

The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience

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This article revisits the criticisms of “diaspora” by Wang Gungwu, Ien Ang, and Shu-mei Shih, and urges a return to the concept with an attention to temporality. Focusing on the story of Lim Boon Keng (1869–1957)—an Edinburgh-educated baba Chinese who led a Confucian revival in Singapore in the 1890s, clashed with May Fourth writer Lu Xun in China in the 1920s, and has been celebrated since the 1990s—this article argues that diaspora is less a collection of communities than a series of moments in which reconnections with a putative homeland take place. By considering how “diaspora moments” emerge and create actors, scholars may ask why and for whom essential ties become useful, and how the history of mass emigration foregrounds a contingent Chinese identity. Temporally inflected, diaspora is a process to reckon with a world in flux, hence a useful paradigm for analysis.

I have used the term [diaspora] with great reluctance and regret, and I still believe that it carries the wrong connotation and that, unless it is used carefully to avoid projecting the image of a single Chinese diaspora, will eventually bring tragedy to Chinese overseas.

—Wang Gungwu, “A Single Chinese Diaspora?” (1999, 15)

Ultimately, diaspora is a concept of sameness-in-dispersal, not of togetherness-in-difference.

—Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese* (2001, 13)

When the (im)migrants settle and become localized, many choose to end their state of diaspora by the second or third generation. . . . To emphasize that diaspora has an end date is therefore to insist that cultural and political practice is always place-based. Everyone should be given a chance to become a local.

—Shu-mei Shih, “Against Diaspora” (2010, 45)

IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY of migration studies, diaspora has had a dramatic career. The interest is well recognized in the scholarship about Jews, Armenians, Africans, Italians, South Asians, and Latin Americans, leading to the creation and transformation of entire fields of study (Butler 2001; Duany 2011; Gabaccia 2000; Ghosh 1989; Gilroy 1993; Mishra 1996; Patterson and Kelley 2000; Tölölyan 1996; Torres and Velázquez 1998).

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A similar boom is unfolding in the study of the Chinese experience transnationally, but diaspora has provoked great controversy.¹ Some have applied the term so loosely that it seems to include every Chinese (Pan 1990; Suryadinata 2007; Wang Gungwu and Wang 1998). It is unclear what diaspora is as a tool, as it is often used interchangeably with migration, transnationalism, hybridity, and ethnic minority. Such practices have drawn a backlash of critiques from leading scholars Wang Gungwu, Ien Ang, and Shu-mei Shih, whose positions range from accepting diaspora with “great reluctance and regret” (Wang Gungwu 1999) to moving “beyond diaspora” (Ang 2001) to turning “against diaspora” (Shih 2010). Even though each of them engages in different inquiries about Chinese history and culture, their common concern is that diaspora essentializes a Chinese identity, flattening variegated practices into sameness. At its worst, diaspora risks portraying Chinese everywhere as perpetually foreign to local societies and potentially loyal to a rising China.²

To understand the controversy over diaspora, it is necessary to consider how it intersects with some of the most vexing issues in the representation of Chinese communities outside China. First, the specter of racism and exclusion continues to haunt discussions about Chinese emigrants and their descendants in many places. In Southeast Asia, diaspora evokes sensational charges from the Cold War era that “the overseas Chinese” (or “*huaqiao*” in Chinese) controlled disproportionately large sectors of the national economies and harbored loyalties to Communist China, as in the expressions “the overseas fifth column” and “once a Chinese, always a Chinese” (Alilunas-Rodgers and Reid 2001; Chirot and Reid 1997; Mackie 1976).³ In settler societies such as Canada, the United States, and Australia, with their histories of white European domination, diaspora implies that ethnic Chinese are sojourners and can never become committed citizens (A. Chan 1981; Sucheng Chan 1991). Since the 1990s, Russia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa have become popular destinations of the “new emigrants” (*xin yimin*). Local residents sometimes imagined them as clients of their own corrupt regimes or of an expansionist China eager to siphon off local wealth and resources (Nyiri 2007; Rucker-Chang and Chang 2012; Van Dijk 2009). Refracted through historical memories and contemporary anxieties that critics have left implicit, diaspora appears loaded with “the wrong connotation” that could “bring tragedy to Chinese overseas” (Wang Gungwu 1999, 15).

Second, the question of how to account for a Chinese identity beyond the Chinese nation, capturing both its diverse and specific qualities, is perennially perplexing. Already significant in the sixteenth century, Chinese migration overseas increased dramatically in the nineteenth century as part of the first global wave of mass migration. From the 1840s to the 1940s, over twenty million Chinese left for Southeast Asia, Europe, the Americas,

¹Scholarship on the Chinese diaspora and the related Sinophone and Asian American studies have been booming in recent years. See Chiang and Heinrich (2014); Ho and Kuehn (2009); K. Louie, Pomfret, and Kuehn (2013); Madsen and Riemenschnitter (2009); Shih (2007); Shih, Tsai, and Bernards (2013); Tan (2013); Tsu (2010); and Tsu and Wang (2010). See also Hu-DeHart, Leong, and Wang (2010); and C. Wang (2012).

²Examples of renewed public and academic interest in the Chinese diaspora include Barné (2010), French (2014), Hornby (2014), Jacques (2008), and Kotkin and Sim (2011).

³For an example of the Cold War literature that portrays the overseas Chinese as proxies of Communist China, see Elegant (1959).

Africa, the Pacific Islands, and Australia (Kuhn 2009; McKeown 2010; Wang Gungwu 1991). In recent decades, emigration from the Chinese mainland has not only comprised petty merchants and poor laborers, but also created a privileged class with Western degrees and citizenships, a mobile elite nicknamed “returning sea turtles” (*haigui*) by the Chinese government and media (C. Wang, Wong, and Sun 2006). Moving in successive waves and enormous scope, this dynamic history suggests that Chinese communities would have vast social differences internally and a varying extent of transculturation with other groups. Thinking that diaspora is a Sinocentric concept, scholars have been quick to denounce it, stressing instead Chinese assimilation in local and national environments. Nonetheless, most have yet to take up the question of what makes “Chinese” a viable subject of study, given its internal fragmentation, and to ask whether references to China must distort local reality.

