

Asian Migrations and Diasporas since 1500

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Given human migration's crucial role in world history, the Asian migrations of the past half millennium and resulting diasporas are an important topic, with impacts in many parts of the globe. Even a North American heartland city like Green Bay, Wisconsin is home to over 5,000 Asians, predominantly Hmong but also including Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, South Asians, Vietnamese, Lao, and Filipinos, alongside long-established Lebanese families. Hence I include material on Asian migrations in my world history textbook.¹ One of the pioneering world historians, William McNeill, argued that contacts and collisions between peoples and societies are a major force for change. When people encounter each other sparks can fly between brains as well as between swords. Migration can also result in a trans-regional redistribution of peoples. Population movement spreads cultures, stimulates invention, and in some cases fosters long term diasporas of people sharing the same ancestral heritage and many common customs.

Some of the population movements after 1500 CE have been extensively studied, such as the migration of millions of Europeans to the Americas, Oceania, and southern Africa, and the transport of many enslaved Africans across the Atlantic.² The less well-known and studied migrations of Asian peoples also began early and has continued down to today. This essay briefly surveys the history of the Asian migrations, discusses the concept of diaspora, and then offers a case study of the Chinese.

Some Diaspora Experiences

Some thumbnail sketches, mostly drawn from my own experiences as a student, researcher, and academic interested in emigrant Asians and their adaptations, can indicate some of the diversity of Asian diaspora experiences:

§ In 1963, following a year of undergraduate study in Hong Kong, I visited Taiwan, rooming in a student hostel with a young Chinese from South Africa who was studying Chinese culture and language. Victor's South Africa-born parents had been Anglophiles, but he hankered to know the China of his grandparents. Yet he was a stranger in Taiwan and struggled with the sociocultural differences, concluding ruefully that he was more South African than Chinese. But this also dissatisfied him. Returning to Apartheid-era South Africa and its bizarre racial laws meant that, as a Chinese, he was considered an "Asian" and hence legally inferior to whites, while the Japanese businessmen who sojourned in South Africa were considered "honorary whites."³

§ As a graduate student in the 1960s researching an M.A. thesis on the Chinese community in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, I met an elderly but vigorous Hakka Chinese whose ancestors settled in western Borneo in the late eighteenth century, well before Western colonization of the island. Lo spoke flawless English and Malay as well as two Chinese dialects. A highly honored civil servant, very Malaysian but also proudly Chinese, he had little interest in visiting China itself but planned to start a farm raising Malaysian fruits for Malaysian Chinese emigrants to Australia, among them his own children. Lo was a great example of what sociologists term a "bicultural broker" linking various cultures.⁴

§ When my wife Kathy (then doing her Ph.D. research)

and I lived in Kampala, Uganda in the early 1970s several of the best local restaurants as well as the main auto dealerships and service departments were owned and operated by Chinese, most of them migrants from the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, whose large Chinese community began forming in the eighteenth century. They were good examples of "secondary migration and acculturation". Of course, most of the commerce in Uganda was dominated by Indians who numbered nearly 100,000 before most were expelled by President Idi Amin in 1972. With Amin gone many have since returned to Uganda.⁵

§ In 1985, while traveling around the emigrant zone of southeastern China I visited the old trading port of Shantou (Swatow), from where many Chinese left for Southeast Asia between 1850 and 1940. There I became acquainted with an "ABC" (Australian-born Chinese) teenager from suburban Sydney, stuck in China for the summer while her China-born parents visited relatives there. She spoke little Chinese, her China relatives no English. She was like a duck out of water, Australian to the core, and an example of assimilation triumphant.⁶

§ In the 1980s I became acquainted with a Peruvian-Chinese artist operating a gallery in Green Bay, his wife's hometown. He struck me as the perpetual stranger, neither completely at home in Lima, in Hong Kong (where his Peru-born father had relatives), or Green Bay, although I think he did root for the Packers!

