Diasporic Chinese Boundaries and Bonds Revisited: An Introduction to the Special Issue

重新检阅离散华人的界线与连线: 特刊简述

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Abstract

Over myriads of migration trajectories, settlement adaptations, and generation varia-
tions, diasporic Chinese have constantly reconfigured their subjectivities as a group, locally, regionally, and globally. Either as migrants transcending geographic demarcations and territories or ethnic groups with distinctive cultures and mentalities, members of the Chinese diaspora have aspirations and concerns that have evolved over time and space. This special issue re-examines and reconceptualizes boundaries and bonds of Chinese diaspora in various realms and aspects. It features six revised papers, from an international conference on “Boundaries and Bonds” held in October 2021, and an article that shares the same academic concern. They are riveting accounts of how multiple disciplines should be engaged in order to approach Chinese diaspora as subject matter and to reveal the diversity of situations where Chinese as migrants and ethnic groups are positioned and constructed for a myriad of reasons. Their case studies on Guangdong, Brazil, Singapore, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar reveal the various processes and routes of resetting networks and boundaries that have brought about new elements of Chinese ethnicity.

Keywords

Chinese diaspora – ethnicity – migrants – networks – boundaries

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Origins of the Special Issue

This special issue started with the need to connect scholars and the public with a view to re-examining trajectories and situations of Chinese diaspora, conceptually and empirically. On 2–3 October 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak, disrupting and even containing mobility and travel of people, a webinar conference was organized on the theme of “Boundaries and Bonds,” with a focus on Chinese diaspora. The event brought together in a virtual setting 18 distinguished speakers from Asia, the North and South Americas, Australia, and Europe and attracted more than 1000 participants from across the globe for the purpose of getting a better understanding of realities embedded in ethnic Chinese communities.

The papers presented to the conference were thought-provoking in terms of ideas and cases, leading to robust and fruitful discussion among the scholars as well as the audiences. There were three keynote speeches, followed by 15 papers grouped together into four panels: (i) “Identities and Concepts”; (ii) “Transnationalism and Governance”; (iii) “Terrains and Representation”; and (iv) “Literature and Publications.” The sharing of findings and exchanges of thoughts surrounded what was set out as the objective of the conference:

For centuries Chinese diaspora have traversed oceans and continents, crossing—settlement adaptations, and generation variations, diasporic
Chinese have constantly reconfigured their subjectivities as a group, locally, regionally, and globally. This international bilingual conference, in physical and virtual forms, will gather scholars together to revisit, re-examine, and reconceptualize boundaries and bonds of Chinese diaspora in various realms and aspects.

This conference has witnessed a successful collaboration between three institutions as its main organizers – Singapore Chinese Cultural Center; School of Social Sciences, NTU, Singapore; and Chinese Heritage Centre, NTU, Singapore. Also, it has solid working relations with the Singapore Society of Asian Studies, which played the role of supporting organizer. Together, these four institutions share a passion and interest in the field of Chinese communities and diaspora.

2 Concepts of Migrants and Ethnic Groups

The historically long duration and wide geographical spread of Chinese diaspora has drawn the attention of many scholars, readers, and observers to the enduring features as well as the evolving identities associated with migrants and migrants’ descendants of Chinese origin. There are two starting points that we can adopt to look at Chinese diaspora, as migrants and as ethnic groups. Departing from these angles, however, surveys into deeper terrains will certainly warrant a plethora of complexities and particularities in terms of how boundaries and bonds have been constructed, over time and space, for Chinese diaspora.

Chinese diaspora can be viewed as emigrants from China’s perspective and as immigrants in the contexts of other countries. The distinguished historian Gungwu Wang, in a seminal article (1992), has identified four major types of Chinese migrants who shaped the various phases of Chinese diaspora until the 1990s – (i) Chinese merchants, huashang; (ii) Chinese labor, huagong; (iii) Overseas Chinese, huaqiao; and (iv) Chinese descendants, huayi, a considerable number of whom embarked on tertiary migrations. New Chinese migrants, xin yimin, who began to enter the world after China’s introduction of a policy of economic reform and reopening in 1978 and become increasingly evident in the 1990s, are currently a subject of media coverage and academic inquiry (Wang 2004; Thunø 2007).