Third, these questions become more complex when Chinese emigration is understood as part of a global phenomenon (Cohen 1997; Dufoix 2008). As laborers and entrepreneurs, Chinese migrants have entered the circuits of empires, nations, and capitalisms that have similarly moved and embedded others around the world. Here, the concept of diaspora may serve as a productive interface between Chinese and non-Chinese experiences in a post-Orientalist framework to rejoin narratives of globalization. Still, some scholars are concerned about applying a foreign concept with its own meanings—originally Jewish and with meanings of forced exile—to Chinese contexts. Since the 1990s, various attempts at a precise definition of the term have been contested and inconclusive (Butler 2001; Safran 1991). Even whether diaspora accurately reflects all Jewish experiences remains debatable (Clifford 1994). It is worth asking if Chinese experiences were indeed exceptional and how they might in fact expand the understanding of global diasporas.

Keeping in mind the caveats and stakes involved, this essay hopes to make the case for diaspora. It begins with the premise that there is no single Chinese diaspora to be studied. Such an observation needs not be the end of discussion, but rather a useful starting point. Nation-centered models remain poorly equipped to deal with phenomena derived from links and circulation across borders, often misconstruing a world of discrete units (Duara 1996, 1997). Recognizing the analytical potential, Adam McKeown has called for a “diasporic perspective” to highlight global processes that would otherwise be suppressed in nation-based histories, rather than to simply use “diaspora” as a descriptive term for social groups. But he too has acknowledged that to talk about the “diasporic Chinese” is no less essentializing than “the Chinese diaspora,” suggesting “a concrete entity that is indissoluble over long stretches of space and time” (McKeown 1999, 311). How might we think through this problem?

My answer is to return to diaspora with a new emphasis on temporality. Drawing attention to human movements across state boundaries, diaspora has mainly developed as a spatial concept to challenge territorially bounded understandings of nation, culture, and identity (see Cartier and Ma 2003; Hamilton 1999; Ong 1999).⁴ But the focus on space has largely eclipsed an attention to time. Situated in time, diaspora is less a collection of communities than a series of moments in which reconstructions with a putative homeland

⁴Common keywords in diaspora studies also tend to focus on space, such as “deterritorialization” and “transnationalism.”

take place. Typically, diaspora moments involve references to essential roots and ties. Yet their actual meanings are always subject to open interpretation. Rising and falling in relation to a shifting world, diaspora moments transform the self or group in question into an intermediary between two reified centers of power, such as national and global, native and foreign, thereby generating new knowledge and agendas. What is always at stake, then, is who is making diaspora assertions, both positively and negatively, and to what ends. Temporally inflected, diaspora is a process to reckon with a world in flux through turning and returning to a fixed origin, hence a useful paradigm for analysis.⁵

To illustrate this temporal framework, this article now turns to an intellectual named Lim Boon Keng (Lin Wenqing, 1869–1957), whose broad involvement in Singapore and China has recently inspired vigorous discussions in both places (Lee 1991, 2009; Lin 2011; Yan 2010; Zhang 2012). Born in Singapore and educated in Britain as a medical doctor, Lim was purposely groomed to be an elite subject of the British empire. Surprisingly, he rediscovered the traditional culture of his ancestral homeland while in Scotland, spearheaded a Confucian revival movement upon returning to Singapore, and subsequently remade himself into an anti-Christian, anti-imperialist critic on behalf of China. With a transnational background resembling those of other colonial Chinese such as Ku Hung-ming (Gu Hongming, 1857–1928, b. Penang), Wu Lien-teh (Wu Liande, 1879–1960, b. Penang), and Eugene Chen (1878–1944, b. Trinidad), Lim went to China in 1921 to lead Amoy University for the next sixteen years. There he became best known for a clash with May Fourth writer Lu Xun (1881–1936), who called him “Chinese with British nationality who cannot open or shut his mouth without the word ‘Confucius’” (Lu Xun 1981, 3:399). A symbol of cultural inauthenticity and political backwardness in May Fourth China, Lim has recently evolved into an exemplar of Chinese cosmopolitanism in the age of neoliberal capitalism. Taken together, the telling and retelling of Lim’s story urge a return to diaspora as a series of moments. By illuminating how emigrant connections have historically intersected with forces of nation, empire, and capital, diaspora is not reducible to mere claims of racism and nationalism, as feared by Wang, Ang, and Shih. Rather, the point precisely is to reveal how essentialist claims about Chinese identity and culture get made in specific moments.

DIASPORA MOMENTS: THE STORY OF LIM BOON KENG

To rethink diaspora temporally through the story of Lim Boon Keng, three moments appear instructive about the formation of Chinese identity and culture in relation to global forces. These moments include Lim’s turn to China as a homeland in the 1890s, his clash with Lu Xun over Confucianism in the 1920s, and new celebrations of him by various politicians and academics since the 1990s. Each of these events signaled a shifting process, from a modernizing China in the system of empires, to a revolutionary China in

⁵This article is part of a larger book project based on my dissertation and ongoing efforts to reconceptualize diaspora as a temporal concept (see Shelly Chan 2009, 2013, 2014). My thinking on diaspora has been influenced by Brah (1996), Clifford (1994, 1997, 2013), Hall (1990), and Lowe (1996), among others. See also Keith (2002, 2004) for an example of reconsidering the Sikh diaspora in temporal terms.

the age of nation-states, and to a rising China in discourses of neoliberal capitalism. These major transitions gave rise to changing formulations of the Chinese diaspora, from a broker between East and West, to a threat to national modernity, and to an emblem of cosmopolitanism. As the story of Lim Boon Keng shows, despite common assumptions, connections between diaspora and homeland were far from fixed and insular.

