AT HOME IN THE CHINESE DIASPORA

MEMORIES, IDENTITIES AND BELONGINGS

Edited by Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng and Andrew P. Davidson

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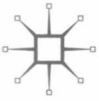

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Preface

The journey to this book has been a long and pleasurable one indeed. It first began when Kuah-Pearce organized a panel on 'Power of Memories: Negotiating Belongingness in the Chinese Diaspora' for the Third International Convention of Asian Scholars, held in Singapore in 2003, where several of us presented papers addressing the issues surrounding memories, sense of belonging and identity in the Chinese diaspora. Subsequently, the editors discussed the possibility of working on a book project on this topic. We invited various scholars to participate in this project and we have been privileged that they have taken up the challenge of writing for this project.

In this book project, we have tried to bring together various issues and interrogate the debates regarding how memory, identity and sense of belonging helped shape migrants' understanding of self, the diasporic community(ies) and the wider society in which they lived, as well as to account for the local and transnational challenges they faced in their daily lives. We looked at issues of how memories were reproduced, how they served as social and cultural capital, how they created tensions and conflicts and how memories changed and impacted on the individuals and communities across generational bars. We also explored the role of place in situating memories and how the media, films and music portrayed and reinforced the understanding of identity.

We are very grateful to our contributors who have taken the time to write and contribute to this edited book. Without their contributions, this book would not have taken shape, especially in its present form. Both editors have worked hard on this book, especially AD who undertook to contact the publisher and carried out editorial work on the chapters. We would also like to thank Md. Nazrul Islam for his assistance with the index.

Our efforts were made especially difficult as the editors and contributors were scattered across the globe. While the Internet and email made the completion of this project possible, the editors managed to work through the themes and details of the book early on in Hong Kong before AD returned to work in Vietnam. For this reason, our special and heartfelt thanks go to the contributors for their patience and persistence.

There are also many people we would like to thank for helping to make this book project a pleasurable endeavour. We would like to thank Jill Lake at Palgrave Macmillan for her support, patience and confidence in

us and our project. AD would also like to express his gratitude to Lydia (Chuen Tai) Ngai and his children for emotional and other support. KP would like to thank her husband and daughter for their emotional support and trust in her ability. Lastly, as most of the contributors are transnational migrants and part of one diaspora or another, we dedicate this book to all migrants and hope that this book resonates within the memories of their own experiences.

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Introduction: Diasporic Memories and Identities

Andrew P. Davidson and Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng

Introduction

As the Chinese diasporic communities expanded throughout the world with the settling down of migrants as permanent residents or citizens of the nation state, a sojourner's mentality soon gives way to a sense of permanence, marking the transition from migrant to becoming a fully fledged member of the host society. In this sense, Georg Simmel's stranger finds home, fashioned from two worlds, similar yet disparate. As such, the diasporic communities take root in a land away from the original home. The extent to which the diasporic communities become fully integrated into the host society will allow us to understand the process – and success – of nation-building and citizenship development in a world where nation states are becoming increasingly multicultural and pluralistic in orientation. It is also a world where multiculturalism is becoming progressively more problematic as cultural identities confront the dictates of the nation state and dominant social groups. The presence of diasporic communities thus reveals the intense interchange of community and nation.

This chapter examines how diasporic communities are defined but redefined through the need to reformulate this as a conceptual category of community that is formed through the interplay of memories and identities. Nevertheless the concept of diasporic community quickly reveals congeries of meaning that are often difficult to disentangle and clearly delineate, or what Brubaker (2005, p. 1) terms 'The "diaspora" diaspora'. Yet the theoretical importance of community as the confluence of habits, customs and beliefs demands such a discursive exercise. Diasporic communities, by their very nature, suggest the idea of dispersal and fragmentation, of an enduring albeit often ephemeral connection between the diasporic community and what is generally termed the country of

origin and host country. Nevertheless meanings do matter. In a certain manner, when a migrant becomes integrated into the host society, can we still continue to speak of a diasporic community? Or should we continue to understand the diasporic community in terms of their historical and contemporary migration routes and migrant roots? Then too what role does the state play in shaping migrants' feelings of home? And what of the migrants themselves; is there a compelling need, some form of autochthonous call, to recreate the past in the present, even at the cost of marginalization? Likewise, how do the migrants themselves look at the issue of 'self' in its search for an identity that straddles historical memory and contemporary demands (Kuah-Pearce 2006, pp. 223–39)?

