

## Introduction

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### Transnational Chinese Diaspora and Mobile Practices

Transnational Chinese diaspora are constantly in flux. The term refers to extraterritorial Chinese populations, including temporary, permanent or circular migrants, as well as their descendants (Zhou 2017: xi). The Chinese diaspora has been, and still is, one of the largest and oldest in the world. History has witnessed successive waves of migration from China to the outside world since time immemorial and from Chinese diasporic communities to other countries since World War II. The transnational Chinese mobility can be divided into five distinguishable moments. They are (1) the early history of the Chinese trading practices in Southeast Asia and colonial invasion in the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, (2) the transnational labor movement in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, (3) the nationalist movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, (4) the period of nation-building and the cold war era, and (5) the post 1978 China's economic reform in the era of globalization and neoliberalism (Dongen and Liu 2018: 35-36). The latest Chinese diasporic moment, the focus of our study, has just begun.

Chinese diaspora has been central to economic transformations and significant sociocultural and political changes in Southeast Asia for centuries. Scholars of Chinese studies (Wang 1991, 2002; Suryadinato 2007; Rae and Witzel 2008, Barrett 2012) have well documented the role of the overseas Chinese community and the development of Southeast Asian economies. Conventional thinking was that in the 1950s after the Communist Revolution the China-centered allegiance was replaced by assimilation to local cultures (Skinner 1957, 1958) and the ethnic Chinese have become Southeast Asians (Suryadinato 1997). Over the past few decades, however, the fundamental changes taking place in China and in Chinese diasporic communities have challenged this conventional wisdom. The rise of China as a regional and global power and the vibrant business network among the ethnic Chinese and PRC Chinese have led some observers to look once again at the integration process of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. Are we witnessing an oscillation between de-sinicization and re-sinicization of the Southeast Asian Chinese?

This research is about contemporary Chinese transnational mobile practices with special focuses on the ethnographic exploration of the lives, experiences, views, and narratives of the Chinese mobile subjects in three ASEAN countries: Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, and their interactions with the ethnic Chinese communities in these countries.

Two critical interpretations shape the starting point of our research. First, we consider mobility/ migration to be an integral part of Chinese socio-economic life rather than its exception (Kuhn 2008). Since Admiral Zheng He's first expedition in 1405, the trajectories of growth in China's maritime trade provided the impetus for both internal and international migrations of Chinese diaspora over the past centuries (Suryadinata 2007, Amrith 2011). We see mobility as an essential part of a process of adaptation that enabled Chinese families to deal with changing environments. Chinese mobility was briefly interrupted when Mao came to power in 1949 till his death in 1976 (Karl 2010). In recent decades, the going out policy

initiated in 1999 by the PRC to promote investments abroad has introduced numerous supports to assist domestic companies in developing a global strategy to exploit and utilize opportunities in the expanding local and international markets (Yos 2018). Since the launching of the going out policy, interest in overseas investment by State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and private companies has exponentially increased. Some of the most prominent Chinese business and professional institutions are expanding their investments in the international markets and, along with this expansion, the world has encountered a massive movement of PRC Chinese out of their homeland.

Secondly, we think of the PRC as a state keen in stimulating and molding mobility within and across its national borders. Far from a tightly structured political organization which controls every fabric of social life of its citizens, the PRC government and its going out policy has been a proactive, coordinated machine with all its agents acting in unison to facilitate transnational flows of the Chinese to go global. Since 2001, PRC's economic policy has pushed its SOEs and national champions to go global to develop Chinese brands that can conquer the world market (Callahan 2011: 9). Chinese transnationalism arose before the turn of a new millennium with a global shift from Fordism to globalized regimes of flexible accumulation (Ong and Nonini 1997). Transnational forces operate alongside the centralized policy of going out and encourage transnational linkages (Barabanseva 2011: 8-9). The processes of rethinking nation and nationalism (Darr 2011), the art of rewriting school textbooks on national history (Guo 2004), reconstructing a Confucian imagined community and reconstituting a standardized mother tongue (Hartig 2016) are all essential parts of the PRC state's production of national identities which go hand in hand with the formation of transnational subjectivities, constructing an image of the modern Chinese patriots. The production of national identities and the formation of transnational subjectivities reinforce each other to strengthen its relevance and primacy.