Born in 1869, Lim Boon Keng was a third-generation creole of Hokkien-Malay ancestry in Singapore locally known as *baba*. A British settlement founded in 1819, Singapore comprised a predominantly Chinese population (about 62 percent in 1881) as a result of colonial policy that encouraged the free entry of Chinese migrants (Song [1923] 1967, 22–25). At age eighteen, Lim became the first Chinese to receive the prestigious Queen's scholarship to study in Britain, where he trained as a medical doctor at the University of Edinburgh. It was said that while living in Scotland, his racialization from witnessing humiliation of the Chinese by whites, being isolated by students from China because he could not speak Chinese well, and feeling ashamed over his inability to translate a Chinese paper for a professor prompted him to study the Chinese language and Chinese classics zealously in his spare time (Lee 1991). In 1893, Lim returned to Singapore to begin his medical practice, but soon became one of the most outspoken critics of the *baba* community. He co-edited an English-language quarterly journal, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897–1907), with a fellow Queen's scholar named Song Ong Siang. Together they and other *baba* writers spearheaded the restoration of Confucian ethics, the study of the Chinese language, and social reforms such as cutting the Chinese queue and introducing female education (Lim 1899a, 1899b, 1899c, 1900b, 1900c, 1901a). Moreover, Lim also attacked Malay and European influences for making the *babas* “lazy” and “hedonistic” (Lim 1900a). The objective was to propagate a modern Straits Chinese identity by reconnecting the creolized *babas* to ancient Chinese civilization and rejecting missionary portrayals of degenerate Chinese in need of Christian rescue (Lim 1897, 1898a, 1898b, 1904, 1905; *Straits Chinese Magazine* 1897). In this view, Chinese culture had become a lost memory as a result of migration and settlement outside China, but one that could be recuperated.

Meanwhile, as the colonial experience caused Lim to discover China, the imperial Qing state also discovered diaspora through colonial forces. After China's forced opening in 1842, millions of Chinese left the coastal treaty ports for new economic frontiers around the world. As Western powers tied the Qing to a series of international treaties that institutionalized labor recruitment and emigration, new ideas of sovereignty and diplomacy also impelled the state to recognize Chinese abroad as its own subjects. At the same time, from the 1870s onward, Chinese in many places, such as Cuba, Peru, the United States, Australia, and Canada, began to demand Qing protection and representation, drawing China aggressively into their orbit (Godley 1975, 1981; Yen 1985). Yet, the more decisive factor behind China's turn to diaspora was not simply that there were many Chinese living overseas, or that some were suffering from extreme oppression; rather, it was the discovery of Chinese wealth and power in Southeast Asia.

An important example was the reformist official Huang Zunxian, who served as the Qing consul-general at San Francisco (1882–85) and later Singapore (1891–94). Disheartened by the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, Huang took up a new post in Singapore and promptly became one of the strongest advocates for the lifting of the Qing emigration ban in 1893. In a poem titled “Foreign Guests”

(*Fanke pian*), Huang expresses deep adulation for a group of rich Chinese merchants whom he met at a wedding. As he recounts, there is a shipping magnate and *kapitan* (European-appointed headman) who was once a poor fisherman at the mercy of the monsoon winds. Now he owns “several tens of ships moving to and fro on the open seas.” There is a miner who has labored in vain for many years. One day, he stumbles upon a tin mine and rises instantly like “an impoverished county-grade scholar” (*xiucai*) becoming successful at the civil service examination. One man has taken advantage of the fertile southern soil to cultivate coconut trees, cloves, pepper, and cardamom, “earning a handsome harvest, year after year.” Another man “arrived without a single wimble in his hands.” After getting into land dealing, he now owns land as large as an entire village. Like the lord of a thousand marquis, he enjoys “food of a hundred kinds” and “three concubines taking turns to scratch his back” (Ke and Lin 1986, 165–66).

These stories extolling Chinese entrepreneurship in the areas of shipping, mining, plantation agriculture, land investment, and commodity trading underscored the lure of diaspora in the late nineteenth century. To Huang, the fact that these lucrative undertakings were dominated by the Chinese in Southeast Asia signaled prospects of a stronger China. It led him to forge a particular vision of diaspora in the remainder of the poem: economically powerful, but racially and culturally degenerate, therefore requiring leadership of the homeland. Like “the Jews who had no nation to rely on,” Huang continues, Chinese of a weak nation fell under native influences, fluent in English but knowing not a word in Chinese, practicing Islam and abandoning the Chinese classics. Such a situation was “worse than blind men feeling out [the elephant],” but like “a foolish man instructing his sons and grandsons,” suggesting generational decay in the social Darwinist sense. Claiming that “the cure was nowhere to be found” in the colonial environment (Ke and Lin 1986, 167). Huang calls on the Qing state to take the lead in protecting the wealthy merchants and to invite their families back to China to live.

This strategic formulation of diaspora not only proved instrumental to the abolition of the Qing emigration ban in 1893, but also paved the way for direct mobilization of Chinese abroad for the national cause. Now respectably known as *huaqiao*, Chinese emigrants were no longer subject to earlier imperial practice that had stigmatized them as traitors and deserters of the empire (Wang Gungwu 2000). Quite the opposite, they came to be seen as a single diaspora comprising absent but essential members of the emerging nation. To China’s growing ranks of modernizers and revolutionaries at the turn of the twentieth century, the successful mobilization of Chinese elsewhere held the key to China’s own struggle for wealth and power in the global arena.

The Turn toward China

It was in this complex environment of Qing transformation, Western colonialism, and mass emigrations that Lim Boon Keng recognized China. In 1895, he was appointed as a Chinese member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, a colonial governing body. But he also began to take a keen interest in the changing politics in Qing China and developed close ties with its famous exiles, reformer Kang Youwei and revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, both of whom visited Singapore in the early 1900s. After the success of the 1911 Republican revolution that ended Qing rule, Lim served briefly during Sun Yat-sen’s provisional presidency as his personal secretary, physician, and head of the Board of Health (Lee 1991, 134–35). In 1921, Lim accepted the invitation of the

successful rubber industrialist Tan Kah Kee to preside over the newly founded Amoy University in Tan's home province in China, Fujian, serving there for sixteen years until 1937.