Chinese diaspora can also be perceived as an ethnic group. This is particularly critical in the countries where Chinese migrants settled and naturalized and their offspring participate in various national frameworks in the presence of other races with different heritages and cultures. In Southeast Asia and
North America and elsewhere, various nation-states have from time to time formulated and reformulated procedures for selecting immigrants, blending ethnic groups, and incorporating immigrants as citizens. Both localized Chinese communities, which have been established over generations, and new Chinese immigrants need to acclimatize and find feasible ways of accommodating new elements and retaining old traditions as members of an ethnic group in multicultural environments.

Scattered across the globe with footholds in various places, Chinese diaspora have transcended many types of boundaries and created many forms of bonds. On the one hand, essentialism, either prevailing among the diasporic communities or imposed by other parties, demands a rigidity of boundaries, exclusive bonds, and bounded identities. On the other hand, constructivism opens more avenues for expanding boundaries and inventing connecting both within the diaspora and beyond it (Anthias Yuval-Davis 1992; Lie 1995; Stone 1998). In many cases, Chinese diaspora face a dilemma or end up striking balances in this seesaw game.

For the existing literature on Chinese migrants and their descendants, we know that various groups with new demarcated boundaries have been formed because of diasporic exercises and connections. In China, particularly in Guangdong and Fujian and increasingly in Zhejiang, families, towns, and villages with distinctive cultures and activities connected to their kinsfolk living abroad are in the process of evolving (Chen 1939; Hsu 2000; Li 2013; Williams 2018). In other parts of the world, other ethnic Chinese are more affiliated to China or more engaged in the countries where they reside, leading to groupings with different identities among Chinese diaspora.

Chinese diaspora have to deal with various forms of nationalism, politically and culturally, tied to certain states and ethnic groups (Leong 1976; Yen 1976). Moreover, they have to tackle various race discourses, which determine the extent to which they can acculturate, assimilate, or integrate into local settings and national projects (Suryadinata 2004; Sercombe, P. and R. Tupsas 2014). In addition, they need to take heed of various requirements of citizenship, which are absolutely demanding in some cases and more flexible in others (Ong 1999; Ong and Nonini eds. 1997). From another perspective, the operation of transnational networks has sustained Chinese diaspora as migrants and ethnic groups, particularly with the help of new technologies and media in the era of globalization (Tan ed. 2007; Chan ed. 2000).

Therefore a combination of factors affects the boundaries and bonds of Chinese diaspora. The papers in this special issue are riveting accounts of how a range of disciplines should be engaged in order to approach Chinese diaspora
as subject matter and to reveal the diversity of the situations in which Chinese as migrants and ethnic groups are, for myriad reasons, positioned.

3 Articles and Cases

Six papers were selected from the international conference on “Boundaries and Bonds” for this special issue. They were revised on the basis of the discussion at the webinar event and of suggestions by anonymous reviewers. The papers were originally presented in English. Another five papers, delivered in Chinese during the conference, have been selected for inclusion as a special issue of *Huaren Yanjiu Guoji Xuebao* (The International Journal of Diasporic Chinese Studies), to be published in June 2022.

These six papers are academic investments by scholars based in various places: (i) Steven B. Miles, who transferred from the US to Hong Kong while preparing for and participating in the conference; (ii) Changsheng Shu, in Brazil; (iii) Shaohua Zhan, in Singapore; (iv) Hong Liu and Lingli Huang, in Singapore; (v) Josh Stenberg, in Australia; and (vi) Jee Yin Chin, Yee Mun Chin, and Hooi San Noew, in Malaysia. Tienshi Chen’s article also features in this special issue, although it was not presented at the actual conference. Chen is based in Japan and her paper shares the same interest and focus as the other six articles. This special issue is therefore yet another illustration of the fact that Chinese diaspora as a subject matter is attracting worldwide concern.

