

# **Identity, Politics, and Transnationalism: Deciphering New Chinese Diaspora in Singapore, 2010-2020**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with developments of (new) ethnic Chinese communities in Singapore in the changing contexts of state-society relations and transnationalism against the backdrop of a rising China and its growing influences in Southeast Asia. In addition to substantially expanding and updating some of themes discussed in my earlier work pertaining to Chinese diaspora in Singapore, such as the transnational social sphere and regional networking (Liu 2012; Liu and Zhang 2020), complex relationship between new migrants and the mainstream society (Liu 2014), diaspora Chinese entrepreneurs and their dual embeddedness (Liu 2008; Ren and Liu 2015; Liu 2016), and new Chinese capitalism in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Liu and Zhou 2019), this chapter examines in details the new demographics, the state's recent policy initiatives, and business transnationalism. While it will touch upon local-born Singaporean Chinese who are broadly defined to be included in the Chinese diaspora, my focus is on new Chinese migrants, those who left mainland China and resided overseas since the start of its reform and opening-up in the late 1970s. The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Singapore in 1990 and the growing economic ties since then have provided a further impetus for the arrival and settlement of a large number of new migrants in the country, ranging from businesspeople, professionals to laborers. Scholars have also examined in details the complexity of new migrants in the nation and diverse patterns of reactions by the citizens (e.g., Zhou and Liu 2016; Kong and Woods 2019; Gomes 2019; Zhan and Zhou 2020; Yang 2020; Ho 2020; Dirksmeier 2020).

Singapore serves as an illuminating and conducive site for a detailed analysis of changing relationship between the state, society, identity, and transnationalism not just because it is the only country outside Greater China with an ethnic Chinese majority in the population, but also because the thriving linkages between the two nations. While bringing about significant economic benefits and opportunities, they have contributed to local

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anxieties about the role of new diaspora which have been complicated by the intensified American-China rivalries over the past few years. In the meantime, as will be detailed in the subsequent pages, the past decade has witnessed significant changes in Singapore's domestic socio-political scene which has a major impact upon relationship between the state, society and identity as well as the nation's future trajectory. My analysis of these issues is situated in the broad literature of state-society relations as well as transnationalism, which is defined as

“the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasise that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organisational, religious and political – that span borders we call ‘transmigrants’. An essential element of transnationalism is the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants sustain in both home and host societies” (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994, 7; see also Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007).

This chapter aims to identify the intersecting spaces between these two theoretical domains of analysis and decipher the complex patterns of their interplay. Data for this paper are drawn from two main sources. The first is personal interviews with relevant stakeholders and participant observations of relevant activities in both Singapore and China (such as ceremonies of new migrants associations and business conventions), which help formulate an actor-centric perspective. The second type of data is publicly available documents such as population and trade statistics, speeches by statesmen, reports of meetings, surveys of business development and public attitudes, special publications of Chinese new migrant associations, and media reports in both English and Chinese. They represent both the state's perspectives and outsiders' views of diaspora development in the island state whose domestic political economy has been invariably shaped by the external environments.

This chapter is organized into three main parts. The first is an overview of the socio-political changes taking place over the past decade and how they have impacted upon the Chinese diaspora and their relations with the state/society. The second part examines the changing demographics, the emergence of new diaspora associations, and Singaporean state's policies towards the diaspora which constitute an overarching framework for an understanding of state-society relations and transnationalism. The third part of the chapter looks at the operations and characteristics of new Chinese business transnationalism by focusing on Chinese businesses in Singapore and new migrant business in China. These simultaneous trends have taken place against the backdrop of a rising China and its changing

policies on diaspora engagement. The conclusion discusses the theoretical implications of the Singapore experience and proposes future research directions.

### **A New Political Economy**

The past decade has witnessed significant changes in the social and political environments of Singapore which have in turn shaped the nation's engagement with the new diaspora in general. First and foremost is the 2011 General Election in which the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) won only 60.1 per cent of the popular votes, the lowest since the nation's independence in 1965. The second major event was the demise of the founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015, marking the end of an era in modern Singapore. The subsequent years have seen the beginning of the graduate transition from the third generation of the political leadership led by current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to the fourth generation. The third was economic restructuring in which the nation has been more firmly geared toward internationalization and innovation. All these events have direct impact upon the state-society relationship in the context of ethnicity, changing demographics, and transnationalism.

#### Socio-Political and Economic Changes, 2010-2020

As one of the most contested political events in the island-state's recent history, the 2011 General Election heralded some major changes for the whole decade and beyond. Although the economy was doing quite well, achieving a respected GDP growth rate of 14.7% in 2010, surpassing the previous record of 13.8% set in 1970 and constituting the fastest growing economy in Asia of the year,<sup>1</sup> the ruling PAP did not perform well in the May 2011 parliamentary election. It received 60.1% of popular votes while opposition parties won a "landmark gain." In the presidential election held in August of the same year, Tony Tan, former Deputy Prime Minister who was seen "as the preferred candidate" of the PAP, won with a slim margin of 7,269 votes out of over two million valid votes cast in the four-way

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<sup>1</sup> "Singapore economy sees record expansion in 2010," <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-12106645> (January 3, 2011).

race.<sup>2</sup> The post-mortem review identified four main reasons for the PAP's poor election performance in 2011 as follows:<sup>3</sup>

1. Sharp increase of the cost of living including house prices;
2. Overcrowding on public transport;
3. The hospital bed crunch, transport woes and stagnating wages were blamed on a large influx of foreign workers due to a liberal immigration policy;
4. The main opposition party Workers' Party's theme of a First World Parliament resonated with residents in Aljunied [where the main opposition party had a landslide victory].

The first two factors were closely intertwined with the third, namely, migration issue, evidenced by the rapid and large-scale influx of foreigners in the country during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Liu 2014). It had played a big part in leading to this watershed event, which perpetuated a series of policy changes including restrictions on migration. It has led to what some called popular nationalism in the nation's political environment. As Jason Lim (2015) contends, "Popular nationalism is concerned about local issues concerning national identity, social cohesion, and an appreciation (or at least an understanding) of local heritage. Proponents of popular nationalism emphasize a common beginning, shared historical memories (local heritage), several elements of a common culture (such as the use of Singlish), and an association with a specific 'homeland' (born and raised in Singapore and, for males, the completion of conscription). They view Singapore as a nation-state with a unique and evolving identity destabilized by a liberal immigration policy." The more restrictive policies towards immigration in the post-2011 general election has to be understood in this context.

The demise of Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015 was another major turning point in the nation's political history. Since the mid-1950s when Lee co-founded the PAP, he had been at the centre of the local politics and shaped almost every aspect of the new nation's political, social, and economic developments. The post-Lee Kuan Yew era has continued the trend of "new normal," which has been "based on the

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<sup>2</sup> "Singapore presidential election won by Tony Tan," <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-14690176> (August 27, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> "GE2015: A look back at the last 5 general elections from 1991 to 2011," *Straits Times*, August 28, 2015. For a more detailed analysis of the 2011 election and the relations with anti-immigration sentiments, see Chong (2012), Tan (2012); Lim (2015); and Gomes (2019).

assumption that Singaporeans had become more vocal and developed greater expectations for their government. Public criticism and demands for fairer governance were now acceptable.” The nationalist revival also shaped the local socio-political scene in which many native-born Singaporeans displayed negative views of new immigrants and wanted the government to do more to help them (Welsh 2015). Alongside with “a growing social and political momentum behind the notion of tempering the highly stressful nature of Singapore's system towards a more socially cohesive and holistically oriented ‘compassionate meritocracy,’” the country was also preparing for the political leadership transition after the PAP won a convincing victory of 69.9% of votes in the 2015 general election (Tan and Boey 2017). The 2020 general election, held amidst the global Covid-19 pandemic, saw the PAP share of the popular votes decreased to 61.24%, with the opposition party Workers’ Party winning unprecedented 10 seats in the 83-member parliament.