Redefining diasporic communities

Communities are living entities that evolve through time and space in response to the social, communal and individualistic needs of their members and the contextual pressures of the wider nation state in which they are embedded. Then too diasporic communities change against the varying circumstances of trajectories and outcomes of resettlement, adjustment, adaptation and integration, pointing to the risk of attributing a self-actualizing, homogenizing logic to the diasporic communities, just as we cannot for the exaggerated claim of the nation states as the great unifier (Brubaker 2005). Diasporic narratives, like narratives of the nation state, are fraught with contentions over belonging, difference and diversity. In some of the literature on diasporas: 'We find an almost primordial conception that such collective identities are stable attributes that migrants take with them and insert into the country of settlement' (Koopmans et al. 2005).

On the contrary, just as memories are subject to the 'dialectics of remembering and forgetting' (Cattell and Climo 2002, p. 1), identities are malleable and subject to the putative concept of what Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy term 'hybridity'. While acknowledging the problematic nature of hybridity (see Werbner and Modood 1997), it is a useful term to reveal the interplay of memories on identity construction and the creation of transnational identities. In this volume we deploy a syncretized notion of hybridity, one informed by the discursive framework of specific cultural intersections. Specifically, we look at hybridity, or what Mudrooroo (1990, p. 24) propounds as 'the contestational weave of cultures'. Revolution in communication technologies and the affordability of long-distance travel facilitate the creation of hybrid identities and transnational communities and, for us, diasporic communities and their continued relevance as point of entry.

It is for these reasons that we choose to define community through the nexus of memory and identity as memories of regional, linguistic, ethnic and religious identities confront a larger imagery of identity, in this case 'Chineseness'. In other words, how memories and identities are racialized, if not overtly then flowing just beneath the surface of political correctness (see, for example, Stratton and Ang 1994). As Alexander and Knowles (2005) so eloquently note, race does matter and in many ways is the cornerstone of diasporic identities. Racially charged memories are bittersweet, providing succour to the migrant while serving to further differentiate. On the other hand, some migrants eschew the identities and memories of the diasporic community, rejecting the idea of their cultural authenticity and seek instead inclusion in the wider community. Still, memories run deep, however fractured they are, and inscribe themselves upon migrant identity in the shifting contours of identity politics.

In this book, we initially define diasporic communities according to the migration trajectories where migrants moved in search of better lives in the economic, social, political and ideological arenas. But migration is never so simple a matter of self-betterment. In the complex realities of migration, migrants experience a sense of deterritorialization and dislocation where the break with the country of origin with its familiar social practices and cultural icons means these are no longer available to these migrants in their adopted country. Diasporic communities thus conscientiously seek to retrieve and reproduce some of these social practices and cultural icons in order that migrants 'remember' and reconstruct the customary meanings migrants find in their daily lives. It is for this reason that diasporic communities engage in the production of diasporic collective and social memories; that is, as social constructions. Such reproduction can prove essential as it provides liminal communities with a sense of continuity of their cultural traditions, so necessary for the restabilization of their identity – their sense of social self – in a foreign land. Cultural familiarity is also imperative for its members to reterritorialize themselves as Chinese, however defined.