A number of scholars (Liu 2005, Callahan 2008, Barabanseva 2011) have documented the re-emergence of overseas Chinese nationalism due mainly to the transnational strategies employed by Beijing to facilitate growing number of new migrants (*Xin yimin*) according to the going out policy. Duara (1997, 2005) proposes the term 'deterritorialized nationalism' to refer to the new form of nationalism among the transnational Chinese. Deterritorialized nationalism has a different reality from the territorial nation. People in deterritorialized nations such as transnational diaspora live in different places and deal with different groups of people and necessarily confront the challenges of these different situations. *Xin Yimin* or new transnational migrants differ from their predecessors because of their more extensive and intensive linkages with the motherland. They are culturally and politically attached to PRC through modern education, state policies and state-supported intermediaries such as Chinese-language newspapers and magazines, radio and television programs, and websites. Networks of *Xin yimin* who are linked by shared ideas of history, culture, and identity constituted an imagined China that transcends geopolitical borders. The PRC government has also been actively engaged with its diaspora through various kinds of support for overseas Chinese organizations that perform cultural and entrepreneurial activities in many foreign countries and regions.

The multiplicity of PRC agencies not only shape transnational mobile practices but also forms their subjectivities. The scope of these agencies often exceeds the territorial

boundaries of the political construct of the state. *Qiaowu* (To 2014), for instance, refers to government agencies responsible for extra-territorial policies towards the Chinese diaspora. Its main purpose is to cultivate, influence and manage Chinese diaspora as part of a global transnational project to rally support for China.

Has the PRC government been successful in its extra-territorial policies? While this is a difficult question, Barabanseva (2011) provides a partial answer when she cites the cases of Tibetan uprising in 2008 that sparked international outcry over PRC treatments of its ethnic minority and subsequent reactions of overseas Chinese students abroad actively and vehemently protesting the anti-Chinese sentiments that they discerned in Western media coverage of the Tibetan incidents. Millions of overseas Chinese students abroad have been one of the prime targets of the PRC's global project to rally support for China and cultivate a deep feeling and commitment about China that leads various groups to feel embraced by it (Chan 2009). The sense of patriotism and loyalty are not necessarily confined to the territorial integrity within the nation-state. Transnationalism radically transforms the conventional meaning of territory and sovereignty. On the one hand, the state has continually attempted to cultivate and influence the transnational identities of Chinese diaspora but on the other, individuals and communities have constantly struggled to resist, subvert or adapt to such influence.

Benedict Anderson (1991) contends that nationalism emerged once people are able to see themselves as part of an 'imagined community' culminating from a shared language, printed capitalism, and the educational pilgrimages that ambitious youth made to national centers. Building on Anderson's concept of nationalism, Aihwa Ong (1997) suggests that the imagined communities could be applied to imaginaries pertaining to the reconfiguration of global capitalism. Vanessa Fong (2011), in her study of transnational Chinese students, argues further that the increasingly globalized nature of the media, language, and educational pilgrimages available to Chinese youth encourages them to aspire to belong to an imagined developed world community composed of mobile, wealthy, educated and well-connected people worldwide. Transnational Chinese students believe that pilgrimages to developed countries would not only help them become flexible citizens of the developed world but also facilitate efforts to make their homeland part of the developed world.

Over the past few decades, millions of Chinese families, especially from the expanding urban middle class, have struggled to send their children abroad with the hope that college education abroad could transform them into citizens of the developed world even if they eventually returned to China for permanent residence (Fong 2011: 35). Contemporary transnational Chinese are well-educated, well-traveled, well-connected and well-informed. They are able to navigate global flows in strategic and flexible ways. The increasingly globalized world and information flow through the internet make them more aware of the challenges and opportunities that the world presents them. Where transnational migration was once a one-way move from the country of origin to a desirable country of choice, it is now more common to see transnational migrants returning to their homes or moving to a third country and beyond following available opportunities.

From the perspectives of the host countries, the questions of integration, embeddedness, and loyalty are paramount. If transnational Chinese migration is actually to help host countries maintain vibrant and innovative economies, these societies are going to have to invest in innovative, integration measures and strategies to make it possible for those

with high skills to contribute to the economy (Zhang and Duncan 2014: 4). From the PRC's perspectives, the central government not only legitimizes dual social embeddedness or 'dual allegiance' (Nyiri 2004: 120) but celebrates transnational diaspora as a patriotic act, thus encouraging transnational mobile practices among the younger generations of PRC citizens. Transnational Chinese diaspora is celebrated as patriotic members of imagined communities of modernity, a hybridized third culture (Nonini and Ong 1997: 11, Callahan 2004: 48) that is mobile, deterritorialized, but contingent on China.