The third major change in the mid-2010s was pertaining to economic development strategy. Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state has strengthened a regionalization strategy, in which firms are encouraged to venture into markets adjacent to Singapore, including but not limited to China. The goal is to develop a second market to augment Singapore’s small domestic market. Although Singapore continued to do well in comparison with other economies in the region, there were some underlying issues including (1) slow global economic growth, (2) a prolonged fall in oil prices, (3) shifts in international trade flows, and (4) a mismatch between current workforce skills and new jobs being created by disruptive technologies (Tan and Boey 2017). After a year-long extensive review and consultation, the government announced in February 2017 the “Committee on the Future Economy Report,” aiming to transform Singapore’s future economy by embracing innovation and becoming a digital economy through focusing on five key areas: future growth industries and markets through internationalization, corporate capabilities and innovation, jobs and skills, urban development and infrastructure, and connectivity.<sup>4</sup>

This short overview of major transformations in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century highlights a few key themes that are closely related to this chapter. In the first place, Singapore has a rapidly changing demographical profile. The first-time voters in 2011 election were estimated to be 200,000, together with other voters below 35, they numbered about 600,000 out of the 2.3 million voters (Chong 2012). Born after the mid-1980s, they grew up in a time of Singapore’s entry into the advanced economy and prosperity, their views

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<sup>4</sup> The full report document is available at <https://www.mti.gov.sg/Resources/publications/Report-of-the-Committee-on-the-Future-Economy>.

of the nation, national and ethnic identity, and its future are different from the earlier generation who lived in a much more difficult period after Singapore's forced separation from Malaysia in which the fighting for survival was the top priority. While the younger generation has firmly established their national identity as Singaporeans, their perceptions of China and new Chinese migrants in the country are more detached, which is part driven by the English education environment they grew up with many considering English as their new "mother tongue" (Tan 2014; Toh and Liu 2021). This is the socio-linguistic mosaic of new Chinese diaspora have to live with (namely, not take Singapore's Chineseness for granted) and the Singapore government's changing approach to nation-building.

Secondly, the passing of Lee Kuan Yew and the subsequent process of transition of political leadership has opened up a new space for the government's active engagement to build a more inclusive society through dialogues and civic consultations. It also entails close integration of new migrants into the nation's social and political fabrics. A number of nationwide Singapore Dialogues launched during the decade repeatedly highlighted this theme of identity and inclusiveness. Speaking at the "Building Our Future Singapore Together" dialogue in June 2019, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Heng Swee Kiat spoke of the need "to shift from a government that focusses primarily on working for you, to a government that works with you. Working with you, for you." One of the key foci of the 4G leadership is to "build on the strong foundation of a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural society, to build an even more caring, gracious, kind and cohesive community, and strengthen our identity as one people."<sup>5</sup>

Third, the new economic development strategy as being elaborated in the Future Economy Report has provided ample opportunities not only for the general populace to enhance their employability through life-long learning and government-sponsored Skillsfuture programmes, it also serves as a conducive platform for those highly-skilled new migrants to develop their careers in Singapore with innovation and new digital economy such as AI and big data forming the core of future focuses. As the nation does not have sufficient quantity of talents in these emerging fields, it has to turn to overseas to supplement the human capital that is critical for the new economy. Furthermore, connectivity and internationalization are the twin foci of the new economic strategies, which are in tandem with China's Belt and Road Initiative. In other words, economic relations with China have

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<sup>5</sup> "Speech by DPM and Minister for Finance Heng Swee Keat at the 'Building Our Future Singapore Together' dialogue on 15 June 2019," <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/DPM-Heng-Swee-Keat-Building-Our-Future-Singapore-Together-Dialogue>.

been further strengthened built upon earlier strong foundation. Indeed, since 2014, Singapore has been the largest foreign direct investor in China, and close to 26% of China's investment to the 60-plus BRI countries went to Singapore in 2018.<sup>6</sup>

## **Changing Demographics and the New Chinese Diaspora**

### **Changing Demographics**

Singapore's population development since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been shaped two main factors: the country is rapidly becoming an ageing society with a chronically low fertility rate. There has been a steady increase in the size of Singapore's elderly population over the years. In 2017, those aged 65 years and older increased to 13% of the resident population from 7.2% in 2000. It is projected that 22.1% of the resident population will be aged 65 years and over in 2030.<sup>7</sup> In the meantime, the past five decades have witnessed a steady decline in demographic trend, registering one of the lowest total fertility rates in the world: from 2.62 (1970–75), to 1.57 (1995–2000), to 1.16 (2017), far below the population replacement level of 2.1. More specifically, the birth rate for ethnic Chinese was even lower than the national average, at about 1.05, thus posing a potential challenge to the nation's racial balance since independence in which the Chinese account for roughly 75% of the total population. The government has made it clearly that immigration policy had to be calibrated to maintain this balance (Frost 2020).

A liberal immigration policy thus constituted an important component of the government's population policy. The then Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong announced in 1999 that "without talents, we cannot become a first-world economy and a world-class home; we must import talents from overseas to supplement local talents."<sup>8</sup> Lee Kuan Yew believed that Singapore's diminishing population would slow down the economy and regarded the task of increasing the country's population as its "biggest challenge." Pointing to the

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<sup>6</sup> "Singapore was the largest overseas investment destination for China along the Belt and Road and captured close to 23% of the total investment outflow from China to Belt and Road countries in 2018." Press Release by Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry (April 29, 2019). "Singapore deepens economic cooperation with China through new platform with Shanghai and Third-Party Market Cooperation." Available at <https://www.mti.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2019/04/Singapore-deepens-economic-cooperation-with-China-through-new-platform-with-shanghai>. See also Liu, Fan, Lim (2021).

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Social and Family Development, *Ageing Families in Singapore, 2000-2017* (Singapore: MSFD, 2019), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Lianhe Zaobao*, August 23, 1999.

stagnation of the Japanese economy as a result of their hostility to immigrants, he put it bluntly: “Like it or not, unless we have more babies, we need to accept immigrants.”<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the government’s proactive initiatives in recruiting “foreign talents” and a liberal immigration policy regime, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had seen a rapid growth in the foreign permanent resident (PR) population, who represented the fastest-growing segment of the population in Singapore (Table 1). Singapore’s total population was 5.08 million as of June 2010. There were 3.77 million Singapore residents, comprising 3.23 million citizens and 541,000 permanent residents, and 1.31 million non-resident foreigners who were on various work permits or long-term visas.