§ When traveling in Ireland in 2006 I noticed the growing Chinatown and the many Indian "cornershops" in Dublin as well as the fact that virtually every town had a Chinese "carry-away" restaurant and often an Indian or Thai restaurant. Several years ago the *New York Times* had a long review of the best Thai restaurants in Berlin, Germany, a great example of globalization and trans-regional connections.⁷

§ In 2007 I visited the old Vietnamese seaport of Hoi An, where much of the population traces their ancestry to Chinese merchants and a smaller number of Japanese families who settled there in the seventeenth century. The local culture, language, and food became a mix of Chinese and Vietnamese.⁸ Hoi An's hybrid cuisine reminded me of the hybrid cuisine in New York restaurants operated by Cuban Chinese immigrants, as well as the mixed Chinese-Malay cuisine known as Nyonya or Straits cooking that developed in the Malayan port city of Melaka during 400 years of cultural blending.⁹

§ During the 1960s Chinese Jamaicans helped establish the recording industry on the island; their capital and technical expertise provided some of the business context for the rise of reggae, the folk-pop music that has come to symbolize the energy and the concerns of Afro-Caribbean culture. Bob Marley owed a small part of his career start to Leslie Kong. Kong was, like so many Chinese in the diaspora, a great example of adaptation and enterprise. Even one of the longtime top dance bands in Jamaica, Byron Lee and the Dragonaires, had a strong Chinese component.¹⁰

§ I should also note here several other Asian diaspora contributions to world pop music. The late Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of the 1980s British rock group Queen, was born on the East African island of Zanzibar to Parsi Indian parents before moving to London. The Parsis are, of course, a quintessential diaspora people, descendants of Zoroastrian Persian immigrants to India centuries ago. The musicians who founded the American rock group Van Halen are from a Dutch-Indonesian family who

first left Indonesia for Holland in the 1950s and then later settled in my hometown of Pasadena (California), which was already the home of many of the 10,000 pro-Dutch Indonesians who came to the United States as refugees after Indonesian independence.¹¹ And Indian immigrants in Britain created some of the most exciting dance music of the 1990s and after, *bhangra*, a potent mix of rock, electronica, and Punjabi folk music that enjoyed wide popularity in Europe, North America, and especially the South Asian diaspora around the world.¹²

§ One of the more useful books on global migration and diasporas was edited by Wang Gungwu, a well-published Malaysian Chinese historian specialized on China, Southeast Asia, and the Chinese overseas.¹³ Wang's valuable introduction integrates the study of migration and globalization into his own restless sojourning and diaspora experience. Born in colonial Indonesia to immigrant Chinese parents, Wang was raised in Malaya and educated in Malaya, China, Singapore, and London before pursuing a distinguished academic career with lengthy stops in Kuala Lumpur, Canberra, Hong Kong, and, most recently, Singapore.¹⁴ Spending much of his life in places with substantial or predominantly immigrant populations has understandably enhanced his appreciation for the importance of migration as a theme in world history.

§ Today, among many others, Americans, Canadians and Australians live in increasingly multicultural nations, filled with immigrants and their descendants from the four corners of the globe. They are rapidly transforming cities like Los Angeles, Seattle, Houston, Miami, Vancouver, Toronto, Honolulu, and Perth into internationalized hubs of world culture and commerce while even bringing Latin American grocery stores, Southeast Asian restaurants, Japanese factories, Caribbean music, and African art galleries into once provincial heartland towns like Green Bay. And the towns and neighborhoods dominated by immigrants from particular groups are growing. Today both metropolitan Los Angeles and New York each have three pronounced Chinatowns and several Little Indias. The L.A. area also has a Little Tokyo, Thaitown, Koreatown, Little Saigon, and several heavily Filipino and Iranian neighborhoods. South Asians operate many of the hotels and motels in the U.S.; Gujaratis control some 42 percent of the hotel/hospitality business, their holdings collectively worth \$40 billion.¹⁵ There are also some 40,000 Chinese restaurants in the U.S., more than all the McDonald's, Burger Kings, and Kentucky Fried Chickens in the U.S. combined!¹⁶

These thumbnail sketches attempt to place the study of social groups in a more personal context; there are individuals and communities behind the generalizations. But they also raise for the scholar of world history perpetual questions of identity, cultural maintenance, assimilation, discrimination, enterprise, and the role of migration and diasporas in establishing and maintaining transregional connections, in this case involving people with roots in Asia.

The Long History of Asian Migration

Various Asian peoples were among those on the move between 4000 BCE and 1500 CE, including the ancestors of today's Chinese, Korean, Central Asian, Indonesian-Malay, Polynesian, Thai, and Indian peoples. Indian merchants and priests have been migrating in small numbers to Southeast Asia for two millennia, often intermarrying with local people. Indian settlers also helped shape the culture and commerce of the East

African coast while Indonesian migrants helped forge societies on Madagascar. By the 1400s and 1500s more Chinese and some Japanese sailed to Southeast Asia, chiefly as merchants, some sojourning and others settling permanently. In the fifteenth century the major Southeast Asian port, Melaka, contained some 15,000 foreign merchants from all around the Indian Ocean basin and Southeast Asia, China, Okinawa, and Japan. Two centuries later the major Thai city, Ayutthaya, had substantial communities of Chinese, Japanese, Arabs, and Persians mostly living in their own neighborhoods and administered by their own leaders.¹⁷ Chinese merchants also settled in trading ports in Japan and Korea.

