Reimagining Chinese Diasporas in a Transnational World

*Reimagining Chinese Diasporas in a Transnational World* examines the changing nature of the Chinese diasporas in a transnational world and its concomitant implications for Chinese diaspora studies internationally.

With a shifting paradigm of transnationalism and transnational migration, new patterns of Chinese mobilities have emerged that can be characterised as multiple and circular rather than unidirectional or final. This book illustrates how the analytical constructs of hypermobility, hyperdiversity and hyperconnectivity aid in the understanding of contemporary Chinese transnational diasporas. The book offers new research findings and theorisation and contributes to the existing Chinese diasporas literature and the interdisciplinary fields of ethnic, migration and mobility studies. It stimulates further research and scholarly work on the Chinese diasporas in the age of transnational migration.

This book will be a great resource for academics, researchers and advanced students of sociology, ethnic studies, international politics and migration studies. The chapters in this book were originally published as a special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

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Introduction—Reimagining Chinese diasporas in a transnational world: toward a new research agenda

Shibao Guo

ABSTRACT
This introduction article examines the changing nature of the Chinese diasporas in a transnational world and its concomitant implications for Chinese diasporas studies internationally. With a shifting paradigm of transnationalism and transnational migration, new patterns of Chinese diasporas can be characterised by unprecedented hypermobility, hyperdiversity, and hyperconnectivity. Such characterisations depict the global dispersal of overseas Chinese as one of the most hyperdiverse groups with substantial sub-group differences that distinguish it from most other diasporas. As an important hallmark of contemporary Chinese diasporas, the hyperconnectivity manifests itself in the transnational social networks, talent mobility and brain circulation between China and the globalised world. Unlike earlier movements and mobilities, the latest ones are more dynamic and fluid suggesting that the Chinese sojourn is seen as multiple and circular rather than unidirectional or final. This special issue illustrates how the analytical constructs of hypermobility, hyperdiversity, and hyperconnectivity aid in the reimagining of contemporary Chinese transnational diasporas. It also offers research findings and theorisation to further stimulate new scholarship on the Chinese diasporas in a transnational world.

A brief history of the Chinese diasporas\(^1\) and conceptualisations

Prior to the first millennium A.D., the movement of Chinese outside of China was rare with only a few venturing out to the surrounding areas in the South China Sea. A cliché, with a strong measure of truth, about China at that time was one of ‘earthbound China’ (Wang 2000, 3). This inward-looking China was very different from many regions of Europe during this same B.C. time period where the operation of imperialism relied on maritime activities for wars and the building of empires. Examples of these activities include the Greco-Persian Wars and the building of the Roman Empire from a republic and a kingdom where naval battles were fought and where there was a significant movement of people and goods throughout the Mediterranean.

It was only in the first millennium A.D. that trade and co-requisite diplomacy began on a small scale for China which included the present day regions of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia which were small polities or port cities, and, as Wang (2000) points out,
these were places that the central empire of China did not take very seriously. Nevertheless, these were the beginnings of early Chinese settlements overseas. However, early in the second millennium, from the tenth to twelfth centuries, China had an increasing economic interest in the Southeast Asia. Thus, a significant Chinese overseas population began to emerge in the region as a result of major maritime and commercial developments. In the early 1400s, during the Ming Dynasty, China’s Yongle emperor built ships capable of visiting not only countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia but also across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon, the Persian Gulf and the east coast of Africa (Pan 2006). By the mid-1500s, there was a small but significant Chinese community in Manila and between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries migration from China headed primarily to Southeast Asia. Lai (2006) points out that China’s emerging interest in Southeast Asia at this time was collaterally related to the back-drop of a large and progressive expansion of European interest in overseas trade, colonisation, and settlement where, for example, the first Chinese overseas community in Manila was connected to the trade nexus of China-Manila-Acapulco that was established by the Spanish.