Table 1: Population Growth in Singapore (1990–2019)  
(Number in thousands)

Year	Total Population	Singapore Residents			Non-Residents
		Total	Citizens	Permanent Residents	
1990	3,047.1	2,735.9	2,623.7	112.1	311.3
2000	4,027.9	3,273.4	2,985.9	287.5	754.5
2010	5,076.7	3,771.7	3,230.7	541.0	1,305.0
2019	5,703.6	4,026.2	3,500.9	525.3	1,677.4

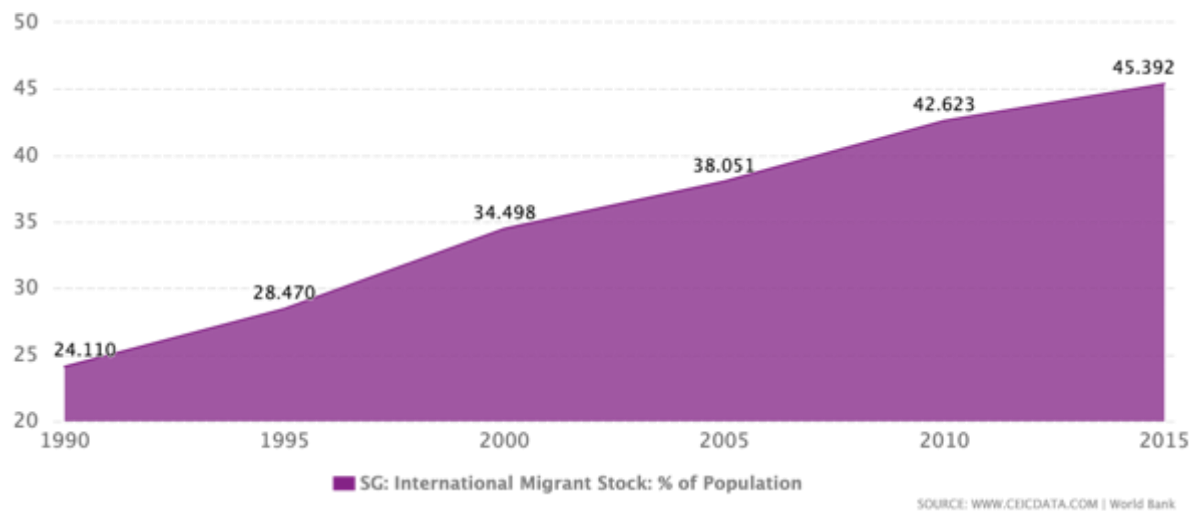
Source: Department of Statistics Singapore: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2010acr/key.pdf>  
<https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/population/population-and-population-structure/latest-data>

The past decade has seen steady growth of Singapore population, thanks in large part to the fast pace of migration and non-resident population (Figure 1). Between 2000 and 2010, Singapore’s non-resident population increased from 18.7 percent to 25.7 percent. Over the same decade, the number of Singapore PRs increased by on average 8.4 percent annually,

<sup>9</sup> *Straits Times*, Feb. 4, 2012. For a more detailed analysis of Lee Kuan Yew’s view on foreign migrants, see Liu and Zhang (2016).

rising from 8.8 percent of the total population to 14.3 percent. In 2011, the Chinese made up 61.4 percent of this increased PR population (Frost 2020).

Figure 1: Number of International Migrants to Singapore (1990-2015)

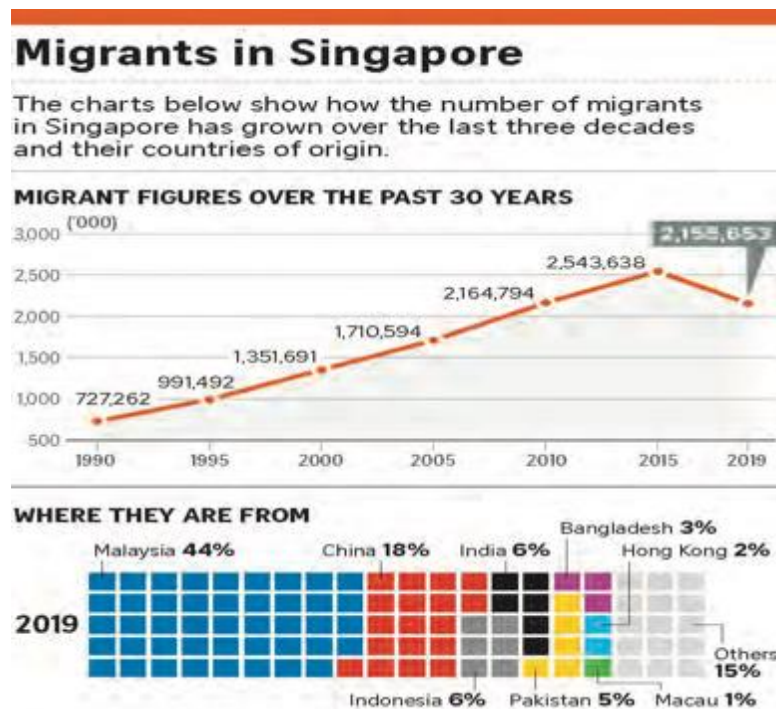


Source: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/singapore/population-and-urbanization-statistics/sg-international-migrant-stock--of-population>.

As to how many new Chinese migrants have been in Singapore (including those who have naturalized and become permanent residents of the nation), the information has not been released by the government. My earlier studies estimated the number to be around 350,000-400,000 (Liu 2012). It was only in early 2020 that the United Nations published the data pertaining to the sources of Singapore's international migration. As shown in Figure 2<sup>10</sup>, the largest source of migrants (defined as those naturalized citizens, permanent residents, and long-term work pass holders who were born outside of Singapore) came from Malaysia (44% of 2,155,653 in 2019, or 948,487), followed by those from mainland China (18% of total migrants, or 388,000).

<sup>10</sup> Tan Ee Lyn, "Migrants in Singapore: UN report debunks popular perceptions," *Straits Times*, Jan., 19, 2020. The UN data are available at <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/countryprofiles.asp>.

Figure 2: Growth and Sources of International Migrants in Singapore



Sources: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and *Sunday Times* (January 21, 2020).

New Chinese migrants emerged as a result of China's reform and opening-up in the late 1970s and they are not a homogenous entity who is actually composed of people of different socio-economic, regional, and sub-ethnic backgrounds (Liu 2005; Zhou 2017). According to the World Migration Report 2020, the number of international migrants originated from China is 10.7 million.<sup>11</sup> By comparison, new migrants in Singapore only account for 3.6% of total new Chinese migrants. Like those in other countries, new migrants in Singapore share some demographic characteristics with their counterparts elsewhere, who originated from all over China instead of from the traditional *qiaoxiang* in South China. Apart from about 70,000 labourers (in the early 2020<sup>12</sup>), those new immigrants with "portable skills" are generally much better educated than the local population, and they are overrepresented in some research and higher education sectors. Take the example of the National University of Singapore: Among its 1,671 full-time teaching faculty members in 2000, 887 (53 per cent) were Singaporean citizens and the remaining 784 (46.9 per cent) were foreigners, of whom 110 (14 per cent) were PRC citizens. Among the 1,171 full-time

<sup>11</sup> [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr\\_2020\\_en\\_chapter1\\_004.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020_en_chapter1_004.pdf), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sg/chn/kjxgfyyqztxx/t1773552.htm>.

researchers, only 221 (19 per cent) were Singaporean citizens; 621 (53 per cent) were foreigners, 329 of those (28 per cent) were from the PRC (cited in Liu 2008). This is a reflection of the deliberate policy efforts on the part of the Singapore government in recruiting foreign migrants who are divided into highly skilled and low-skilled, with the former meeting the needs for the nation's drive towards a smart city-state amidst the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Zhan and Zhou 2020). The low-skilled foreign laborers, on the other hand, are needed for manual work that few Singaporeans want to do, and they have no prospect of settling down in Singapore.