In the eighteenth century, and partly in response to the globalization of capitalism, migration of peoples from eastern and southern Asia accelerated, mostly by sea to distant shores, as people were pushed by necessity and drawn by opportunity. The emergence of capitalism in Europe and the formation of a truly world economy played a role. Between 1500 and 1914, in a quest for resources and markets to be exploited, Western nations colonized most Asian, African and American societies. Thanks to improved transportation, such as newer and faster ships, and new economic incentives, both positive and negative, large-scale migration was central to fashioning the nineteenth century world and its empires and economies. Deteriorating economic conditions, sometimes combined with violence from wars or unrest, in countries like China, Indonesia, and India fostered a willingness to seek a better life elsewhere. Some colonial powers, especially Britain, France, and the Netherlands, looked to the densely populated Asian societies to provide a labor force for the plantations and mines in their colonies which supplied much wealth to Western governments and businessmen.

During the past several centuries millions of eastern and southern Asians relocated temporarily or permanently, some to nearby countries, others to faraway lands, making these migrants and their descendants a visible and vital presence in the world economy and in the population of many nations.¹⁸ Every migrant connects a point of origin and a destination. As Patrick Manning put it, at the end of a pathway lay a beachhead.¹⁹ Philip Kuhn proposed the model of "corridors" and "niches" to characterize Chinese migration. Corridors linked emigrants and their original home communities while niches describe the way migrants fit into the venue society.²⁰ Many emigrants relied both on connections to local communities and to networks linking them with families and contacts elsewhere, including their ancestral homes, to achieve success. Today there are some 20 million refugees (many of them Asians) and 100 million migrants in the world, many of them living far from their ancestral roots.

But this migration led many places to fear of a "Yellow Peril" and hence to a "great wall" of restriction (such as late 19th to mid-20th century anti-Chinese laws in Australia, Canada, the U.S., South Africa, and the U.S.-ruled Philippines) as well as stronger notions of national borders as labor markets tightened and receiving societies saw themselves overrun by aliens. The result was a global network of barriers that discouraged immigration and weakened diaspora-homeland links at the same time that supplying countries faced even more severe social and economic dilemmas.²¹ However, times change. In more recent decades many Asians, some middle class, some refugees, and others impoverished workers seeking low-wage jobs, have migrated legally or illegally and fostered some newly hyphenated groups

such as Korean-Venezuelans, Cambodian-Swiss, and Vietnamese-Australians.²² For example, the explosive growth of the Asian population in the U.S., many of them immigrant professionals and shopkeepers, has given Asian communities greater visibility in American society. Japanese and Indians especially developed reputations as “model minorities” since they were mostly law-abiding, well-educated, and economically successful. But Asian success was not limited to the United States. Men of Indian ancestry have become presidents or prime ministers in Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Fiji, Singapore, and Mauritius. The “great wall of restriction” for Asians has diminished in recent decades. Hence, in 1999-2000 Canadians chose a Chinese woman as Governor General (or head of state) and elected a Sikh immigrant as Premier of British Columbia, a province with nearly 600,000 residents of Chinese or Indian ancestry.²³

Today perhaps 40-45 million people of Asian origin or heritage live outside, and often thousands of miles away from, their ancestral homelands. Chinese and Indians account for the great majority of Asian migrants. Many settled in Southeast Asia but the two groups also established significant communities in the Americas, Europe, Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, and parts of Africa. Just as Chinatowns arose in cities all over the world, “Little Indias” flourish from Durban and Nairobi to Singapore, Fiji, Toronto, and Trinidad.²⁴ Meanwhile Japanese²⁵, Koreans²⁶, and Filipinos²⁷ settled chiefly in the Americas and Hawaii; Indonesians²⁸ moved to several Pacific islands, Suriname, and Malaysia; and Lebanese and Syrians migrated to the Americas and, mostly as merchants, to colonial West Africa. In the past forty years several million Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians fled war and repression for new homes elsewhere, particularly North America, Australia, and France.²⁹ The varied diasporas of eastern and southern Asian peoples constitute one of the more important social and economic developments in modern world history.