In the time period from the beginning of nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, there was much more Chinese international migration and significant Chinese overseas settlements were created that went beyond Asia and which were also concomitant with European colonialism and political imperialism not only in Asia but many other parts of the world (Lai 2006). By the early nineteenth century, the industrial revolution in Britain was complete and British colonialism was hegemonic. The social and market forces of British hegemony began to swing eastward as the industrial revolution continued to create a demand for raw materials including food. With the ending of the transatlantic slave trade in the 1800s, there was a labour shortage in the Americas while British India and imperial China were declining due to Western aggressiveness (Lai 2006). These events set the stage for a mass migration of flexible labour of Asians, primarily Chinese and Indians, and the creation of new Chinese diasporas beyond Southeast Asia to the Americas, Australia, and Oceania, Europe, East Asia, India, and Africa. In terms of European colonialism, Chinese were labourers in the colonies of Britain, France and the Netherlands and as well as in the respective colonial societies (Christiansen 2013). This Chinese flexible labour force included those who were unfree and free. They were primarily Chinese males who toiled as laundry workers, miners, railway workers, loggers, fishers, farm workers, gardeners, and domestic servants, among other manual labour jobs. Tens of thousands of Chinese males were recruited to build the transcontinental railways of both the United States and Canada in the mid to late 1800s as part of these two countries nation-building projects. Overall, Chinese labourers experienced not only highly exploitative working conditions, often in split-labour market situations, but also general and widespread societal racism in their respective destination countries, including head taxes and periods of legislated exclusion in countries such as the United States from 1882 to 1943, Canada from 1923 to 1947, and Australia from 1901 to 1949. Yu (2022) points out that while Chinese transnational networks at this time were shaped by the politics of white supremacy in settler nations, there were many forms of resistance that the targeted Chinese used to undermine, circumvent and subvert racist legislation. These troubled relationships of the early Chinese in ‘host’ societies are characteristic and a common feature of diasporas (Cohen 2008, 17).
In many European countries, like Britain and France, the native populations viewed the Chinese as a national threat whenever there was a large influx to meet labour force shortages (Sluka, Korobkov, and Ivanov 2018). While the Chinese migrations of this time period were mainly characterised as labour diasporas, it should be noted that these migrations also involved some Chinese merchants and entrepreneurs as trade diasporas (Cohen 2008). These included tens of thousands of Chinese gold miners working for themselves in the mid-1800s in the gold rushes of California USA, New South Wales Australia, and British Columbia Canada. However, toward the end of the twentieth century (circa 1970s), the nature of this flexible labour began to shift and increasingly involved highly skilled knowledge workers for emerging new economies in the United States, Australia, and Canada as well as many countries in Europe (see Gao 2022; Zhou and Yang 2022) and to a lesser extent in Africa where the proportion of skilled temporary migrants has been growing since the early 2000s but with low skilled migrants still dominant (Park 2022).

This brief history and periodisation of Chinese diasporas over-simplifies the deeper scholarly literature on this topic which is not within the scope of this introduction to this special issue. Li and Li (2013) point out that the scholarly work on the periodisation of the history of Chinese overseas is quite varied with numerous scholarly interpretations and conceptualisations whereby, in this literature, there is a major dichotomy where the Chinese overseas were seen as either a part of a greater China or as separate entities and settlements contextualised in local conditions and exigencies of life. They further point out that what is central to this debate is the comprehension of sojourning and how much China should be considered as the homeland and reference point for the conceptualisation of Chinese overseas populations.