Our research focuses on the questions of integration and social embeddedness. Is it possible that the transnational Chinese diaspora could be simultaneously embedded into two or more nation-states and geopolitical spheres? Is integration into Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and transnational ties with China necessarily mutually exclusive? It is hypothesized that the Chinese transnational migrants do not necessarily assimilate to any particular host countries but may develop multiple social embeddedness, a deepening sense of integration with the host country and continuing intensive transnational connections with the homeland at the same time in their business world of the diaspora.

### **Social Embeddedness, Capital and Person-centered Ethnography**

Among the complex interrelations between transnational Chinese diaspora and their rapidly changing socio-economic and political environment, the mobile practices shift and transform with changing circumstances, networks, and business opportunities. Transnational entrepreneurs are never aimless individualistic wanderers. Their actions are purposive and interested. Economic life is by necessity socially embedded, business organizations, enterprises and markets are entangled in social networks. The concept of social embeddedness implies that actors, actions and relations are in essence social production and processes.

The concept of embeddedness was coined by Karl Polanyi whose lifelong study of the linkages between economy and society ranged from the reciprocal exchange and other traditional customs in the South Pacific economies to the political economy of the institutions regulating the global economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *The Great Transformation* (1944) Polanyi provided a historical description and an analysis of the emergence of the market economy and the destruction of the traditional economies. Polanyi argued that contrary to popular belief, markets have been of marginal importance in traditional societies throughout history. In traditional pre-capitalist societies, the economic system had been conceived of as a part of the broader society governed by social customs and norms as much as by market principles of profit and exchange. The rise of capitalism involved political efforts to dismantle the linkages between the economy and the social environment. The market economy emerged after a prolonged battle against traditions as a separate domain of human activity, disconnected from the 'social institutions' in which it was fundamentally embedded.

More recently, the concept of embeddedness has also been adopted by Mark Granovetter (1985) to refer to social entanglements of economic actors or how social networks are implicated in economic transactions. The concept of embeddedness expresses the notion that social actors exist within relational, institutional, and cultural contexts and cannot be seen as atomized decision-makers in maximizing their own utilities. Economic action is embedded in concrete ongoing systems of social relations. The embedded actor exists in a set of social relationships with others whose choices influence and affect his or her own choices as well. This implies that the choices actors make are not wholly determined by

facts internal to their spheres of individual deliberation and beliefs. Actions are influenced by the observed behavior and expectations of others. The immediate utility cannot fully explain the meaning of social relations. Embeddedness concept prioritizes the different conditions within which social action takes place.

The social embeddedness concept with its emphasis on action and actor is in line with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice which stresses that all action "is interested" (Bourdieu 1977:178). The French sociologist extends the logic of economic calculation to all practices as oriented towards the maximization of material and symbolic profit. Thus material interest and symbolic interest are perceived as two equally objective forms of interest in every human society. More recently, Bourdieu (1990: 16) also speaks of action as "strategy" to convey the idea that individual practices are basically interested, that actors attempt to derive advantages from situations.

In Bourdieu's view, all actors are capital holders and investors seeking profits. He extends Marx's idea of capital to all forms of power, whether they be material, cultural, social or symbolic. In everyday life, individuals and groups draw upon a variety of economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources in order to maintain and enhance their positions in the social order. These resources are capital when they function as a social relation of power, that is, when they become objects of struggle as valued resources. In peasant societies, the livelihood of every household depends not only on its land, animals and farming instruments but also on its kinship ties and networks of alliances that represent a heritage of commitments and debts of honor, and as Bourdieu (1977: 178) puts it, "a capital of rights and duties built up in the course of successive generations and providing an additional source of strength which can be called upon when extraordinary situations break in upon the daily routine." In modern societies, access to jobs and income in the labor market depends upon cultural capital in the form of educational credentials, work experiences and social capital in the form of networks of family members, friends, and colleagues.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, as Swartz (1997: 75-77) has noted, covers a wide variety of resources including educational credentials, skills and expertise, and such things as verbal facility and aesthetic preferences. This concept emerged from his attempt to explain unequal scholastic achievement of children coming from families with different educational though similar social backgrounds. He contends that the concept offers an alternative explanation for the received wisdom that attributes academic excellence or failure to natural aptitudes such as intelligence or giftedness. School success, Bourdieu argues, is better explained by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu than by measures of individual talent or achievement. From his research, Bourdieu (1986: 242-243) distinguishes between different forms of cultural capital – its embodied form as internalized culture through socialization and that constitutes schemes of appreciation and understanding, its objectified form in material objects such as books, works of art and scientific instrument, and its institutionalized form by which Bourdieu means the educational credential system.