### Between De-territorialization and Re-territorialization

In comparison with traditional Chinese organizations based upon primordial ties such as locality and kinship (Liu 1998; Liu and Ren 2018), new associations tend to be more inclusive, recruiting members from diverse geographical and social backgrounds originated from China. Here we highlight two such examples to showcase their characteristics and functions. While deterritorialization emphasizes the separation of people, processes and sentiments from a particular locality or nation, “this image of global space as a ‘placeless, distanceless, and borderless’ realm is the geographical essence of deterritorialization approaches” (Brenner 1999, p. 61).

The Singapore Hua Yuan Association was established in 2001 by mainland-born Chinese professionals, recruiting members from the new emigrants who have become Singaporean citizens or permanent residents. The key individuals attending the founding ceremony in May 2001 was indicative of its intended mission to serve as a bridge between Singapore and China as well as between new migrants and the local-born Singaporean Chinese: Chan Soon Sen, the then Senior Parliamentary Secretary in the Singapore Prime Minister's Office, Zhang Jiujuan, the then Chinese Ambassador to Singapore, Freddy Lam Fong Loi, President of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry which was founded in 1906 and has been one of the most influential Chinese organizations in the nation, and Chua Gim Siong, the General Secretary of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, which was established in 1986 with a view to liaise with some 300 Chinese voluntary associations in Singapore (Singapore Hua Yuan Association 2016, p. 81). The Association also recruits “para-members” among those PRC citizens who are on long-term student visas or employment permits. According to its constitution, the association has six main missions:

- 1) to assist members to better integrate into the multi-ethnic society of Singapore;
- 2) to promote information exchange and communication;
- 3) to foster the spirit of mutual help;
- 4) to promote exchanges and communications with other associations;
- 5) to uplift its members' social lives by organizing various activities; and
- 6) to promote commercial and trade relationships between Singapore and China.

As the largest association representing new migrants from China, the Hua Yuan Association claims to have a membership of more than 6,000 in 2016 (Singapore Hua Yuan Association 2016, p.8), who collectively represent nearly every province in China and majority of whom have at least a college degree. Table 2 is a detailed analysis of the events organized by the Association during its first 15 years of development, revealing that there are four major types out of all 187 listed activities (in other words, average one event per month).

Table 2: Breakdown of Events organized by Hua Yuan Association (2001-2016)

Types of Events	Integration with the local society	Business networking	Social-cultural bonding among members	China engagement
Number and percentage	77 (41.2%)	36 (19.3%)	49 (26.2%)	25 (13.3%)
Examples	Co-organizing events jointly with the People's Association; attending functions hosted by Singaporean politicians	Receiving delegations from China and other countries on business collaborations; working with local companies to promote business	Recreational and enriching activities such as sports, seminars, singing competition, and matching	Attending National Day celebration in China and/or Chinese embassy in Singapore

Source: Author's compilation based upon "15-year Milestone", in Singapore Hua Yuan Association (2016), pp. 64-95.

It should be noted that the above events are often multi-purposed with mixed aims to maximizing social, cultural, economic, and sometimes, political benefits, hence there could be overlapping in their activities. They do, however, reflect a trend of integrating with the local society and enhancing transnational business networking, in addition to serving as a platform for new migrants for cultural bonding. The integration efforts were also clearly demonstrated in the New Migrants Outstanding Contribution Awards the Hua Yuan

Association has organized, with the award criteria being focused on the awardees' contribution to Singapore and the awardees also included non-Chinese who are new comers to Singapore.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, reflecting the fact that the new diaspora were born in China and still maintain family, social, and business ties with the ancestral homeland, the activities in relations to China account for about one-third of the Association's overall activities (including some business networking events held in Singapore and cultural root-seeking programmes).

De-territorialization is also characteristic of another new Chinese association established by and for the new migrants. Just as the case of the Hua Yuan Association, the Singapore Tianfu Hometown Association, founded in 2000, represents the hometown in a more symbolic manner. Although Tianfu is an alias of Sichuan Province, the Association's membership is not confined to the traditional organizing principles of locality (namely, those born in Sichuan and who speak the local dialect), but also includes those who have studied or worked in the province or have business/ cultural contacts with Sichuan. The word "Hometown" was dropped from the name of the association in 2006, and the Tianfu Chamber of Commerce was established as an affiliated entity. Its members were born in every part of China. As of March 2018, it had registered members of 1,312, 95% of whom have a college degree and 60% have a masters or PhD (Singapore Tianfu Association 2018, p. 16). Its President Du Zhiqiang revealed that about 30% of its members studied in Singapore and more than half of them have master's degrees (*Lianhe Zaobao*, August 9, 2020).

While the Tianfu Association has vowed that "Singapore is our home" and aims to contributing "our society and serving our country [Singapore]" in its pledge, it does not mean it has totally cut off from linkages with China. On the contrary, the dual embeddedness in both Singapore and China has provided significant social and economic capital for its leadership and business members in their activities (Ren and Liu 2015). The Association's key leadership, for example, has been invited by central and local governments of China to attend major functions such as National Day celebration. There are other similar new Chinese associations being formed over the past two decades. While the number of such associations was six in between 1990 and 2010, at least five new associations were set up between 2011 and 2016 (Leong 2016).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Based upon author's participation as a member of selection panel for the second award (2012/13) and third award (2018/19).

<sup>14</sup> Leong Weng Kam, "New Clan Group for Residents from Jiangsu," *Straits Times*, November 14, 2016.

We have mentioned about new Chinese Associations' tendency to develop de-territorialization in that the locality linkage has been decoupled or delinked in their efforts to reach out a wide audience from all over China and engage China as a political and cultural symbol, we should not assume that locality linkage has been totally discredited or given away. In effect, similar to earlier globalization of overseas Chinese clan associations in which primordial ties such as kinship and locality have been revitalized to serve to the new needs of economic development (Liu 1998), there is re-territorialization among some major Chinese associations after they have firmly established in the new host societies.

The co-existence of de- and re-territorialization is reflected in the Tianfu Association's 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration held in March 2018 in Singapore, with the then Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung (who also chaired the government's Chinese Community Liaison Group at the time) as the guest of honor. The celebration was held in conjunction with the 5<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Presidents of Overseas Sichuanese Associations. The 30 presidents represented in the meeting included those from the USA, Europe, Australia, Japan and Southeast Asia, with their ancestral hometowns being Sichuan province or Chongqing (which used to be part of Sichuan), or the neighboring provinces such as Guizhou. This mechanism of global networking was established in 2014 in Sichuan with the backing of the local provincial government, serving as a linkage between Sichuan province and those (mostly) business leaders originated from Sichuan as well as the neighboring provinces (Singapore Tianfu Association 2018).

### Government Policies toward New Chinese Migrants

The development of the new diaspora has been significantly shaped by the Singapore government's policies. While the largest source of international migrants come from Malaysia, the issue of integration is less of a concern for the Singapore state, mainly because the two countries have had long-standing social, economic and cultural linkages dating back to the colonial period when both territories were under the British rule and were united as a country for a short period of time prior to Singapore's independence in 1965. The integration, therefore, would have to be focusing on the second largest source of international migrants, those from mainland China.