However, it is worth emphasizing that Lim's turn to the ancestral homeland did not simply mean that he "re-Sinicized" himself and surrendered to a putative center. Rather, he located China in the global realm whereby Chinese elsewhere would enjoy a competitive edge and help shape its modernization. Noting that the country was undergoing "the grandest struggles for wealth or fame that the history of the Far East has ever witnessed," Lim, writing from Singapore in 1903, declared that China had become "a new and almost limitless field for [Straits Chinese] exploitation":

[When] the Straits-born Chinese with proper qualifications arrives in China he finds that he is the sort of individual destined by nature to reconcile the great Chinese Nation to the ways of the great world beyond China. Naturally the natives of China have more confidence in their kinsmen from abroad, much more than they would have in foreigners however friendly. They look upon the returned of [*sic*] Chinese as practically their own people. They are prepared to trust us and we can read their hearts as no other people can do. (Lim 1903)

Essentially Chinese but worldly in experience, the "returned" Straits Chinese were "destined by nature" to lead China's integration with the world. This is because, Lim continued, a modernizing China needed "experts" and "middlemen who thoroughly understand the foreigner," by whom he meant the modern Japanese and Westerners. Unlike them, only the Straits Chinese could "operate in China as the Apostle Paul did in different environments, blending in easily like a Greek among the Greeks and a Gentile among the Gentiles" (Lim 1903). In addition, as British subjects, the Straits Chinese would also benefit from the spread of British influence in China. In fact, they might also emulate the example of Gu Hongming (1857–1928), the Penang-born Chinese who like Lim studied in Edinburgh and later worked for the Qing reformist viceroy Zhang Zhidong (Du 2009; Liu 2004).

Just as Huang Zunxian declared in his poem that nowhere except the Chinese nation would provide the colonized Chinese with cultural sustenance, Lim claimed that nobody would be more capable of brokering for a modernizing China than the Straits Chinese (Lim 1903). By invoking a fixed Chinese identity rooted in China, he did not simply convey a sense of affinity with the compatriots or longing for the homeland. Rather, he meant that the *babas* in a colonial society could transform modern China because of their cosmopolitanism—familiarity with both the ways of the Western world and those of Chinese civilization. By installing themselves as "experts" and "middlemen" who could cross the purported East/West divide, the *babas* became subjects in their own right without being reduced to objects of modernization like Chinese in China or colonized *babas* in Singapore. Here, interestingly, the traditional role of "middlemen" with access to local knowledge and international networks, which had been filled by Chinese in many native and colonial regimes in Southeast Asia for centuries, was being reinvented at the moment of China's opening (Chirot and Reid 1997).

Emerging at the turn of the twentieth century, the awareness of diaspora provided a way to think from the margins of powerful systems. To be sure, there were important

differences over agency between Huang Zunxian and Lim Boon Keng. Huang claimed that China provided Chinese elsewhere with an antidote to deracination under colonial capitalism, therefore it should lead; Lim asserted that the Straits Chinese were conduits who would lubricate the capitalist transformation of China, therefore they should lead. Yet both men were reacting to their existence at the fringes of empires. Lim was a British colonial subject in Singapore; Huang's China was on the periphery of an industrializing and imperialist West. Their appeals to Chinese ties sprang from a shared awareness of Western expansion and new conceptions of cultural bonds on a global scale. Their respective visions also anticipated tensions in the new relationship between China and Chinese elsewhere.

The Clash with Lu Xun

Lim's famous clash with Chinese writer Lu Xun in 1926 was precisely such a moment of tension. As the founding president of Amoy University in Fujian from 1921 to 1937, Lim became best known for imprinting the university's educational philosophy with his Confucian ideals. Aimed at educating youth on the Confucian model of *junzi*, which he considered to be the equivalent of the "educated gentlemen" in Britain or "heroes and knights" in the age of European chivalry, Lim's ideal of the modern Chinese was devoted to the "revival of national culture," by which he meant the teachings of Confucius (Lim 1936, 49–54). This project appeared ironic from the start. Lim had first imported Confucian values to help the *babas* in colonial Singapore develop a progressive Chinese identity. Now he reimported it back to China. Here, the irony is that he was restoring Confucianism not only to the land of Confucius, but also at a time when traditional thought came under serious attack. To the generation shaped by the inauguration of the Republican era (1911–49) and calls for radical critiques in the New Culture and May Fourth movements (1915–19), Confucianism stood for the failure of traditional China to become modern. Lim saw no contradiction between tradition and modernity, but he had to speak about Confucianism through an interpreter because he was not confident about his Mandarin. The result was a jarring effect on the faculty and students seeking new knowledge. Their university president was an English-speaking, inferior copy of the Confucian culture in China that had already become obsolete, but who still insisted on telling them how to be Chinese.

The multiple ironies of the situation were hardly lost on May Fourth writer Lu Xun, who taught at the university and was famous for his anti-Confucian iconoclasm. He immediately called Lim "a Chinese of British nationality who cannot open or shut his mouth without the word Confucius" (Lu Xun 1981, 3:399),⁶ suggesting that he was culturally inauthentic, politically unreliable, and intellectually questionable. Shortly after an official celebration of the birthday of Confucius, Lu Xun aired his grievances in his first public appearance at the university on October 14, 1926, where Lim was also in attendance:

Lately, the calls to revere Confucius, venerate Confucianism, read the classics, and revive the ancient past, so as to save China, have gotten louder and

⁶This letter, "Haishang tongxin" [Letter while sailing on the sea] (Lu Xun 1981, 398–403), was originally written on January 16, 1927, and published in the monthly magazine, *Yusi*, no. 118, on February 12, 1927.

louder. In the past, those who advocated reading of the classics often had ulterior motives. They wanted to turn other people into filial sons and subservient subjects, virtuous women and chaste widows, so that they themselves could act superior and oppress others. (quoted in Wang Gungwu 1991, 152)

After that, referring to the recent incidents of British and Japanese firing on Shanghai protesters and strikers in May 1925 and Japanese attacks on Tianjin in March 1926, Lu Xun continued to lampoon the Confucianists:

Yet did they ever manage to stop foreign soldiers from shooting by using *The Analects*? Could they have sunk the invading battleships that destroyed the Dagu fort by using *The Book of Changes*? (quoted in Wang Gungwu 1991, 152)

Instead of poring over “dead [Chinese] books” with such “little application,” Lu Xun urged students to read Western newspapers and magazines. Furthermore, they should become “troublemakers” (*haoshi zhi tu*), similar to European explorers such as Columbus who discovered the New World and Nansen who surveyed the Arctic. Meanwhile, Lim did not respond to the attacks on Confucianism directly, but added that the university founder Tan Kah Kee, a successful Fujian industrialist in Malaya, could well be considered a “troublemaker” in Lu Xun’s terms (Lu Xun and Xu 2006, 156–59; see also Wang Gungwu 1991, 153–54). Amused by Lim’s apparent unawareness that the criticisms were meant for nobody but himself, Lu Xun wrote to his lover Xu Guangping, saying “This is how confused things are in this place!” (Lu Xun 1981, 11:158).

At first glance, the difference between Lu Xun and Lim Boon Keng describes an unsurprising clash between May Fourth modernity and overseas Chinese traditionalism. A few months later, Lu Xun resigned from the university. Suspecting that he had been pushed out in a power struggle involving Lim, students demanded that Lim be removed from the position of president. The protest lasted for several months, during which Lim also needed to speak to the protestors through an interpreter. Because of these controversies, Lim was later criticized by Chinese Communist historians for being reactionary and unable to come to terms with modernity.⁷ At the same time, the name of Lu Xun was made synonymous with revolution.

These accusations emphasizing Lim’s anachronism make necessary a deeper look at Lim’s appeals to cultural authenticity and authority. This is because he drew inspiration not only from Confucian texts but also from colonial racial ideologies, Victorian gender ideals, Christian missionary discourses, and principles of scientific reason. While promoting Confucian revival in Singapore, he prescribed the model of Victorian masculinity for the *baba* community that he thought to be lost in the mixture of cultures, too often guided by “instincts,” and characterized by overindulgence in carnal pleasures such as food and prostitution. His solution was the cultivation of masculine self-restraint through athleticism, debate, literature, and music, while he held that women should become moral guardians in the home and respectable companions of men, both of which suggested a heavy borrowing of gender ideals from British imperial culture.

⁷For criticisms of Lim Boon Keng in Communist historiography, see Wang Gungwu (1991, 147) and Lee (1991, 209).

Another example was Lim's firm commitment to Western ideals of enlightenment. Recognizing the weakness of China, Lim believed that it urgently required a sound education in philosophy and science through a return to "the accurate study of nature" laid down by Confucius in *The Book of Great Learning*. Here, claiming that scientific rationality was intrinsic to Confucian teachings, Lim's teleological reading of Confucianism aimed to show that Chinese civilization, when stripped of contemporary superstitions and returned to its original core, should be as capable as European civilization of reaching modernity. Convinced that all religions were superstitions that did more harm than good to the modern mind, Lim claimed that if Confucianism were a religion, it would have been "a religion of the highest grade" because "Confucius was not a spirit nor was he an incarnation," but rather a man who laid down the principle of agnosticism, the foundation of modern science (Lim 1900a, 1904).

Far from a mere rehashing of traditional values, Lim's Confucian essentialism also stemmed from a stringent critique of Christianity and imperialism. Engaging the same political and intellectual currents of the time, Lim shared Lu Xun's deep interest in Western missionary discourses about the characteristics of Chinese civilization, despite the obvious disagreements between the two men.⁸ While Lu Xun considered that such portrayals reflected a defective Chinese national character and should be heeded, Lim situated the missionaries within a larger body of Western views on China and thought that they propagated an "unfair estimate of the value of Chinese institutions" and threatened to obliterate Chinese culture (Lim 1898a). Although missionaries routinely blamed ancient Confucian values for Chinese xenophobia, Lim thought that this perspective concealed the modern origins of these attitudes: the "indiscretion" of missionary activities and "the wars waged to force the Chinese to accept opium" (Lim 1903, 95). In a 1901 collection of articles published in London for an English audience, Lim Boon Keng argued that Western missionaries were a source of social strife that violated the "communal rights and customs" of the Chinese people and encouraged some Chinese to take political advantage of the missionary influence. Thus, Chinese attitudes of hostility had historical causes, and could not be attributed to "inherent defects in the native character" (Lim 1901b, 190–124). These anti-imperialist observations published right after the anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion of 1900 in Beijing, boldly took issue with criticisms of Chinese xenophobia in the West. It also closely matched later critiques of Western imperialism made by those on the left in China. With respect to political commentaries, Lim was just as radical as Lu Xun, albeit in different terms.

To explain the origins of Lim's intellectual adaptations, historians have tended to locate their roots in China and rarely acknowledge that the Straits-born Chinese made significant cultural innovations of their own. Yen Ching-hwang finds it "ironical that the Confucian revival movement [in Singapore] should have been led by a Westernized intellectual like Lim" (Yen 1986, 295) and argues that the ideology of the movement "sprang directly from [Qing intellectual] Kang Youwei's reformism" (53). Lee Guan Kin (1991) argues that Lim's political sympathies with Kang Youwei and association with other China-born Confucianists agitating in Singapore would suggest their heavy

⁸For a discussion of Lu Xun's interest in missionary discourses, see Liu (1995, 76).

influence on him.⁹ But the breadth of Lim's Confucian revival suggests deep entanglements with colonial Singapore, imperial Britain, Qing and Republican China, and emigrant-sending Fujian, rather than a simple desire to reproduce a putative original. Each of these places offered discrepant meanings of being Chinese, but they were also contemporaneous, intertwined, and not necessarily mediated by a single core.