In terms of this conceptualisation, Wang (1981; as cited in Huang 2010, 6–7) argues that the term *huaqiao* should technically and more narrowly refer to ‘Chinese sojourners’ rather than the broader concept of ‘overseas Chinese’. As such, he considers *huaqiao* as a sub-category of ‘overseas Chinese’ with its direct linkage to the concept of sojourning. In contrast, other scholars, such as Li and Li (2013), have pointed out that the term *huaqiao* (or Chinese sojourners) suggests that they are subjects of China given, by definition, their desire or intention to return to China. They argue that some scholars prefer the term ‘Chinese overseas’ as it is more neutral and recognises that many Chinese immigrants and their children may very well have acquired citizenship (*haiwai huaren*) and identity in their destination countries. Further, many English writing scholars in Southeast Asia prefer using ‘Chinese overseas’ rather than ‘Chinese diaspora’ because of the latter term’s sensitivity that implies ‘not rooted’ or that the term may be perceived as China-centric (Tan 2012, 3). These are complex scholarly issues that are not only semantic but also have legal and political implications in terms of official discourse and Chinese state policies. For the analysis here the distinction between *huaqiao*, Chinese overseas, and *haiwai huaren*, ethnic Chinese or Chinese descent, is becoming moot over time in light of the recent ‘transnational turn’ in China studies (Chan 2018). These include Chinese movements described as hyper-mobility, return migration, circular migration, transmigration, and double diasporas (Guo 2016) and emphasis on transnational Chinese including student migration, skilled migrants, investors, and entrepreneurs many of whom are in ‘new’ Chinatowns and ethnoburbs (Li 1998; Miles 2020).
As Chinese flexible labour increasingly involves highly skilled knowledge workers, a further conceptual issue arises and it revolves around the question of ‘how much China should be considered as the reference point and homeland for Chinese overseas populations?’ This matter revolves around how the term ‘diaspora’ is defined when referring to Chinese overseas populations as Chinese diasporas. Historically the diaspora referred specifically to Jews and their exile from their historic homeland, but by the end of the last century, the notion of diaspora was broadened and redefined to include many other groups. Four popular definitions of diaspora that were developed in the 1980s and 1990s, when the term started enjoying wider usage in scholarly literature, include the work of Connor, Safran, Cohen, and Van Hear. In the mid-1980s Connor (1986, 16) simply defined diaspora as ‘that segment of a people living outside the homeland’. Safran (1991) further developed Safran’s definition of diaspora to include notions of collective memory, alienation, and commitment to an ancestral homeland. Soon after, Cohen (1996, 1997, 2008) drew upon the classical tradition and Safran’s insights to further expand the definition to include nine traits of a diaspora, which he called strands of a diasporic rope. These traits included: (1) not just dispersal from a homeland but also expansion, which includes the search for work and trade; (2) a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, and achievements; and (3) ethnic solidarity. While Cohen posits nine common features of a diaspora, he argues that no one diaspora will manifest all features. Following Cohen’s definition, Van Hear (1998) conceptualises diasporas very broadly as populations which satisfy three minimal criteria; (1) the population is dispersed from a homeland to two or more other territories; (2) the presence abroad is enduring, although exile is not necessarily permanent, but may include movement between homeland and new host; and (3) there is some kind of exchange – social, economic, political or cultural – between or among the spatially separated populations comprising the diaspora. These four definitions while being somewhat disparate also had some common themes. What is problematic is that there is no one single definition of diaspora that is widely accepted in the literature as contemporary definitions of diasporas are quite varied and illustrate that it is an essentially contested concept (Grossman 2019). The work presented here reflects a broader definition of diaspora, akin to Van Hear’s definition, using the term to refer to any internationally dispersed ethnic group or community with the notion of homeland being significant but not paramount. Grossman’s (2019) recent qualitative data analysis of a database of seventy-four articles that used the keyword diaspora led him to conclude that there are six core and decontested attributes of a diaspora of which includes ‘transnationalism’ and ‘homeland orientation’ among others. From his work, I would argue that not only are the Chinese overseas considered as diasporas but they are also engaged in transnational communities and practices hence they should be referred to as transnational diasporas.  

In recent decades there has been a growing literature that examines Chinese diasporas utilising a transnationalism perspective (Guo 2016; Hsu 2000; Ling 2012; Ma and Cartier 2003; Pieke et al. 2004; Wong and Ho 2006; Yang 2013). Moreover, with respect to Chinese immigrants to the United States, Yang (2013) argues that over time there has been a shift and transformation in Chinese migratory practices from sojourning (1848-1943) to settlement (since 1943) and to contemporary transnationalism (since the 1970s), with the latter two still occurring and overlapping to some degree. Song
(2019) has recently made the case that the two most important issues that define Chinese diasporas are ‘Chineseness’ and transnationalism and arguably the Chinese overseas are transnational diasporas.