Diasporic community thus also refers to the core values, deep cultural memories and ideational self that inform migrants' biographies. According to Benedict Anderson's (1991) *Imagined Communities*, 'Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.' It is in this sense that the diasporic community leads migrants to fix in their minds a mental image of their amorphous communal affinity and bind it together with cultural artefacts and social constructs. Of course neither memory nor identity is static. Diasporic communities, like Anderson's nations, are subject to what Homi Bhabha (1990)

calls 'the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force' as 'Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye.' So too with the diasporic community as the act of narration is lost in its ambivalent emergence. It is thus the symbolic artificiality of identity and plasticity of memory that shape and reshape the diasporic community, tightening communal bonds for some while loosening them for others, or what Brubaker (2005, p. 6) designates '*boundary-maintenance* and *boundary-erosion*'. Hence the diasporic community (like the nation), is never uncontested or unaltered.

Although many diasporic migrants do receive it (for us through Chineseness) as a primordial 'fact', its form and content are continuously subject to disputation, especially over its authenticity and meaning. We agree with Brubaker (2005) on the futility and similarly question the need to enumerate specific numbers for the various diasporas and that it is better to focus on it as a process. In short, the diasporic community, while problematic, offers a site to explore such questions. Diasporic community, as used here, refers to physical locations and/or imagined constructions where migrants come together from shared memories and a perceived common identity, albeit loci that are located in varying cultural, social and historical situations. This community of shared needs and solidarity (Gilroy 1993), however, points to the limitations of deploying diasporic discourse. We concur with Clifford (1997, p. 267) that diasporic communities are more than 'a "changing same", something endlessly hybridized and in process but persistently there – memories and practices of collective identity maintained over long stretches of time', but in a way that while indicating modes of belonging, transcends a presumed postcolonial condition (see Dunn 1998).

Nevertheless, and for analytical purposes, there is latitude for cautious generalization about diasporic communities as a lived form of social cohesion, but one indisputably cross-cut by long-standing structural issues. Clearly too, in this volume, we are arguing against an absolute or unitary Chinese culture and consequently challenge essentialist notions of Chineseness. And certainly we recognize migrants' feelings of alienation and insulation, but also acknowledge that not all are marginalized. Lastly, we note that diasporic communities are continually constructed, debated and reimagined through the intersection of memories and identities.

Diasporic memories and identities

Halbwachs and others explored the significance of social and collective memories in identity formation for all social groupings. Individuals and

communities as a whole consciously choose what they want to remember and pass down to their future generations. This process of selection is a personalized choice on the part of the individuals and a collective choice for the community as a whole, depending on what cultural elements the individual and community view as key to the survival of their identity. As a result of the subjective choices of the cultural elements that are selected, Halbwachs (1992) argued that the reproduction of social memories is a fragmented process at best. As such, diasporic memories comprised only those sociocultural elements that the migrants selectively remembered and wanted to reproduce in their new home and community. This is often interlaced with their own social experiences, both in their original home and the host society.

At the same time, diasporic memories are also shaped by various sets of social experiences. First, there are the social experiences before the migrants left their home of origin. Second, there are the migration experiences that occurred during the interstitial or liminal period where the migrants moved from one locality to the next. Third, there is the experiential existentialism of a diasporic community where migrants often are subjected to a sense of marginality, discrimination and social exclusion in the host society (Alexander 2003). Here we see Simmel's stranger writ large (Heinke n.d.):

> The attributes of that stranger are his differences of time and place of his origin, his socially not belonging to the host society and also his independence in moving, staying and in his way of behaviour compared to the rest of society which he enters. If we communicate with strangers we have – at the same time – the impression of being close to someone from a distance and of being far away from someone who is in our immediate environment.

Within the diasporic communities, as the migrants settled into a new environment, it is imperative also for us to explore the significant social and cultural elements that the diasporic Chinese stashed in their personal and collective memories that they would reproduce as they work themselves into the host society. Among the key elements that they remembered and sought to reproduce are the Chinese social institutions such as the family, voluntary organizations (dialect and clan associations), the social ties and networks, *guanxi* and *guanxi-wang*, aspects of Chinese social customs and religious practices such as the continuing significance of the Lunar New Year, the Mid-autumn Festival with its attendant display of lanterns and mooncake eating, the *Duan-Wu* Festival and the