There are two main underlying logics behind the government's positions pertaining to the new diaspora. The first is economic and demographic logic, which requires Singapore to attract foreigners with good educational credentials and the needed skillsets to facilitate the

country's economic development and transformation. This would also directly address the issue of declining fertility rate. Speaking in 2016 about Singapore's drive toward research, innovation and enterprise, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2016) made it clear that "we have to be able to attract international talent and be open to talent in order to be able to deepen our talent pool, to create new knowledge and to enhance our technological expertise. If we can do that, then we can get the right mix of local and foreign talent. We have to make this a creative, a fertile, an innovative and enterprising environment."<sup>15</sup>

The second logic is political and identity-driven, which requires the government to ensure the newcomers to be political loyal to the country (if they have naturalized to become Singapore citizens) and be closely integrated into the local multi-ethnic socio-cultural mosaic. While the two logics may not be contradictory to each other, the government has given priority to the second throughout the past decade as a direct reflection of the changing political economy documented in the earlier section of this chapter. As a young nation in the process of forming its own national identity, Singapore wants to avoid any potential distractions that might be inconducive to this larger and more important project. This is especially the case in relation to new migrants from China, a rising power that has had a long cultural tradition. The mounting US-China tensions over the past decade has reinforced this policy preference. As Lee Hsien Loong wrote in the July/August 2020 issue of the *Foreign Affairs*, the existence of a significant number of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia is a "politically sensitive issue" and an "obstacle that would prevent China from taking over the security role currently played by the United States." He highlights specifically the delicate challenges faced by Singapore:

Singapore is the only Southeast Asian country whose multiracial population is majority ethnic Chinese. In fact, it is the only sovereign state in the world with such demographics other than China itself. But Singapore has made enormous efforts to build a multiracial national identity and not a Chinese one. And it has also been extremely careful to avoid doing anything that could be misperceived as allowing itself to be used as a cat's-paw by China. For this reason, Singapore did not establish diplomatic relations with China until 1990, making it the final Southeast Asian country, except for Brunei, to do so (Lee 2020).

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<sup>15</sup> "PM Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the Research, Innovation and Enterprise Council (RIEC) Press Conference," January 8, 2016. Available at <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loong-research-innovation-and-enterprise-council-riec-press-conference>.

Guided by these two main considerations, the Singapore government has formulated a series of policies towards the Chinese community in general and new migrants in particular, with interconnected agendas that have been aptly summarized by the then Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security, Teo Chee Hean, at the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) 16th Council investiture ceremony held on 7 October 2018. He highlighted the role of the SFCCA to be an important bridge for Singapore: “First, a bridge between our people; second, a bridge between new and old; and third, a bridge between countries” (Teo 2018). The first role is for the Chinese community to enhance “multiracial society and multicultural traditions” which are what “make Singapore unique.” The second is help the assimilation of “new immigrants into our society. SFCCA should continue to create opportunities for new immigrants to better understand Singapore’s customs and culture, and to deepen interactions.” The third is for “a deep understanding of China and maintains many connections and networks in China.”

The formulation and strengthening of a unique Singaporean (Chinese) identity has been at the core of the state’s policies over the past decade. In celebrating Singapore’s bicentennial in 2019, Lee Hsien Loong spoke in length about the emergence and characteristics of this unique identity and tradition. He pointed out that even before the arrival of the British in 1819, “Singapore had already had hundreds of years of history” that could be traced back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The country’s history had also “made us quite different from our neighbours and friends.” And he concluded: “Over two centuries, all these different strands wove together into a rich tapestry, a shared sense of destiny, and eventually a Singapore identity and nation” and in the meantime highlighted that the nation-building is an on-going project: “[W]e are never done building Singapore. It is every generation’s duty to keep on building, for our children, and for our future” (Lee 2019). Identity construction explains the political leadership’s emphasizing in integration of all ethnic communities as an overarching framework in confronting new migrant communities in the nation.

Integrating new Chinese migrants into the multiracial society while engaging them for business networks with China have, therefore, become the dual frameworks of the government’s positions toward new Chinese migrants. The speech by Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office Chan Chun Sing (who also chaired the government’s Chinese Community Liaison Group at the time) in November 2016 at the celebration event of the Hua Yuan Association is indicative of such a dual focus. In the first place, he noted that Chinese clan associations were like a bridge between Singapore and China in the past, new migrant associations are expected to position themselves differently and “are like a construction

crane, with a solid foundation capable of rising and helping Singapore to reach out and connect with different parts of the world, not China alone.” He emphasized that “the new Chinese immigrants must not only integrate with the older immigrants with their younger generations all Singapore-born, but also those from the minority races.” The role of business networks is also important. In the launching event of the Global Hua Yuan Collaborative Network, Chan praised that “such networks by Chinese community groups can play a new role in connecting Singapore with the rest of the world” (cited in Leong 2016).

In a similar vein, Chan spoke in the founding ceremony of the Singapore Jiangsu Association in March 2017: “New citizens are a part of our social fabric, and it is critical that they can integrate well and at the same time, contribute to society to ensure sustainable growth for Singapore. The Association will play an important and active role in facilitating and promoting social integration, thereby further strengthening the harmony and growth of Singapore.” He urged the Jiangsu Association to “further promote exchanges and cooperation between Singapore and Jiangsu, as well as the whole of China, in areas such as trade, technology, culture and education” (Singapore Jiangsu Association 2017). Minister Ong Ye Kung’s opened his speech at the Tianfu Association’s 18<sup>th</sup> Anniversary gala dinner with the praise that the Association “has actively encouraged and helped new migrants integrate into Singapore society, and has promoted various activities aiming at racial harmony” (Singapore Tianfu Association 2018).

The above efforts of identity construction, integration and transnational business networking have been institutionalized to ensure smooth coordination of various government agencies and effective implementation of the evolving policies. One of the most important institutions has been the Chinese Community Liaison Group (CCLG), comprising office-holders and PAP Members of Parliament, which was set up in 2000 to “strengthen relations between the Government and the Chinese community as well as cooperation amongst the various Chinese groups.” The first chairman was Chan Soon Seng, an MP and Minister of State. He was succeeded by Senior Minister of State (later Minister for Health) Gan Kim Yong in 2006. Chan Chun Sing took over the chairmanship 2014, and Ong Ye Kung assumed this role in 2017 (Tham 2017). In November 2020, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong, who is also Second Minister for Law (and a Roman Catholic), took over as chairman of CCLG. In his statement, Lee Hsien Loong said: “Much synergy exists between his [Tong’s] current portfolio and the needs of the Chinese community. In the course of *fostering a cohesive multiracial and multi-religious community* in Singapore, Edwin will

also be able to deepen the engagement of arts and cultural groups, as well as religious and youth groups in the Chinese community.”<sup>16</sup>

As both Chan and Ong are the core members of Singapore’s 4<sup>th</sup> generation leadership, their appointments demonstrate the government’s growing attention to the engagement with the Chinese community, while Tong’s appointment could be seen as a reflection of the government’s efforts to strengthen Chinese identity in the Singaporean context of multiracial and multi-religious context. According to Lee Hsien Loong, Chan “did much to deepen and expand CCLG’s engagement with the Chinese community. He has canvassed the community leaders’ feedback and concerns, worked with them on government programmes and explained these initiatives to the Chinese ground. Mr Chan has also broadened the reach of CCLG beyond the Chinese clan and business associations, to include media, sports, arts and cultural groups” (Prime Minister’s Office 2017).

In addition to being under the helm of the PAP’s rising political stars, the CCLG is supported by a number of politicians and technocrats who are effectively bilingual (English and Chinese) and have a deep knowledge of Chinese culture. According to the local newspaper *Lianhe Zaobao*, the CCLG is composed of several working groups headed by senior politicians and MPs, such as those dealing with business, clan associations, Chinese religious groups, cultural and arts sector, media, bi-culturalism, and new migrants. After the 2015 General Election, five new members including two full ministers were appointed to the CCLG (*Lianhe Zaobao*, November 10, 2015; Xinhuanet). The wide-ranging activities under CCLG’s charge indicate the important role of what Lee Hsien Loong called “Dahuashe” (“pan-Chinese community”) which is composed of clan associations, business associations, religious groups, cultural groups, media, new migrants, martial art organizations, and organizers of *Getai*<sup>17</sup> (*Lianhe Zaobao*, November 11, 2015).