This rich multiplicity of Chinese identity and culture, as a result of Chinese mass emigration and settlement, was evident in Lim's persistent efforts to challenge the singular view of the May Fourth era. Even as historians have portrayed him as having been sadly misunderstood, Lim continued to stress publicly the relevance of Confucian teaching to modern life, long after the conflicts with Lu Xun and the students. In 1929, two years after Lu Xun's departure from the university, Lim completed a study and translation of *Li Sao*, the classical verse by the famous Chu poet Qu Yuan (circa 338 BCE – 288 BCE), with a preface by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. Portraying Qu Yuan as “a true Confucian,” Lim found him to be “refreshingly modern,” an inspiration to those devoted to working toward the common good “without the least desire for reward or recognition, in spite of popular misunderstanding, criticism, or attack” (Lim [1929] 1974, xxvii). He wrote:

China has need today of a patriot like Ch'ü Yüan [Qu Yuan]. A man of principle is wanted to stop all lies and shams, and to tell the crowd to do honest work and not to think of clamoring for the moon, before they can stand up and walk. . . . Though circumstances have changed, the spiritual conditions of existence remain fundamentally the same. Organic life is an endless chain of kaleidoscopic essentials. Therefore, while China is today in throes of the birth of democracy, it does not mean that the lessons of her past are devoid of meaning or value. (Lim [1929] 1974, 48–49)

This call for a return to the “essentials” at a time of great change illustrated Lim's belief that Chinese values were not only timeless but recoverable by all. Clearly, Lu Xun's acerbic observation that Lim was a foreign and outmoded Confucianist, damaging as it might seem, had not weakened Lim's commitment to Confucianism. Rather, he took up the project of reinventing Chinese culture as his own and spoke no less authoritatively than Lu Xun.

New Celebrations

Since the 1990s, the figure of Lim Boon Keng has returned with a vengeance in Singapore. Brought back by academics and politicians, his story had slipped out of attention during the Cold War. From the 1950s to the 1970s, decolonization and nationalism in Southeast Asia, together with the Communist Revolution in China, cast a dark, long shadow over diaspora as a viable source of identity. Any open assertions of Chinese ties became politically suspect. In Singapore, similar processes of self-governance in 1959 and full independence in 1965 inaugurated a battle over national culture and

⁹Lee Guan Kin (1990, 78–86) details Lim's warm relationships with China-born reformers Khoo Seok Wan (Qiu Shuyuan, 1874–1941) and Lim's own father-in-law, Wong Nai Siong (Huang Naishang, 1894–1924), but offers no actual evidence of Wong's or Khoo's direct influence on Lim's reformism.

politics. Those trained in the former British colonial system, known as the “English-educated,” came to dominate the political stage under the leadership of the People’s Action Party (PAP). Claiming to be thoroughly “Malayized,” they attacked the “Chinese-educated,” leftist, working-class intellectuals trained in Chinese-language schools, for being “chauvinist,” “pro-China,” and “pro-Communist.” However, since the waning of the Cold War, the rise of neoliberal capitalism, and China’s economic reforms in the early 1980s, discussions have renewed over Singapore’s past, particularly in its historical links with China. The revival of Lim Boon Keng’s story was therefore part of these overtures of reconnection.

These events signaled a new moment of diaspora, in which China reemerged as the ancestral homeland and Singaporeans were exhorted to rekindle Chinese ties. Initially, in order to combat what the Party perceived to be the ills of “Western decadence” associated with development in the 1980s, the ruling PAP instigated a barrage of campaigns to promote “Asian values,” Confucianism, and bilingualism. Ironically, these essentialist appeals to Chinese roots were precisely what the Party would have called “pro-China” only a decade earlier. During the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1984, the most famous statesman of “English-educated” background, Lee Kuan Yew, remarked that Mandarin, not English, was the only “emotionally acceptable” language and “mother tongue” capable of reminding Singaporeans that they were “part of an ancient civilization with an unbroken history of over 5,000 years” (quoted in Kwok 1998, 216), even though Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Teochiu were far more commonly spoken in local society. On the introduction of Confucian ethics to the school curriculum, another leader, Goh Keng Swee, said that the measure would avert “the risk of losing the traditional values of one’s own people and the acquisition of the more spurious fashions of the West” (quoted in Kwok 1998, 216). Simultaneously, hardly escaping anyone’s notice was the reopening of China under Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. In 1990, the two countries established formal diplomatic ties. By 1993, Singapore had become China’s fifth-largest investor. For the next decade, as Singapore reconfigured itself as the “gateway” to China, the government called upon its citizens of Chinese descent to become a “new bicultural elite” who would be “steeped in and knowledgeable about Chinese culture, history, literature and the arts,” well suited to participate in the expanding economy of China (quoted in Huang 2011–12, 15). In this strategy, the renewal of diaspora ties would help Singaporeans transform into an intermediary between global capital and the Chinese homeland.

The state call for a “bicultural” elite unexpectedly found traction in the work of Lee Guan Kin, a veteran of the “Chinese-educated” generation and a scholar of Lim Boon Keng’s thought. According to historian Huang Jianli, diminished contacts with China and a steady erosion of Chinese education since the 1960s had created among intellectuals like Lee “a profound sense of crisis over the cutting off of Chinese roots,” partially because of their marginalization by the “English-educated” elite (Huang 2011–12, 7). As the fraught associations of Chinese culture and identity in the past were replaced by new demands for cosmopolitan biculturalism, Lee Guan Kin found that no one could have fit the model more perfectly than Lim Boon Keng. Having begun to study Lim in the 1970s, Lee published two academic books about him in 1991 and 2001, and led a widely publicized campaign to pressure Amoy University in China to honor Lim’s contributions to its founding. In these efforts, she recast Lim as a member of the “bicultural elite,”

“a model of ease in handling the Eastern and Western cultures” as well as “a roots-searcher, messenger, and warrior of Chinese culture” (*Straits Times* 1998, 2001a, 2001b). Calling him a “Singapore-Malaya Chinese” (*xinma huaren*) who located his “cultural roots” in China while remaining “locally-oriented,” Lee declared Lim the most appropriate model for Singapore Chinese who must learn to bridge both in the twentieth-first century (Lee 2001a, 2; 2001b). Some media reports alleged that Lee went as far as to compare Lim with the PAP leader Lee Kuan Yew, saying that both men were “English-educated Straits Chinese who later turned towards learning Chinese, and a good measure of the reality inside and outside of the country” (cited in Huang 2011–12, 16). Meanwhile, Lee Kuan Yew also endorsed the story of Lim Boon Keng. In 2004, he publicly referred to Lim as a historical model that must be “replicated” and urged citizens to follow his example to become “multicultural players” in the growing economies of China and India (*Straits Times* 2004a, 2004b). Here, the figure of Lim served to bridge the old divide between the English- and Chinese-educated in Singapore’s reconnection with China.