Diasporas

Our concept of diasporas (or dispersals) -- a Greek word -- derives from Babylonian times, where “Babylon” became a code word among Hebrews for oppression and forced exile, a concept reinforced for Jews after the Romans forced many out of Palestine. Millennia later some African- American and Afro-Caribbean peoples adopted the same notion of forced exile from the homeland, Africa. Yet, diaspora is a disputed concept, in part because it has expanded in usage and definition over time. To some observers it refers narrowly to a forced banishment and consequent trauma of groups such as Jews, Palestinians, and Armenians who dispersed all over the world. To other scholars it signifies migration and colonization. As Constance Lever-Tracy argues, in this perspective diaspora is a collective noun, referring to people who have been scattered from their place of origin and broadly share an identity and culture.³⁰ Adam McKeown adds that, used as an adjective rather than a noun, diaspora focuses on geographically dispersed communities, institutions, and discourses beyond local and national frameworks, held together by common networks and shared institutions stretching across oceans and continents.³¹ Ien Ang offers a useful definition: “diasporas are transnational, spatially and temporarily sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original

homeland.”³² As Robin Cohen wrote, “one dreamed of home but lived in exile.... the ‘old country’ always had some claim on their loyalty.”³³

Today the term “diaspora” and especially “diasporic community” is increasingly used as a metaphoric designation of several categories of people whose members share certain characteristics, including political refugees, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities.³⁴ Sunil Amrith contends that the concept is most useful when it addresses the kinds of connections migrants have maintained with both their homeland and with others of shared origins spread around the world. It describes a process of migration and dispersal as well as the condition of diaspora life.³⁵ Diaspora then offers a useful perspective to focus on transnational links and flows by grouping people together across geographical and political boundaries. Hence, it contains two divergent ideals: exile and diversity.³⁶ Some diaspora communities maintained a collective memory, vision, or myth, often unrealistic, about their country or origin and of an eventual return to it. Many people continued to relate to their homeland in one way or another. Symbolic, emotional, and/or material ties to the homeland held the diaspora together and distinguished the diaspora communities from other groups, which may have political implications for the diaspora. As in the case of, among others, Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis, Koreans, and Japanese, the governments of the ancestral home could exploit diaspora sentiments for their own purposes.³⁷ Yet, some diasporic Asians embrace a kind of flexible citizenship, in some cases even holding two or more passports or legal residence status. Immigrants are also shaped by local circumstances. Among diaspora people ancestral and local cultures can be transformed, rejected, or replaced by a new one emphasizing cross-connections rather than roots.³⁸

Depending on the dominant mode of life and circumstances of migration, diasporas can be subdivided into several categories, including the two most characteristic of Asian migrants between 1800 and 1940, labor diasporas and trade diasporas (sometimes termed entrepreneurial networks). Scholars sometimes describe the Chinese diaspora as forged by “sweat and the abacus” (the traditional Chinese calculator used by merchants).³⁹ Anthropologist Abner Cohen described a trade diaspora as “distinct as a type of social grouping in its culture and structure. Its members are culturally distinct from both their society of origin and from the society among which they live....”⁴⁰ Members of trade diasporas often serve a middleman function. Anthropologist Lloyd Fallers put it another way: “The immigrant trader is commonly an essential economic link between the village community... and the outside world. As a result, he is often *in* the community, but he is seldom really *of* it. Economically he is a member, but culturally he is not.”⁴¹ The Indians of Uganda in the early 1970s, most of them engaged in commerce, provide a case in point. Disliked by many Ugandans, they tended to live in their own neighborhoods, supported their own community and religious institutions, rarely intermarried with local Africans, and (perhaps wisely) sent their money abroad as a hedge in case anti-Indian sentiments exploded (as indeed they did when Idi Amin seized their property and ordered them out of the country).