With a view to responding to the government’s call to better integrate newcomers into the nation’s social fabric, the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, a consortium of more than 300 locality/kinship associations, decided in January 2012 to set up a new Chinese Cultural Centre “to integrate newcomers to Singapore and showcase the local Chinese identity” (*Straits Times*, Jan., 25, 2012). Located in the central business district, the Centre was open in 2017, with Lee Hsien Loong serving as its patron. Its stated vision is “a

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<sup>16</sup> *Straits Times*, November 12, 2020. Emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> *Getai* literally means “song stage” in Chinese, it is a popular form of mass entertainment that has evolved in Singapore since the 1940s and serves as a major grassroots activities for the Chinese mass, especially those Chinese-educated. [https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2015-02-25\\_161203.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2015-02-25_161203.html).

vibrant Singapore Chinese culture, *rooted in a cohesive, multi-racial society*,” and the mission is to “nurture Singapore Chinese culture and *enhance social harmony*.”<sup>18</sup>

In summary, significant changes have taken place in the past decade with respect to Singapore’s politics, society and the Chinese community. The three interconnected driving forces behind the transformation of new Chinese diaspora in Singapore are: 1) the government’s policy, especially in terms of identity-building in a multi-racial Singapore and their role in contributing to the nation’s future economy through cross-border business networks; 2) changing demographics and the growing numbers of new Chinese migrants and their associations in the nation, and finally, 3) the rise of China as the largest economy in Asia and its growing presence in Southeast Asia, its engagement with the Chinese diaspora, which not only encourages diaspora investment in China but also actively encourages Chinese enterprises going abroad in which Singapore has been one of the key destinations (Liu and van Dongen 2016; Liu, Fan and Lim 2021).

### **Sin-Singaporean Business: Traversing between National and Transnational**

Having documented the socio-political and demographic changes over the past decade, let us now turn to the changing strategies and operations of new Chinese businesses in Singapore. This section focuses on two patterns of business transnationalism, one is represented by relative larger enterprises (including both mainland Chinese and local businesses) who formed their business association in Singapore, and the other is a case study of new diaspora business originated in China which has reversed its investment by going from Singapore to China. These two-directional investment activities highlight the continuing significance of national and transnational dynamisms.

#### China Enterprises Association (CEA)

Since the establishment of the diplomatic relationship between Singapore and China in 1990, and especially after 2001 when China joined the WTO and with the launching of the BRI in 2013, economic relations between the two countries have developed rapidly, with China becoming Singapore’s largest trade partner and the volumes of trade have been on the steady increase since 2010. In the meantime, Singapore has been China’s largest foreign

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<sup>18</sup> <https://singaporeccc.org.sg/about-us/>. Emphasis added.

investor country since 2013, when its investments in China hit US\$7.23 billion. According to statistics from the Chinese embassy in Singapore released in April 2019, there were 998 Singaporean investment projects in China in 2018, an increase of 41.4% from the previous year, and the actual investment was US\$5.21 billion, an increase of 9.4%. The total number of Singaporean enterprises in China was 24,869, while there are more than 7,500 mainland Chinese enterprises in Singapore (Xinhua Silk Road 2019). There have been positive corrections between the Chinese communities in Singapore (both old and new) and China's business presence in the region (Liang, Zhou, Liu 2019). More broadly, it has been established that the presence of ethnic Chinese in the trade partner population and co-ethnic networks contribute to "substantial trade creation effects" and that diaspora impacts on Chinese bilateral imports are in general higher than those found for exports (Martínez-Zarzoso and Rudolf 2020, see also Fossati 2019), while "greater intra-ethnic cooperativeness" has been conducive to economic success of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia (Chuah et al 2016). It is also worthwhile noting that Singapore's largest export partners in 2017 were mainland China (14.7%), Hong Kong (12.6%), and Malaysia (10.8%).<sup>19</sup>

With the growing number of Chinese enterprises in Singapore (about 1,100 in 2003), their representative organization was established in 1999. According to the then President of the CEA, Shen Nanning, with its excellent geographic location, robust legal environment, conducive service-oriented system, and the Chinese-majority population, Singapore becomes "a valuable oasis for Chinese enterprises going overseas and it can serve as a stepping stone for Chinese enterprises going international and a pilot project" (Weng 2004, 27-35).<sup>20</sup> In 2003, the CEA had 126 members whose combined assets were more than S\$20 billion and employed over 16,000 locally.

By the closing years of the 2010s, the CEA has further benefited from the increasing numbers of Chinese enterprises and growing investment in Singapore (and ASEAN as a whole, since Singapore has also served as a major regional hub for Chinese enterprises). According to the United Overseas Bank (UOB) Asian Enterprise Survey 2016, Singapore retained its top spot as mainland Chinese enterprises' favourite expansion destination. One-third of Chinese enterprises surveyed also chose the city-state as the market that they would

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/378617/most-important-export-partner-countries-for-singapore/>

<sup>20</sup> This view of testing ground was further accorded by the Chinese embassy in Singapore, which recommended to the central government in making Singapore as a pilot for various new policy initiatives for management and retention of SOE staff including allowing them to obtain Singapore permanent residency. See Tang (2004); Tay (2004).

expand into in the next three to five years. Aided by the BRI, Chinese companies have been quickening their pace on regional expansion to tap on the increasing opportunities in Singapore. They are drawn to Singapore's stable political and economic climate (43 per cent), its favourable tax and regulatory environment (40 per cent) and large and growing customer demand (39 per cent).<sup>21</sup> According to the Enterprise Singapore, a government agency tasked with attracting foreign investment, there were 7500 Chinese companies had set up their regional headquarters, R & D and/or manufacturing centres by 2017. About 110 Chinese enterprises were listed in the Singapore Stock Exchanges, with a total capital of S\$24.9 billion (Lin 2018).

As of June 2020, the CEA had 670 members,<sup>22</sup> who are in a wide range of business sectors ranging from trade, banking and service (Table 3). Apart from some 70% companies which are mainland Chinese enterprises (most are state-owned enterprises), there are local Singaporean and ASEAN firms joining CEA including the Pacific International Lines (Pte) Ltd, the Bank of Singapore, Maybank (Singapore), ECON Healthcare Group and law firms such as Rajah & Tann Singapore LLP. There are also international firms in the membership including Deloitte & Touche, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, and Conrad Centennial Singapore – Hilton Group. There are some Hong Kong enterprises such as the Suntec Development which was co-founded by the tycoon Li Kai-shing.

