations or sworn brotherhoods marked by open membership of unrelated individuals united by pursuit of a common goal. Members swear allegiance to the organization and to each other by a blood oath and pledge to adhere to strict rules and rituals. The *hui* and *kongsi* predated the *huiguan* among early migrants, in that they were simpler and more informal institutions catering to the needs of marginalized young men left adrift amid social turmoil in China itself, drawn overseas as laborers, particularly to work in pre-colonial frontier regions such as Taiwan or Southeast Asia. Without the protection of traditional lineage, village, clan or state, the *kongsi* form of *hui* mobilized these single men into a cooperative, egalitarian production system, non-élite and proto-democratic in structure and orientation. A good example is the early nineteenth-century *kongsi* on pepper and gambier and