A common culture and often religion keeps the diaspora network together and gives it its ethnic identity. If the diaspora is only marked by shared memories and attitudes, the participants

are less likely to pass along their language and culture and more likely over time to assimilate to the dominant community. On the other hand, continuing transnational communication and flows, such as through the long distance connections of trade diasporas, promote continuity.⁴² There is, however, the danger of essentializing diaspora communities, subordinating the very real differences within and between them to a common heritage and patterns.⁴³

Some historians argue that, contrary to many observers, the integration of the world economy and the globalization of modern economic life does not owe its present character solely to colonialism and imperialism by the West, which disrupted and transformed societies like China, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, prompting many to seek a better life abroad. Trade and labor diasporas, often the consequences of Western imperialism, were also important.⁴⁴

Chinese Emigration and Diaspora Society, 1400-1945

The remainder of this essay examines the largest, most widespread and influential Asian diaspora group, the Chinese.⁴⁵ They accounted for some two thirds of the long distance Asian migration between 1750 and 1940, and a large share of it in the past seventy years, and hence merit detailed attention. This emigration has a long history. Chinese merchants have sailed to Southeast Asia to trade for over a thousand years. By the fifteenth century Chinese trade networks linked Southeast Asian trading ports to each other as well as to China and Japan.⁴⁶ Chinese immigrants founded two Vietnamese dynasties and the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya. Beginning in the later 1500s Chinese settlers became dominant in the commercial sector in most Western colonies in Southeast Asia, including the Spanish-ruled Philippines and Dutch-ruled Java. Major ports like Melaka in Malaya, Batavia (Jakarta) on Java, Hoi An in Vietnam, Ayutthaya in Siam, and Manila in the Philippines had large Chinese merchant communities. Hence, a Dominican friar wrote of mid-seventeenth century Manila: "A surprising thing that we see in this land is that although the city is small, and the Spaniards few, nevertheless, they require the services of thousands of Chinese... who earn a living from these services..."⁴⁷ Between 1750 and 1850 many Chinese settled in Thailand, Malaya, and, like my Sarawak friend Lo's ancestors, islands like Borneo to trade, farm, or mine for tin or gold, sometimes establishing their own self-governing communities. One of the most important Chinese pioneers in West Borneo wrote in the late 1770s that "Gold borne by the earth, Riches hidden in mountains, Only hard work can earn us, A livelihood from mines."⁴⁸ The present royal family of Thailand descends from an eighteenth century Chinese immigrant.

During the later 19th and early 20th centuries, wars with the Western nations and Japan, rebellions, corruption, population explosion, growing landlessness, and natural disasters in China prompted millions to emigrate, mostly to places where Western colonialism and capitalism were opening new economic opportunities. Some ninety percent of the emigrants came from two impoverished and overcrowded southeastern coastal provinces, Fujian and Guangdong, which were particularly hard-hit by China's growing problems, among them the Western military and economic intrusion. Between 1880 and 1930 several hundred thousand people a year left China, chiefly from the ports of Hong Kong, Amoy (Xiamen), and Swatow (Shantou), for

foreign destinations. Singapore served as the main transit and distribution point for Chinese who were eventually shipped to many Southeast Asian destinations while Port Louis on Mauritius served a similar function for the western Indian Ocean and southern Africa.

Many were recruited into the notorious "coolie trade," which operated from the 1820s into the 1920s.⁴⁹ Under this system, desperate peasants become workers (known pejoratively as "coolies") in faraway places, especially Southeast Asia, various South Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, Hawaii, Australia, Peru, Cuba, California, British Columbia, and South Africa. In order to repay their passage, the Chinese signed contracts, mostly to work as plantation laborers, miners, or railroad builders, for a fixed period of time, often 5 or 10 years. The system invited exploitation in an alien environment, where the laborers who survived the difficult voyages in crowded ships faced discrimination and harsh working conditions.

Not all Chinese emigrated as part of this trade. Some paid their own fares, usually to join relatives in business enterprises. For example, one Chinese merchant, Ong Ewe Hai, left Xiamen by boat and arrived in Sarawak's main town, Kuching, in 1846, when he was 16 years old. He obtained some merchandise on credit for sale and also rowed a small boat up and down the river to collect jungle products from the local people, Malays and Dayaks. Eventually he became one of Sarawak's wealthiest and most influential merchants, and his oldest son followed in his footsteps as community leader. His great grandchildren remain prominent in local politics and society.⁵⁰ Like Ong Ewe Hai, the Chinese were, in general, adaptable and resourceful. An 1879 book by a British colonial official listed dozens of occupations pursued by the Chinese in the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, Melaka), from bakers and barbers to bookbinders and carriage makers.⁵¹ In contrast to Indians, who often emigrated as families, the Chinese emigrants were mostly men, since before the 1920s few women were allowed to leave China. Chinese also faced dangers when local peoples viewed them as competitors or governments viewed them as a threat. At various times Chinese were massacred in colonial Indonesia and the Philippines. Some Chinese were lynched and Chinatowns occasionally destroyed in the western United States in the later 19th century. Massacres of Chinese also occurred in Mexico, and in 1931 all the Chinese were expelled from a northwestern Mexico state.⁵²