Steven B. Miles takes readers further back into history, with a case study on Cantonese migrants within the boundaries of China, in “Upriver and Overseas: Revisiting Boundaries in the Study of Nineteenth-Century Cantonese Migration.” Guangdong as a coastal province has witnessed not only the constant re-delineation of the boundaries of family lineages, clan properties, and administrative areas (Faure and Siu 1995) but also changes in the connections between foreign entities and Chinese diaspora (Johnson 1994, 1998, 2007). Miles argues that the 19th century was a critical period for understanding how the Cantonese created their footholds along the West River, in South China, and subsequently gained networking experiences that they put to use in overseas migration. Uncovered in this succinct study on Cantonese trajectories is topography, political configuration, regional differences, class division, gender perception, and migration practices. Consequently, riverine mobility had led to overseas mobility and ventures. With the skills learned from internal migration in China, the Cantonese readily adapted to myriad boundaries and settings after moving abroad.
A rising destination of Chinese diaspora is Brazil, the subject of Changsheng Shu’s “Post-1978 Chinese Migration to Brazil: The Qiaoxiang Models and the Rite of Passage.” Casting light on the period after China’s reopening to the world in 1978, Shu examines how the case of the diasporic Chinese in Brazil can help to understand the qiaoxiang models advanced by Woon Yuen-fong (1996), Minghuan Li and Diana Wong (2017), and Min Zhou and Xiangyi Li (2014, 2018). More particularly, he compares and contrasts the Guangdong and Zhejiang models for qiaoxiang ties and argues that the former feature catering services while the latter focus on wholesale and retail business. His study reveals that the crossing of national boundaries provides a chance for Chinese diaspora to continue their bonding activities in native lands, which in turn reinforces social inequality and developmental unevenness and thus the need for continuous migration abroad. The findings are a latest addition to the existing literature on how Chinese diaspora relate to the formation and transformation of their native and ancestral homelands in China (Douw, Huang, and Godley 1999; Yow 2013).

New Chinese migrants who left China after 1978 have become a subject of tremendous interest for many scholars (Liu 2005, 2008 & 2012; You 2021). In this special issue, Shaohua Zhao’s “Homeland, Host Country, and Beyond: Identity Transformation among Chinese Migrants in Singapore” is an update of identities of Chinese immigrants in the city-state. As information and communication technologies are conveniently accessible and usable, many of the Chinese migrants have demonstrated a transnational identity, encompassing dual relations with both Singapore and China, rather than conform to a pattern of assimilation, sojourning, and cosmopolitan mindsets. More importantly, Zhao’s research underscores the diversity and fluidity of their identities and the factors contributing to their expanding boundaries and bounds as a diasporic group. This is in line with the observations of other scholars concerning new Chinese migrants in Singapore (Zhou and Liu 2015; Yang 2017 & 2018). In other countries, too, new Chinese migrants have had an impact on the existing integration models and conventional notions of belonging (Chuang, Bail, and Merle 2020).

How Chinese diaspora have been situated in contexts is subject to the construction of ethnic boundaries and bonding for races in national frameworks and international nexus. Appropriating the concept and theory of superdiversity (Foner et al., 2019; Fran and Vertovec 2015), Hong Liu and Lingli Huang, in their article, “Paradox of Superdiversity: Contesting Racism and ‘Chinese Privilege’ in Singapore,” uncover the social terrains that have been increasingly diversified in the city-state as global forces continue to shape the political economy. They have identified three sets of factors contributing to issues that require more careful governance: (i) immigration regulation and the drive...
toward a knowledge economy; (ii) new concerns and patterns of electoral politics; and (iii) China’s clout in Southeast Asia. As a result, the public sphere has begun discussing racism and “Chinese privilege” (Goh and Chong 2022). There is paradoxical alignment of superdiversity with the rationale for multiculturalism and variegation (Virno 2004; Cavallaro and Ng 2014; Chan and Siddique 2019) on the one hand and inter-racial and inter-ethnic tension on the other.