It is worth noting that the exuberant celebration of Lim Boon Keng spoke more to the powerful agendas of the time than those on his terms. Most importantly, contrary to new accounts of “biculturalism,” Lim’s appeal to Confucianism in the nineteenth century was meant to remake the creolized *babas* as authentically “Chinese.” Deeply influenced by colonial ideologies, Lim repeatedly expressed anxieties over interracial contact in his writings. In particular, he firmly rejected what he called “Europeanization” and “Malayanization” among the *babas*. By “Europeanization,” he meant the renunciation of Chinese language in favor of English and mimicry of an extravagant lifestyle that was considered “foreign to their forefathers” (Lim 1900a, 24–25). His idea of “Malayanization” was far more disparaging, even though Malay culture had been integral to local life (Lim 1903, 98). Evoking the fact that *baba* society originated from intermarriages between Chinese men and Malay women, Lim Boon Keng and other contributors to *The Straits Chinese Magazine* frequently feminized Malay culture, associating their “maternal blood” with “thriftlessness,” “the hatred of continuous hard work” and keeping women confined and uneducated (Song 1897, 17, 21; *Straits Chinese Magazine* 1901, 112; 1902a, 167; 1902b, 82). “Chinese blood,” on the contrary, was credited with the masculine spirit of enterprise, industry, and frugality (Lim 1902, 1903; Song 1897, 21).¹⁰ Despite evidence that many Malay wives ran family trading businesses while their Chinese husbands were away, therefore contributing essential labor and skills to the household, the degree of “blood dilution” was made a barometer of morality, energy, and success (Lim 1917, 875–82). Lim’s dismissal of “Malayness” reproduced the colonial hierarchy of races that elevated the Chinese above the Malays, suggesting that he had little intent of celebrating “biculturalism.”

As shown previously, Lim’s claims of Chinese ties were largely a reaction to Western hegemonic discourses of Chineseness and China’s rapid transformation, rather than an attempt to become “bicultural.” Nonetheless, recent rediscoveries of Lim have continued to emphasize his cultural in-betweenness, deny his claim of authenticity, and remain

¹⁰ Arguments about the undesirability of “Malay tendencies” and the superiority of Chinese values thread through the social commentaries in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* but have largely escaped the notice of historians.

silent on his fierce disavowals of “European” and “Malay” cultures.¹¹ In 2007, the figure of Lim had gained an interest wide enough in Singapore to result in a public commemoration of Lim’s fiftieth death anniversary, an academic conference calling for historical reappraisals of his legacy, and a reprint of a 1901 collection of his political essays on Qing China, *Chinese Crisis from Within*. Portraying him as a “prominent pioneer of early Singapore” whose “contributions went beyond [its] shores” (Singapore National Library Board 2007, 4–5), the celebratory accounts have not only reinvented Lim as an agent of global capital, but also domesticated him as a nation builder.

The dramatic reframings of Lim Boon Keng illustrate diaspora as a historical process. Writing about the popular perception in the 1990s that the Asian economic “miracle” was the work of a “Chinese” capitalism, Arif Dirlik (1997) finds that it was little more than a reorganization of “Chinese characteristics” to explain new developments in the global economy. Similarly, pointing to the tropes of “the Pacific Rim” and “the Asia Pacific” that glorify overseas Chinese entrepreneurs, Donald Nonini and Aihwa Ong (1997, 4) argue that being Chinese should be understood as “an inscribed relation of persons and groups to forces and processes associated with global capitalism and its modernities, rather than a property or essence of a person.” Going further, the dynamic and proliferating narratives about Lim—from “*baba*” to “Chinese of British nationality” to “bicultural” to “multicultural”—underline the usefulness of a global Chinese identity bound to the homeland. They tell of the distinct moments in which varied actors turn to and against essential ties with China to negotiate new conditions locally and beyond. Far from being fixed, diaspora represents a shifting dialogue about Chinese connections.

BACK TO THE CRITIQUES

Having explored the shifting meanings of Chinese roots in Lim Boon Keng’s story, let us return to the scholarly critiques of “diaspora.” Critics have rejected the term for implying that Chinese identity and culture are uniform everywhere, unchanging, and Sino-centric. Yet as the case of Lim suggests, the turning and returning to a fixed origin are a selective and changing process, resulting in discrepant actors and meanings. Still, the fact that critics have also equated diaspora with Sinocentrism is worth further consideration. Concerned that diaspora might re-impose China as the dominant frame of reference for Chinese overseas, Wang Gungwu argues that “all the overseas communities have their own characters, they rarely can communicate with one another, and there is a myriad of them” (quoted in Malvezin 2004, 50) so it would be better to address how each has independently adapted to local environments. Positing that diaspora is no more than a “transnational nationalism” (Ang 2001, 89), Ien Ang (2001, 50) calls for “post-Chinese identities.” Even more provocatively, Shu-mei Shih (2010, 32) argues that diaspora is “complicit with China’s nationalist call to the overseas Chinese” because “when the (im)migrants settle and become localized, many choose to end their state of diaspora by the second or third generation.” “Nostalgia, racism, or superiority complexes” felt

¹¹Lee (1991) portrays Lim as a bicultural negotiator between Chinese and Western cultures but offers little on his views on Malayness. Mark Frost (2005, 42) notes the “continued efforts by Baba to represent themselves as authentically Chinese in public,” but does not examine their attitudes toward the Malay culture they shared.

by the immigrants represent temporary setbacks, but localization generally proceeds from one generation to the next, therefore diaspora has “an end date” (45).