Most immigrants dreamed of returning to their native village wealthy, and some did. Others moved back and forth, linking two societies. But many stayed overseas permanently, some because they had failed to achieve their dreams, others, like Ong Ewe Hai, because they had established successful businesses with their savings, marrying local women or bringing families from China. A study of the Chinese commercial elite in Sydney at the beginning of the 20th century concluded that they "pined for a homeland and yet lay rooted in Australian soil."⁵³ A Chinese man who settled in New Zealand in the 1920s recalled the hard work that brought him success: "My generation really worked for a living. We had to open the shop at 7 a.m. and we closed at 1 a.m. Then we had to clean the shop. It was seldom before 2 a.m. before we got to bed."⁵⁴ But even those who settled abroad often sent money back to their home villages or invested in China, an example of transnational connections. Today the Overseas Chinese are an important source of capital for China.⁵⁵

Before 1945 most Chinese emigrants spoke one of a half dozen quite different southern China dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, Teochiu, or Hokkien. Hence, there has often been disunity among Chinese in various communities due to the cultural diversity. For example, in Sarawak the Hokkien, Teochiu, and Foochow have often been fierce competitors for commercial dominance. But wherever they settled, Chinese formed their own schools, temples, business associations, and social organizations, fostering considerable cooperation and solidarity, which has helped sustain the Chinese communities in so many diverse environments. Some institutions, such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce or Mandarin-language schools, helped bring the various rival dialect groups together.

Over time, many of the Overseas Chinese were transformed from sojourners into settlers. Through enterprise, organization, and cooperation many Chinese in Southeast Asia became part of a prosperous, urban middle class that controlled retail trade. A few became fabulously wealthy businessmen or industrialists. Complex Chinese commercial networks extended into the smallest towns. For example, many Chinese shops in small towns in Malaya or Sarawak were linked through firms in larger towns to big companies in Singapore, and these companies often had ties to enterprises in China or Hong Kong. Singapore, with a mostly Chinese population, became the major hub of Chinese economic and social networks in Southeast Asia, although Bangkok, Jakarta and Saigon also played important roles. But some Chinese remained poor, eking out a living as commercial fishermen, smallholding rubber growers, rickshaw pullers, or day laborers. For example, the men who pulled the rickshaws in the steamy tropical heat of Singapore and Malaya faced a difficult life and often died young, sometimes from suicide.⁵⁶

Scholars have been fascinated with the varied ways that Chinese have adapted to local environments. Many assimilated over several generations. Since the 1400s some have mixed local and Chinese customs, beliefs and languages. These people formed what the anthropologist G. William Skinner termed “intermediate creolized societies,” distinct sub-groups such as the Peranakans of Java, the Straits Chinese of Malaya, the Chinese Mestizos in the Philippines, the Sino-Thai of Thailand, and the Catholicized Tuzans of Peru, who linked the Chinese and local peoples and moved between both worlds.⁵⁷ But many Chinese, especially those who immigrated after 1900, maintained their language, customs, religion, and identity. Many such people live in or near the large Chinatowns of cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Sydney, Vancouver, San Francisco, New York, Lima, and Liverpool. Nonetheless, even among those who generally maintain Chinese customs and language, local environments shape their culture and identity, fostering clear differences between the Chinese in, for example, New York, Portugal, Suriname, Mauritius, Burma, and the Philippines.

The Overseas Chinese Communities Since 1945

More than 30 million people of Chinese ancestry or ethnicity, often known as Overseas Chinese, live outside of “Greater China” (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau) today. Over 20 million of them reside in the varied nations of Southeast Asia. As a result, some 7 or 8 percent of all Southeast Asians have some Chinese ancestry. Chinese constitute three quarters of Singapore’s population, a quarter of Brunei, a third of Malaysia,

and thirteen percent in Thailand. Three countries- Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand- each contain at least 4 million Chinese.⁵⁸ Over two million Chinese live in the United States. By the 1990s several dozen nations or colonies outside of Southeast Asia also had sizeable Chinese communities, ranging from hundreds of thousands to a few thousand. These include Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, as well as ten nations in Latin America and the Caribbean, five in the South Pacific islands, four in Africa and the Indian Ocean islands, and six in Europe. But most nations in the world, like Uganda, had at least a few Chinese-run restaurants or other businesses, making the Chinese diaspora one of the world’s most dispersed.