What binds migrants and their descendants together as an ethnic group or a diaspora is how they imagine history and nation collectively. In “Finding the Distant Homeland Here: Contemporary Indonesian Poetry in Chinese,” Josh Stenberg has rightfully examined the language used in contemporary Chinese poetry in Indonesia, in three major respects: nationhood, language use, and historical trauma. His meticulous study shows how ethnic Chinese are positioned in Indonesian contexts, as an isolated alien or a cooperative ally or integrated minority. These variations of identity, in one or another setting, are manifestations of the constantly changing subjectivities of Chinese diaspora in Indonesia politics (Suryadinata 2004; Hoon 2008) as well as in Sinophone literature (Shih 2011; Tsu and Wang 2010).

Gender is an essential aspect of Chinese diaspora as it is of other ethnic groups. Working together, Jee Yin Chin, Yee Mun Chin, and Hooi San Noew have produced a succinct study titled “The Participation of Malaysian Chinese Women in the Workforce: Traditional Values and Choices.” In current Malaysia’s job market and workforce, there are more ethnic Chinese women than women of other ethnic groups. This article examines the factors that ethnic Chinese women take into account when deciding to find jobs and build their careers. According to this survey, traditional Chinese values are still an important factor affecting gender roles in families and female participation in job sectors. Such findings are worth noting in the event of further studies on demography and population in Malaysia (Saw 2015).

In the course of pushing boundaries and cultivating bonds, Chinese diasporic identifications grow from singularity to duality and subsequently multiplicity. This is evident in Tienshi Chen’s article “Sino-Burmese Secondary Migration and Identity: Tracing Family Histories.” Chen has mapped the family histories and the evolving identities of two Japan-based leaders with ancestral links to China who migrated from Burma. The fieldwork and survey that she has done reveal that the interviewees make use of their Burmese and Japanese identities for organizing Burmese pro-Burmese actions. One of the interviewees managed a sushi restaurant after leaving Japan for the US. This exactly corresponds with what James Clifford (1994; 1997) argues, that diasporas tend to pick up new markers, labels, and paths along their routes from one place to another, and with the “corridors” that Chinese diaspora, according to Philip Kuhn (2008), build as links to various locations.
Acknowledgments

As guest editor, I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this special issue. They are scholars who have long worked in the field of Chinese diaspora and this time have once again come up with well-crafted research projects. The case studies on Guangdong, Brazil, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar reveal the various processes and routes of resetting networks and boundaries that have brought into being new elements of Chinese ethnicity.

To a large extent, this special issue would have been impossible without the joint efforts that led to the conference staged in October 2021 by the Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC) and School Social Sciences (SSS), both institutions at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), as well as the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) and the Singapore Social Asian Studies (SSAS). All these four organizations have provided intellectual inputs to the conference, which was funded by CHC, SSS (SG200 Conference account), and SCCC.

My heartfelt thanks go to the conference committee, through which I worked together with my colleagues at NTU – Assistant Professor Ong Soon Keong, Assistant Professor Zhou Taomo, Dr Zhang Huimei, and Frederica Lai – and staff at SCCC – Shaun Choh and Jasmine Choo. In addition, I would like very much to thank the production crew for providing technical support during the webinar conference.

On a final note, I would like to draw attention to a book by Professor Wang Gungwu. Its title, Only Connect! Sino-Malay Encounters (2003), is closely related to the theme of this conference and this special issue on “Boundaries and Bonds.” During the constant process of redrawing boundaries while at the same time engaging old and new bonds, it is imperative for Chinese diaspora and scholars concerned with them to address the need for connection and connectivity.

References