Threading through the demurrals is an impulse to decenter China, but “decentering” rarely goes beyond the center-periphery model to understand Chinese outside China.¹² Wang claims that Chinese identity is always locally determined. Ang warns against a Chinese identity of any sort. Shih argues that diaspora is largely a tool of the Chinese nation-state or an interruption to localization at best. Nevertheless, by reifying China and Chinese elsewhere as bounded and separate, their criticisms risk overlooking how the two can become intertwined or mutually constitutive. Drawing sharp distinctions between “immigrant” and “local,” the localization thesis reduces diaspora to a source of developmental delays. Although the emphasis on an “end date” gives useful attention to temporality, it renders change as strikingly linear.¹³ More problematically, as the three scholars attack “diaspora” for essentializing Chinese elsewhere, they essentialize China instead, ignoring how issues of identity and culture at the “center” are far from case closed, but subject to constant reworking. As this discussion of Lim Boon Keng suggests, the different recasting of Chinese ties by himself and others—from a Confucian revival in colonial Singapore, to an educational philosophy in emigrant Fujian, to a controversy over modernity in May Fourth China, to an emblem of cosmopolitanism in an era of global capitalism—invites us not to decenter “China,” but to explore the possibilities of a Chinese identity and culture that are also contingent.

Thus, attention to the temporal dimensions of diaspora may offer a path out of the center-periphery model that has long dominated the study of China and Chinese elsewhere. An important resource, *The Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas* (Pan 1998), organizes the vast history of Chinese migration into thirty-seven countries in six regions. The result is as much a totalizing mapping of Chinese overseas as of a geopolitical imagination of nations and regions around the world. An illustration from the work even portrays “varieties of Chinese” in concentric circles. Three circles surround Circle A labeled China: Circle B, “aspiring migrants, students, Hong Kong and Taiwan”; Circle C, “Overseas Chinese”; and finally Circle D, the “assimilated” (Pan 1998, 14).¹⁴ Reminiscent of the imperial tribute system, the encyclopedic approach conveys a gradation of Chineseness determined by distance from China, which appears as the center against which Chinese elsewhere are to be measured.¹⁵ What is lacking is consideration of time. Under what circumstances does it become imaginable, desirable, or imperative that one claim Chinese roots? What makes linkages with China touted at times, while controversial at others? How do concepts of Chineseness intersect with nationalism and globalization? As Rebecca Karl (2002, 54) has suggested, even though all historical experiences may be spatial, one’s situatedness in a certain space, whether global, regional, national, or local, “comes to the forefront of historical consciousness and contention and becomes

¹²See also Tu Wei-ming’s (1994) proposition to decenter China by recentering the periphery.

¹³What is lacking is consideration of “root searchers” and “return to China” movements among the second generation and beyond (A. Louie 2004), as well as long-settled Chinese communities that were uprooted by anti-Chinese movements in postwar Southeast Asia and repatriated to China (Shelly Chan 2009; Mackie 1976).

¹⁴Ien Ang (2001, 85–88) has also featured the illustration and cogently criticized its assumptions.

¹⁵See also a critique by Anderson (1998).

particularly visible only *at moments of acute rupture or historical dislocation* [emphasis added].” In the case of the Chinese diaspora, space defines experience, but time transmutes experience into consciousness.

In other words, returning to diaspora is a means to understand essential ties in temporal terms. Depending on the configurations of power at a given time, articulations of diaspora may disrupt or reaffirm ideologies of the nation and capital, forming a basis for cultural inclusion or exclusion. Far from being a stage of evolutionary development, diaspora can be revitalized; therefore it is unfinished. This is not to say that Chinese can never be “authentic locals,” as Shih has feared. Rather, it is to acknowledge that belonging is not permanent or self-determined. Always dynamic, diaspora may not only have one “end date,” but multiple ones, rising and fading in a series of discontinuous transformations (Hall 1990).

CONCLUSION

This essay attempts to reopen the debate about diaspora and move it forward. By urging a return to the concept, I do not suggest that it puts an end to all the vexing issues facing scholars of the Chinese experience, but rather stress that it remains productive to think about. The case of Lim Boon Keng shows how diaspora has operated as a process, a strategy, and a paradigm to engage change with global dimensions. In the telling and retelling of crossings that bridged the purported dichotomies of Chinese/Western, native/foreign, and national/global, Lim transformed himself into a broker between East and West, got entangled in China’s struggle for a new culture without Confucianism, and was remade into a poster child for neoliberal cosmopolitanism. Each of these diaspora moments signaled an uneasy transition between *baba* and Chinese, tradition and modernity, as well as disconnection and reconnection. Drawing on the rich histories of Chinese global migration, the renewal of Chinese roots has been a means to forge subjects who can link powerful categories in positive and negative ways.

In this sense, diaspora encapsulates the fluid condition of being Chinese in the world. One of the critics that I have discussed earlier, Ien Ang, considers herself a “Chinese-Indonesian-Dutch-Australian” living “between Asia and the West.” (Ang 2001; Gabriel 2011, 130). In her telling, her “not speaking Chinese” has unvaryingly puzzled conference organizers in Taiwan, waiters in Hong Kong, and taxi drivers in Sydney. Their reactions lead Ang to conclude that her Chineseness has remained disappointingly constant despite distance in travel and course of life. Nonetheless, these sites need not be judged as one and the same. Taiwan, Hong Kong until 1997, and Sydney were hardly part of China, with each operating in more than one Chinese language in addition to many others. Instead, they could be understood as products of long-distance circulation in which Chinese identity has remained a consistent but open question. Though invoked, “China” is not the only referent in the exchanges. Potentially important are gender, ethnicity, region, and class. Seen this way, Ang’s frustration in the various locations is evidence that Chineseness is not only decentered, but subject to the moment of encounter. Just as the story of Lim Boon Keng shows, to be or not to be Chinese has no stable definition, no boundary, and no guarantee. Rather, it derives from historical sedimentation of many sources, laying down rich grounds for future reformulation. This is the case for diaspora.

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