Today the majority of Chinese in Southeast Asia, as well as in Japan, the South Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, South Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, are engaged in commerce and finance. The ethnic Chinese have constituted the most dynamic economic sector in Southeast Asia, with their money and initiative the basis for recent rapid economic growth in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In North America and Europe many also opened businesses, often family-run restaurants, but many of their children gravitated to the professions or the high technology industries where some developed leading companies.⁵⁹

In the second half of the twentieth century many men and women, seeing themselves more as settlers than sojourners, fled communism in China or lack of opportunity in Taiwan and Hong Kong for new lives in North America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Latin America, or Europe. Most, especially the well-educated, found success in their new homes, transforming the Chinese into one of the most affluent ethnic groups in these countries. But pockets of grinding poverty also remained, such as the badly exploited immigrant workers, many recent arrivals (often illegal) from Fujian, in the small textile factories of crowded urban Chinatowns.⁶⁰

Many people in Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and the Americas resented the Chinese because of their enterprise, economic power, desire to preserve their language and culture, and their continuing ties to families or hometowns in China. Before the 1930s most Chinese in colonies like Malaya and Cambodia were administered through their own leaders, usually powerful merchants, planters or mine owners, perpetuating their separateness from local society. Sinophobia and conflict between Chinese and non-Chinese has remained common in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in recent decades, occasionally leading to anti-Chinese violence.⁶¹

Since 2000, as China has become deeply involved economically and politically with varied African, Latin American, and South Pacific nations, hundreds of thousands of mostly poor and less-educated Chinese citizens have migrated to these countries as small merchants or laborers for Chinese companies. But these operations have caused growing local resentment by local politicians, unions, and traders in the past decade. In places like Papua-New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Angola, and Zambia, anti-Chinese violence, including murderous attacks and burning down Chinatowns, raises questions about the durability of this recent settlement.⁶² In some places, such as Suriname and Peru, Chinese who have lived there for decades or generations also resent the newcomers for their aggressive tactics and stirring up Sinophobia.⁶³

Some governments have restricted Chinese political

rights or curtailed economic activity. In the late 1970s many Chinese left or were expelled from Vietnam. Some of them joined a steady stream of Southeast Asian Chinese, especially from Malaysia and Indonesia, moving to North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand in the past several decades for better opportunities or to escape discrimination. For example, by 2001 nearly ten percent of the 68,000 Chinese living in Auckland, New Zealand, were born in Malaysia or Singapore.⁶⁴ But Chinese leaders govern Singapore and have also played an active role in Malaysian politics. Politicians of Chinese or part-Chinese ancestry have led Thailand and the Philippines at various times, as well as Papua-New Guinea, Guyana, Suriname, and French Polynesia.

The turbulent history of mid-20th century China, including the Japanese Occupation of World War II, the Communist-Guomindang civil war of the later 1940s, and then the founding and subsequent anti-Western policies of the People's Republic of China cut off many diaspora Chinese from their formal links to China. This forced most to have to choose between identifying with China or with the countries where they lived, which had consequences for many aspects of life including citizenship, education, and language. But over the past thirty years, as China restored its links to the rest of the world, the diasporic networks to China have been transformed.⁶⁵ For example, large Malaysian or Singapore Chinese corporations operate not only in Southeast Asia, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong but also around the world. When I traveled in China's emigrant zone in Fujian and Guangdong provinces in the 1980s I met Chinese from Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines visiting their ancestral land, and also saw many fine homes built with remittances from overseas.⁶⁶

The Chinese and the Diaspora

Like other Asian emigrants, wherever they have settled, Chinese have had to choose how much to adapt or assimilate to local societies, how much to emphasize their ancestral identity, and how much to stress their global connections as transnational brokers.⁶⁷ Chinese, like other diasporic subjects, have to invent and re-invent themselves through their contact with local societies, which requires crossing boundaries. Lynn Pan argues that "Chineseness" is not a fixed or bounded category, that many are "Chinese more or less."⁶⁸ Some Chinese resent the notion of being part of a diaspora since they fear that may compromise their hard-won local position. For everyone who has rediscovered his or her Chineseness, others, like my South African friend Victor, found China or Taiwan to be culturally strange and foreign. Those used to greater political freedom in the diaspora often find China uncomfortably repressive.⁶⁹