Table 3: CEA members' Business Categories and Respective Proportions

Business Category (number of firms)	Proportion
Shipping (8)	4%
Air Transport (7)	3%
Construction (29)	14%
Financial (23)	10%
Energy (21)	15%
Trading (17)	8%

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.uob.com.sg/cn/pdfs/news20161117\\_en.pdf](https://www.uob.com.sg/cn/pdfs/news20161117_en.pdf)

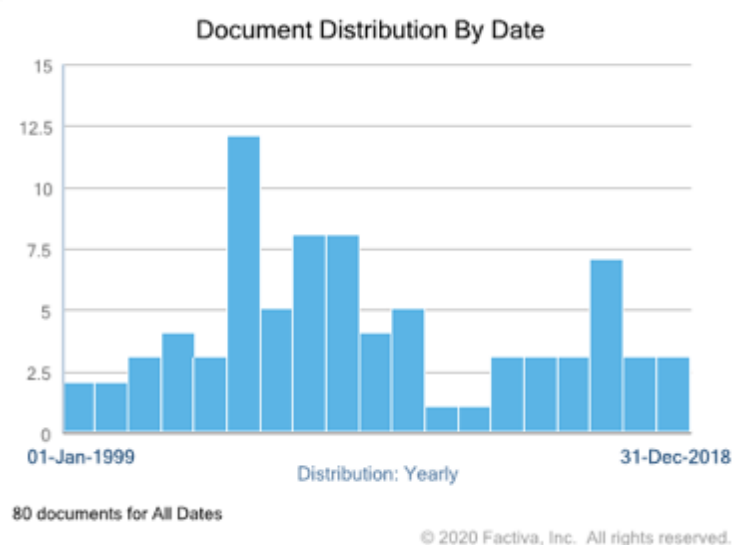
<sup>22</sup> President of CEA Cheng Jun: Tri-city cooperation more important than competition, Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong could work together to expand the financial market in the Asia-Pacific," *Lianhe Zaobao*, Jun 12, 2020. 中企协会会长程军：三城合作大于竞争 新沪港可一同做大亚太金融市场，《联合早报》，2020年6月12日。

Steel (8)	4%
Technology (20)	10%
Law/Accounting (16)	8%
Representative (6)	3%
Service (31)	15%
Education Consulting (12)	6%

Source: Author's compilation based upon the *2018 Membership Directory of China Enterprises Association (Singapore) (CEA)*.

The CEA has four subcommittees: finance, shipping, construction and trading. Its growing membership and international profile have demonstrated the CEA's influences and its role in facilitating business activities that are centred in China and ASEAN. It has kept an active public profile, demonstrated by the regular news coverage of its activities (Figure 3).

Figure 3: CEA Activities and News Coverage (1999-2018)



Source: Author's compilation based upon reports from Factiva (1999-2018).

As most of CEA members are state-owned enterprises, they are, as expected, closely involved in the BRI. The former CEA president who also was the CEO of Bank of China in Singapore, Qiu Zhikuan, stated that the BRI provided a rare opportunity for development along the route, and urged Singaporean companies to actively use their geographical

advantages to establish long-term and stable cooperation mechanisms with “going out” Chinese companies. By the end of 2017, the Bank of China (Singapore) had invested some US\$10b in more than a dozen BRI countries in the infrastructure, food processing and manufacturing sectors. In 2018, it helped the Philippines in raising more than S\$300 million bonds.<sup>23</sup>

One of the private corporations belonging to CEA is Qingjian Realty (South Pacific) Group which is a subsidiary of the Hong Kong mainboard listed company and has been one of the Top Ten Developers in Singapore. It is the first Chinese-funded enterprise in Singapore to obtain the PPVC IPA (Principle Approval Certificate) and the full version of MAS (Manufacturer License) for the concrete structure system. Its recent development has been driven by the Belt and Road initiative, with the strategy of “Internationalisation, Localisation and Integration.” Its business includes a number of property development projects (both public housing and private developments) in areas such as Toa Payoh and Bishan. As a Chinese company, it was a main contractor for the Chinese Cultural Centre in Singapore.<sup>24</sup>

In short, the CEA has facilitated the growing activities of Chinese enterprises in Singapore and business ties between China and Singapore, especially in the context of the BRI since 2013. As the great majority of CEA members are ethnic Chinese, it has provided a practical platform for networking among mainland Chinese and local businesses (including some new Chinese migrants whose companies are also represented). Furthermore, the participation of non-Chinese and international companies in the CEA has further bolstered the impact of the member institutions, thus demonstrating the continuing relevance of organized form of Chinese transnationalism at the time of a rising China (c.f., Liu 2012; 2018).

### Wang Quancheng and Transnational Entrepreneurship at the time of the BRI

In earlier studies (Liu 2008, Ren and Liu 2015), we have identified different patterns of transnational Chinese entrepreneurship and argued that traversing between Singapore and

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<sup>23</sup> “Bank of China (Singapore) Riding on the BRI: Singaporean and Chinese Enterprises should establish long-term and stable cooperative mechanisms,” an interview with CEO of Bank of China (Singapore) on May 18, 2018. <https://beltandroad.zaobao.com/beltandroad/corporate/story20180518-859852>

<sup>24</sup> “Riding on the Belt and Road Initiative” (August 29, 2016), <http://www.cnqc.com.hk/en/company-news/>.

China in business and social arenas have afforded new Chinese entrepreneurs with some important advantages in competing for capital and access to markets. We also argued that these new immigrant entrepreneurs had been simultaneously embedded into two or more nation-states and geopolitical spheres. Our evidence suggests that there is a strong and evolving underpinning of new Chinese capitalism that is characterized by intensive transnational connections with the homeland and deepening integration with the host-land. As these studies had been undertaken prior to the BRI's launch in 2013, we could not examine the BRI's impact. The following pages are devoted to a case study of Wang Quancheng who expanded his business back to China which has been facilitated by growing economic ties between China and Singapore under the framework of the BRI as being detailed in the first section of this chapter and elsewhere (Liu, Fan, Lim 2021).

I have earlier classified Wang as an example of contemporary “brokerage entrepreneurs” who were resemble more closely to their predecessors arriving in Southeast Asia more than 150 years ago (Liu 2008). They usually started small, working for others as manual laborers. After accumulating sufficient capital, network, and experiences, they then set up their own companies in the service or manufacturing sectors that are mostly labor-intensive. The major source of business profits derives from their brokerage activities: between their clients (contractors) and their customers (laborers) in the local settings, and more importantly, as an intermediary between China and Singapore in the transnational setting, by bringing “scarce commodities” (such as knowledge for investment opportunities, laborers, or prospective immigrants) from one side to the other.

Born in 1965 in Anxi county in southern Fujian, Wang Quancheng received only high school education. At the age of 21, he went to Singapore as a construction worker with reportedly only 20 yuan (S\$4) in his pocket, laboring for more than a dozen hours a day and earning merely S\$15. Three years later, using personal savings and loans from friends and the usury, he set up his own construction company, Lianquan Construction Company. The construction boom in the early 1990s and the ability to bring in cheap labor from China helped his business tremendously. His firm soon reached reportedly annual business volume of S\$50 million, and Wang himself became a naturalized Singapore citizen and a director or board member of more than 30 local companies. Wang invested near 100 million yuan to build a four-star hotel in his hometown Anxi. Keenly aware of the importance of social networking among newcomers, he founded the Hua Yuan Association in 2001 (whose recent activities in both Singapore and the global Chinese arena were described in the previous section).

There are a number of new developments with regards to Wang's socio-economic engagements in Singapore and China over the past decade, which in turn reflects the changing nature of new Chinese entrepreneurship and the dynamic rise of China as the second largest economy in the globe.