**The onset of the transnationalism paradigm and its relationship to the diasporas and the new mobilities paradigms**

Over fifty years ago, Canadian sociologist Anthony Richmond (1969) coined the term *transilience* which, at that time, referred to the exchanges of skilled and highly qualified migrants between advanced societies, and as such these migrants were referred to as *transilients*. He argued that transilients: maintain close ties with family and friends; are aware of changing economic, political, and social conditions in their former country and elsewhere; have high rates of re-migration and return. Richmond’s concept of transilience was one of the forerunners to the notion of and phenomena of transnationalism developed by social and cultural anthropologists in the 1990s. Transnationalism, as a paradigm, emerged in the 1990s as a critique of the assimilationist paradigm and, for those in diasporas, their transnational practices often challenged assimilationist forces (Özkul 2019).

Cultural anthropologists Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1992) originally defined transnationalism in terms of the social processes of migrants and their establishment of transnational social fields that cut across geographic, cultural, and political borders. Their writings discussed ‘transnational projects’ which described the nature of these migrants’ cross-border relationships that involved multiple and constant interconnections and relationships (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Zanton 1994, 7) which sociologists later described as transnational social spaces (Faist 2000). Increasingly as immigrants have multiple interconnections that cut across international borders, their identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state and transnationalism can be conceptualised at the individual or institutional or structural levels. In terms of human agency, these ‘migrants’ are engaged in taking actions, making decisions, and developing identities through social networks which simultaneously connect them to two or more societies and these practices are multistranded; thus these migrants are referred to as ‘transmigrants’ (Blanc-Zanton, Basch, and Glick Schiller 1995, 684). At the behavioural and structural levels, transmigrants’ actions and identities are embedded in transnational social networks. Transnationalism can be contrasted to the older notion of sojourning where people, or sojourners, settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of daily life of the country they reside in. Transmigrants, however, are engaged ‘elsewhere’ in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1995, 48). During the 1990s, scholars in other disciplines also started to use the transnationalism paradigm. For example, in sociology Lie (1995) argued that the immigration experience could also be differentiated on the basis of transnational practices whereby the experience of international migration increasingly includes being part of transnational diasporas.

Evidence of increasing interdisciplinary scholarship utilising the transnationalism paradigm included the launching of the academic journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* in the early 1990s. As well, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a
flourish of themed special issues on the topic of transnationalism in mainstream academic journals. These included *International Migration Review* in 2003; *Ethnic and Racial Studies* in 1999 and 2003; *Global Networks* in 2001; and *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* in 2001. While in 2001 Portes (2001) cautioned that these early proponents of transnationalism may have exaggerated its scope, there was, nevertheless, the recognition amongst most scholars of the importance of transnationalism as a refinement or reformulation of existing theories of international migration and of immigrant and ethnic incorporation and adaptation. In the transnationalism paradigm, the terminology, concepts, and theoretical perspectives used in traditional theories of migration have been reformulated and redefined. The immigration experience is no longer ensconced in macroscopic generalisations with emerging social differentiation based on class, ethnicity, and gender (Lie 1995). The transnational paradigm entails a shift away from traditional terms such as ‘international migration’, ‘home society’, ‘settler society’, ‘sending country’, ‘receiving country’, ‘push/pull’, ‘immigrant’, ‘migrant’, and ‘temporary worker’. This fundamental shift from *inter*-national to *trans*-national marks this paradigm. While transnationalism, as a perspective in the study of migration, is seemingly similar to globalisation studies and diaspora studies, it is also dissimilar. Globalisation studies tend to be primarily economic with the binary of ‘the global’ and ‘the local’; diaspora studies are often historical and concerned with culture and identity; and transnationalism studies concentrate more on the flows and counter-flows themselves which are described as the links, social fields and social networks which emerge across nation-states (Özkul 2012). These flows and counter-flows involve not just the migration or movement of people but also other material and non-material mobilities such as capital, goods, culture, ideology, and religion.