Bourdieu's contribution to the sociological study of power relations is the forceful illustration that various forms of capital – economic, social, cultural and symbolic – can be interchangeable. Yet the interchange is not equally possible in all directions and may vary from society to society. In general, economic capital appears to convert more easily into a cultural capital and social capital than vice versa, that is, certain goods and services can be obtained through the economic capital. But other goods and services are accessible only

through the social and cultural capital. Thus, while culture and social networks are forms of capital, they are not exactly on equal footing with money and property.

The concept of culture as capital persuasively calls attention to the power dimension of cultural dispositions and resources, especially the ways in which cultural capital can be transformed into symbolic power. Bourdieu (1986: 242-250) insightfully argues that the traditional Marxist emphasis on economic and class structures underestimates the importance of the symbolic dimension of power relations. He contends that even in industrial societies the principal form of domination has shifted from coercion and the threat of violence to those of symbolic manipulation. This emphasis brings him to focus on the role that cultural processes, cultural producers and institutions play in symbolic manipulation and power relations. In other words, there is symbolic power as well as economic power.

Symbolic power is the power of domination through legitimation, or what Marx calls ideology. Symbolic capital, like other forms of capital, can be accumulated, changed to other forms of capital, or used to legitimize certain power relations. Bourdieu assigns a key role to cultural producers (teachers, writers, artists, religious leaders, and etc.) in legitimating the social order by producing symbolic capital. Cultural producers mediate the relationship between culture and class, between infrastructure and superstructure, by constituting cultural markets or fields that are vested with their own particular interests.

In this research, we employ an actor-oriented approach (Yeung 2004) to examine how transnational diaspora as cultural producers and socio-economic actors accumulate and strategically utilize and change different forms of capital in everyday action to maximize their material and symbolic benefits under particular circumstances and transnational locations of belonging. Data on the Chinese diaspora are gathered through intensive interviews and collection of life history materials.

Life history or person-centered ethnography is a method of qualitative research employed in anthropology since the 1920s when Paul Radin wrote *Crashing Thunder*, a narrative of a Winnebago Indian which reflected a fascinating insight into an American Indian culture (Langness 1965: 8-10). Since then, person-centered ethnography has been perceived as a means to elucidate the workings of society and culture through personal narratives. Life history allows the researcher to probe deeper into a person's micro-historical experiences within a macro-historical framework. Life-history narratives challenge the researcher to understand an individual's experiences, current attitudes and behaviors and how they may have been influenced by initial decisions made another time and in another place. It is common practice to follow a chronological path to interviews, that is, to begin with, the subject's family history, early childhood and proceed to other stages of life to the present.

In *The Children of Sanchez*, Oscar Lewis (1961) juxtaposes a number of life histories from within a family to give a cumulative, multi-faceted, panoramic view of each individual and of the family as a whole which represents many aspects of lower-class Mexican life. In this sense, the person-centered ethnography provides a linkage between subjectivities, class and cultural practices. Another writing *Nisa* presents a life-history of a Kung woman in her own words to the anthropologist Marjorie Shostak (1981). Her narrative presents a powerful challenge to the prevalent misconception of gender equality and egalitarian life of hunters and gatherers in Africa's Kalahari desert. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in 'narrative' across the human and social sciences, especially its potential to emphasize subjectivity, agency, a plurality of viewpoints and the richness and complexity of human

affairs not only to anthropologists but historians, geographers, psychologists and philosophers (Caplan 1997, Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001).

The centrality of our collection of transnational Chinese migrants' life histories is concerned with the 'embeddedness' or 'legitimacy' of economic activity. In daily life, capital holders make decisions based upon self-interest and rules of competition as constant factors conditioning their actions. As with Granovetter (1985), we maintain that the ongoing concrete systems of social relations are another factor influencing socio-economic action. For Weber (1978) an action is economically oriented if it is concerned with achieving certain goals. These goals can be defined as specific and concrete, real or imagined, advantages or opportunities for present or future use. Economic action is differentiated from economic social action by the absence of reference to the behavior and expectations of others. An action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the expectations of others. Weber also distinguishes between 'associative' and 'communal' relationship. Communal relationship entails a sense of belonging together whilst the associative relationship has to do with rational, calculated agreement typically involving material interests. Weber (1978: 41) contends that no matter how calculative in such associative relationship may be – as that of an entrepreneur to his customers – it is quite possible for it to involve emotional attachments which transcend its utilitarianism. This communal component is "social embeddedness," a value we can discern from the observable action and self-reflexive narratives in the life-histories of the transnational Chinese subjects.