In the first place, Wang's growing social profile and wide-ranging networks have led him to be appointed as one of the forty overseas representatives from outside China at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress in 2018. This national representative role has been perceived with prestige, symbolized by a full-page congratulatory message on the most-widely circulated Chinese newspaper in Singapore, *Lianhe Zaobao* (also the most read foreign news portal in China). While this political capital is a result of deliberate building of networks (social capital) and philanthropy,<sup>25</sup> it has facilitated his accumulation of economic capital, especially in China. It is reported that he has donated some 20 million RMB for various philanthropical projects in China and Singapore.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, while Wang made his wealth from construction business in Singapore in the 1990s and early 2000s, the prospect of his business growth has been hampered not only by the economic slow-down after the Asian financial crisis in 1997/98, but also by the economic transition the country has gone through over the past two decades, moving toward knowledge-based economy and innovation. Singapore's small domestic market and highly competitive nature of construction business prevented Wang's business from growing further. As a result, he has increasingly shifted his business operation to China, in his capacity as a Singaporean entrepreneur who was born in China and has accumulated considerable social and political capital in the previous two decades. Commenting in 2015 pertaining to the opportunities brought about by the BRI, Wang said,

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Maritime Silk Road is a modern silk road for mutual benefits and friendly cooperation. The Chinese diaspora are proud of China's remarkable progress in recent years which has led to its massive upgrading of comprehensive national power and international influences. And they are in full support of China's effort to revitalize its great national glory and the realization of the Chinese Dream. We have relatives and friends in the motherland, the environment for business and investment in China has been increasingly conducive. [Furthermore], we have witnessed the

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Wang and Hua Yuan Association members donated 40,000 face masks and 40,000 medical gloves, goggles and protective garments to Xiamen and other Chinese cities in March/April 2020 at the time of global Covid-19 pandemic. See "China, Singapore join hands to confront challenges amid COVID-19 outbreak International Cooperation," available at the official website of Chinese embassy in Singapore <http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/search.htm?strUrl=englishscio&sub=International%20Cooperation>.

<sup>26</sup> [https://news.tianyancha.com/l1\\_6o5xyd84o1.html](https://news.tianyancha.com/l1_6o5xyd84o1.html).

determination of the Chinese government in deepening reform and its eagerness in attracting Chinese diaspora to invest in China.<sup>27</sup>

Thirdly, the past decade has seen the change of not only the geographical concentration, but also his business focus. Construction sector is hard to enter in China without strong local governmental backing, Wang had started some property development (a four-star hotel in his hometown), but it encountered many operational problems which led to legal disputes and the change of ownership. Over the past few years, he has increasingly focused on aquafarming with new technology, targeting the growing market in China whose middle-class consumers have sought for safe and nutritious foods.

Wang's wholly owned company, Quanying Technology Co., was established in October 2013 in Zaoan county, which is close to his hometown and shares the same Southern Hokkien dialect. The initial capital was S\$40 million, or 200 million RMB, making it the largest foreign investment in the city by the time and it was listed as a key provincial level investment project for Fujian province in 2014 and 2015. The aquaculture facility he set up is reportedly the biggest indoor recirculating maricultural system in the world, together with Wang's other businesses such as import and export, it is expected to produce a cumulative value of 600-800 million RMB per year once it is full production.<sup>28</sup> Apart from cooperating with an Australian company through using the latest technology for aquaculture, he has also worked with Singapore's government-link corporation (Mapletree) and local Chinese state-owned enterprise (Fujian Tourism Investment Co.) to explore various business opportunities in the province. His unique background as a local-born Chinese and a naturalized Singaporean citizen bearing the Chinese government's official endorsement has been a comparative advantage in facilitating his business activities, which in turn serves as a bridge between China and Singapore, just like the Hua Yuan Association he set up in 2001.<sup>29</sup>

In summary, the rise of China and its growing economic ties with Singapore have provided emerging and vast opportunities for new Chinese entrepreneurs such as Wang Quancheng, who have traversed between two countries. Wang's activities have benefitted from his dual attachments to both countries—he is simultaneously a national and transnational, and his re-territorialization by returning to invest in his homeland with newly

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<sup>27</sup> “Xi Jinping: China is willing to co-build the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road together with ASEAN” (March 6, 2015). Available at <https://iconada.tv/m/blogpost?id=3600580%3ABlogPost%3A251130&maxDate=2015-06-15T10%3A38%3A43.865Z>.

<sup>28</sup> *Fujian Qiaobao*, September 5, 2015, available at [http://www.cnepaper.com/fjqb/html/2014-09/05/content\\_12\\_1.htm](http://www.cnepaper.com/fjqb/html/2014-09/05/content_12_1.htm); *Lianhe Zaobao*, December 25, 2016; and the author's fieldwork in Zaoan county in Sept 2019.

<sup>29</sup> The author's interviews with Wang Quancheng in Fujian and Singapore, 2018-2019.

acquired social and political capital have given him an edge that is difficult to be matched by his peers from Singapore or China.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The proceeding pages of documentation and analysis have led to the following concluding observations, which in turn serve as starting points for thinking about future research directions

In the first place, significant changes have taken place over the past decade with respect to the political economy of Singapore and new Chinese diaspora community in the nation. New mode of state-society relationship, accelerated pace of identity construction, and ongoing transnationalism are at the core of these multifaceted transformations which are driven not only by domestic politics, economic strategies, changing demographics, but also by a rising China and its growing presence, through mechanisms such as the BRI and associated investment, in Southeast Asia in general and Singapore in particular. The intertwining of national and transnational constitutes a key backdrop for deciphering the characteristics of contemporary Chinese diaspora in Singapore and their identities.

Secondly, the key issue confronting the Chinese communities in Singapore, both local-born and new migrants, has been identity—the forging, nurturing, and strengthening of a Singaporean identity in a multiracial and multi-cultural nation that was formed merely half a century earlier. As the cases in some other Southeast Asian countries (Liu 2016), while local-born Singaporean Chinese have already firmly established their national identity through socialization and education, the influx of a large number of new Chinese migrants over the past two decades has presented new challenges for the national identity project, especially because they are from a rising power with a long and rich cultural tradition and now reside in a Chinese majority country. Integration of new migrants and construction of a Singaporean (Chinese) identity have thus become the foundation of government policies, which have been effectively supported by a wide range of mechanisms such as CCLG and voluntary associations such as SFCCA.

Thirdly, while politics is in command with respect to identity constructions, economic imperative is also a significant component in shaping the trajectory and identity construction of the new Chinese diaspora in Singapore. They have not only contributed to the population growth in a country that is facing the dual challenges of declining fertility rate and rapidly

ageing society, but more importantly, they are a vibrant force in business transnationalism in bridging China and Singapore which has made internationalization one of its key economic strategies since the mid-2010s. Co-ethnic networking has been reinforced by the BRI through its growing investments and expanding trade. Chinese business transnationalism, therefore, has emerged through the dynamic and wide-ranging activities exemplified by the CEA in Singapore and Wang Quancheng's new investment in China. It should, however, be emphasized that the political logic of identity construction is always considered as the priority and of utmost importance, while the economic logic of transnationalism has been formulated to supplement this nation-building agenda.

With regards to future research directions, it is imperative to identify how the shifting external environments such as the mounting tensions between the US and China in recent years have impacted upon the new Chinese diaspora in Singapore (and Southeast Asian region as a whole), which has increasingly become the sphere of great power rivalries (Allison 2020). As previously quoted Lee Hsien Loong's *Foreign Affairs* essay has alluded to, ethnic Chinese issue is a sensitive one that has a larger impact upon diplomacy. Apart from this external dynamic, it is also important to examine the interplay between the political and economic logics in shaping the government's policy, which is in turn a part and parcel of the larger on-going debates about migration and social mobility in the nation. In the final analysis, the studies of diasporic Chinese, be in Singapore, North America, or elsewhere, have to be more compellingly and structurally brought into the domestic and international political economy of our time, which in turn requires the incorporation of a new set of analytical tools and theoretical frameworks into the field that has, for too long, been largely self-contained and aloof.

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