Some scholars have argued that the concepts of transnationalism and transnational communities are broader and more inclusive ones than the concepts of diaspora and diasporic communities. More generally transnationalism is a broader concept than diaspora, which is an older and a more political term, and more narrowly applied to ethnic, racialised, religious, and national groups. Thus, transnational communities are broader and encompass diasporas, but not all transnational communities are diasporas (Van Hear 1998; Wong and Ho 2006; Faist 2010). Diasporas, as indicated above, have very specific criterion such as the paramount importance of homeland. In this sense, diasporas may be appropriately conceptualised as a concomitant of transnationalism (Braziel and Mannur 2003).

For this special issue the premise is that there is analytical synergy by bringing together studies of ethnicity, migration, immigration, transnational and diasporic communities, and mobilities and that this approach is effective for the analysis of Chinese transnational diasporas. Back in the late 1990s, the state of ethnic scholarship in various countries such as Australia, Canada, Britain, and the United States was one of a ‘landlocked’ framework that privileged bounded and essentialised notions of ethnicity while not allowing conceptual space for transnationalism (see Winland 1998). With the introduction and growth of transnationalism and diasporic studies over the past two decades, a conceptual space has been engendered in ethnic and immigrant scholarship. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006, 10) point out that diasporas and transnational citizenship studies have ‘… offered trenchant critiques of the bounded and static categories of nation, ethnicity, community, place and state within much social science’. In addition, they note the crucial role
migration studies has for the field of mobilities research. Other scholars, such as Faist (2013), have noted the important relationship of the new mobilities paradigm with migration studies and sociology while noting both spatial and social mobilities and the emergence of transnational social space. The term mobility encompasses geographical and social phenomenon and in the early and mid-2000s the new mobilities paradigm emerged in the writings of social geographers and sociologists (Büscher and Urry 2009; Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2000, 2007).

There is a dialectical relationship amongst migration studies, transnationalism and diaspora studies, and mobility studies. While migration studies examine the movement of people, most often across borders, transnationalism and transnational studies focus on the fact that it is not only people who move across borders but that human sociality also entails other mobilities such as goods, economic capital, networks, knowledge, and other symbolic mobilities. While there appears to be dialectical relationships amongst transnational, diasporic, and mobility studies, these are only at the points where they converge. To illustrate this, many of the six conceptualisations of transnationalism that Vertovec (1999) expounds on (social morphology, consciousness, cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, political engagement, and reconstruction of place) can simultaneously be thought of as forms of mobility. That is, transnationalism as social morphology (such as social networks, social remittances) are social mobilities; transnationalism as an avenue of capital (such as remittances and foreign direct investment) are economic mobilities; transnationalism as cultural reproduction are cultural mobilities; transnationalism as sites of political engagement are political mobilities; and transnationalism as reconstruction of place are architectural, cultural, and social mobilities. These conceptualisations and forms of transnationalism are movements or mobilities that go in both directions between countries. However, when there is no convergence then the reach of the paradigms goes beyond each other. Blunt (2007) suggests that mobilities research extends far beyond migration studies. Although research on mobilities and migrations cannot be collapsed onto each other, there are many productive connections between them, particularly in terms of materiality, politics, and methodology.

These various forms of mobilities thus include not only the geographic (migration) but also the social (relations and networks), the economic (capital and trade), and the symbolic (ideas, information, and images). These multiple paradigms and their interconnections augur well for an analysis of Chinese diasporas and they provide a general theoretical framework for this special issue on Chinese diasporas both in historical and contemporary contexts. Departing from the traditional ethnic-studies perspective of Chinese migrants in a nationally bounded context, the theme of this special issue explicitly connects them to transnational diasporas. This allows for the reflection of the dynamic historical and current transformations of Chinese diasporas and the connection of their transnational communities. Constant population movements within, but also across national borders, alongside a much more extensive and complex communicational, informational, and exchange network, are permanent features of a globalised world. Both Chinese population movements and intricate exchange networks signal the multiple economic, cultural, social, ideological, and symbolic mobilities within and across states in transnational social spaces.