The analytical focus of our endeavor is on the micro level of social relations, networks, and interactions, cultural content, and meanings that inform actions rather than institutional patterns. How the transnational migrants' acquired life orientations and their specific ways of engaging business opportunities are put to use and socially negotiated in the world of diaspora? The personal experiences of the transnational migrants throughout life impinge upon their business agency or their specific way of doing business. Rather than reducing the Chinese diaspora to their business roles, our research views them as full persons with broad social involvements they have become entangled with at different stages of life. How diverse ethnic and gender experiences may impinge upon entrepreneurial forms, economic social action, and communal relationship? How transnational mobile practices entail a tension between the migrants' cultural capital (knowledge and acquired skills) and the requirements of the host countries' situations in which he or she operates?

In order for a business to succeed, what type of cultural creativity, meaning making and innovations are required in specific socio-cultural contexts? In other words, how market niches are created through social engagement with diverse forms of people from different cultures and ethnicities in face-to-face interaction? What are the mechanisms and institutions utilized in the process of embedding in local forms of sociality? Business profits may be used to support a local charity, ethnic associations, or religious obligations. Are religious affiliation and conversion after migration (Tan 2015) allow the transnational Chinese to have a "sense of belonging" that is related to the homeland as well as allowing them to be part of the local host society?

Ong (1999) asserts that the change in the way financial services are provided have led to the development of a new form of social organization that requires deterritorialized, highly mobile intercultural communications. Due to the segmented international division of labor, the new transnational professionals evolved new, distinctive lifestyles grounded in high mobility, new patterns of urban residence and new kinds of social interactions (Chiang 2010: 40). Thus, hybridized third cultures have emerged out of the new social arrangements, together with new, ever-shifting, identities and consciousness. How does transnational

diaspora reconstruct their ‘Chineseness’ in a hybridized third cultures where new imaginations are produced by the transnational flow of capital?

We see diaspora as dynamic agency negotiating ambiguous meanings of ‘Chineseness’ between the PRC-constructed global deterritorialized nationalism and locally available meanings and strategies. In their life histories, we search for markers of diasporic cultural belongings/social embeddedness that are developed in the interaction with various homes, hosts and transit locations. Hence our research focuses on diasporic subjectivities, human experiences, imaginaries, memories, and narratives grounded in complex transnational locations of belonging. As Ping-hui Liao put it eloquently “Diasporas desire to belong while tortured by lack; their worldviews and discursive practices are informed by fetish desires to reproduce or to fill in the gap between the home and the new world” (Riemenschnitter and Madsen 2009: 5).

Transnational diaspora transcends here and there by continuously coming and going across borders. The term ‘transnationalism’ refers to the process whereby the Chinese diaspora produces and sustain multiple social embeddedness and relations that tie together the country of origin and the countries of settlement. Transnationalism crosses the geographical national boundaries. The diaspora engages economically, socially, culturally and politically in their host countries while residing abroad but at the same time maintaining close ties with people and events in their home country. Transnational diaspora defines and sustains multi-stranded socio-economic relations that transcend geographical boundaries. Living in between multiplicity of cultures and dealings with demands from different cultural predispositions can be psychologically and socio-culturally challenging. Managing and negotiating multiple cultural belongings and identities at the individual, group and community levels is a complex process involving multiple negotiation strategies of de-sinicization, re-sinicization, and hybridization.

Shuang Liu (2015) uses the concept of ‘cultural home’ to describe the psychological need to belong for those who experience cultural transition and the diaspora’s desire for a sense of place in the transnational space. Moving in the transnational space, the migrants may experience a strong yearning for a cultural home where as a cultural being they need a sense of belonging, of being accepted and secure. Cultural home may not be in one space for bicultural or multicultural diaspora (Liu 2015: 5-6). The question is whether the transnational Chinese diaspora is motivated to negotiate cultural membership and social belonging in a new country.

Our research aims to shed new light on whether the transnational diaspora is able to negotiate cultural membership to adapt to the situational requirement, or is unable to reconcile the different cultural expectations and is isolated from the host countries.



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