Even the question of whether to refer to these communities and individuals as Overseas Chinese, Chinese Overseas, ethnic Chinese, Chinese Abroad, people of Chinese descent, or something else is hotly debated.⁷⁰ Noting their entrepreneurial energy and that many Chinese have assimilated or acculturated to local cultures, Ronald Skeldon questions whether diaspora really describes the global network of heterogeneous overseas Chinese communities today.⁷¹ Wang Gungwu also has reservations about the diaspora concept and treating the Overseas Chinese as a coherent group, because these Chinese are so diverse and spread over so many distinct societies. Yet, he

concludes, "If we admit that there are many kinds of Chinese... then we should have no difficulty with the idea that there are times when diaspora should supersede other terms in comparative studies.... After all, there are already many kinds of diasporas."⁷² Of course the wider its use, the more diluted and murky the term becomes.

Clearly many Chinese born and raised outside of China, Taiwan, or Hongkong have struggled with questions of identity. Canada-born Josephine Khu has collected stories about the search for Chinese roots and ethnic identity. Her informants came from many countries- Australia, Colombia, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and the U.S.- and all visited or lived for a time in China or Hong Kong as adults, allowing them to trace family connections. Some found a sense of belonging, one writing that "My roots are no longer blowing in the wind. Their long-time search for fertile earth to sink into has finally come to an end." Others embraced a bicultural perspective: "home is really where one's family is living at the moment. But I also feel the need to nourish both the old and new roots of the family.... I have come to realize and accept that my ears are attuned to two cultures." Indeed, several now viewed themselves as citizens of the world. Some concluded that "identity... is a complex and multifaceted issue... [and] is capable of being constructed, invented, and manipulated."⁷³

The emigrant flow from East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia to the Americas, Oceania, Europe and the Middle East continues today, as people seek better economic opportunities, political stability, or personal security, continuing a human behavior- migration- that has a long history. But most migrants face the challenge of adjusting to their new home and often cosmopolitan influences, many maintaining ties- strong or weak- to their ancestral homeland. Indeed, transnational networks flourish.

The Singapore Chinese Dick Lee, a flamboyant multi-talented singer, composer, theater stalwart, and choreographer, has specialized in creating a distinctively Singapore sound integrating Asian genres into his commercial but jazzy mix of popular music. His 1989 song, "The Mad Chinaman," explored the sometimes contradictory and bewildering feelings he felt toward multiethnic Singapore and the mix of eastern and western influences in the city: "Traditional, International/ Western feelings from my oriental heart/ How am I to know, how should I react?/ Defend with Asian pride? Or attack? The Mad Chinaman relies/ On the east and west sides of his life."⁷⁴ Another Lee composition, "Flower Drum Song," combined a Chinese folk tune with mid-tempo fusion melodies conveying a sense of losing and finding an identity and roots. In a dreamlike state he hears flower drums playing in his head, calling him home: "We'll bring the people home/ The flowers will lead/ show them the heritage they don't know they seek." The chorus was in Mandarin, which allowed him to come to grips with his Chinese ethnic heritage.⁷⁵

Lee's songs well represent the transnational character of diaspora society, torn between the ancestral homeland and the land of domicile while engaging with the clash between Western and Eastern ideas and cultures. These diaspora experiences are the result of centuries of migration, usually spurred by economic conditions and the hope for a better life, from Asian homelands to other countries or regions of the world. And they were aided by the ability of Chinese, like many other Asian emigrants, to

cooperate through connections and networks. Today the ethnic Chinese have strong economic and sometimes even political roles in several dozen countries around the world, and provide a link between these countries and a rapidly developing China, making them both a symbol of, and a force for, globalization. As Philip Kuhn concluded, “emigration has been inseparable from China’s modern history.... Neither Chinese history lacking emigration nor emigration lacking the history of China is a self-sufficient field of study.”⁷⁶ Similarly Asian migration is inseparable from world history.

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16 Jennifer Lee, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (New York: Twelve, 2008), p. 9.

17 See Lockard, “Sea Common,” pp. 219-247.

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19 Manning, *Migration*, pp. 2, 117.

20 *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), pp. 4-5.

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22 Wannu W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee, “Asian American Displacements,” in Anderson and Lee, eds., *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 5.

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37 Safran, "Diasporas," pp. 83-84, 93.

38 Lawrence J.C. Ma, "Space, Place, and Transnationalism in the Chinese Diaspora," in Ma and Carolyn Cartier, eds., *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 33; Anderson and Lee, "Asian American Displacements," p. 11.

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