



*Routledge Contemporary China Series*

# **ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN THE DIASPORA CHINESE AND CHINA UNIVERSES**

**THE MAKING OF A COLLABORATIVE CULTURAL BASIN**

Khun Eng Kuah



**ROUTLEDGE**  


# Ancestor Worship in the Diaspora Chinese and China Universes

Kuah explores the centrality of ancestors and ancestor worship of the Chinese in the Diaspora Chinese and China universes. Building on the original work and book on “Rebuilding the Ancestral Village: Singaporeans in China”, this book goes beyond the premise of remaking the ancestral home.

Ancestor worship and the ancestors, together with selected cultural practices, constitute an important aspect of the broad Chinese culture shared by these two groups of Chinese and leads to the making of a collaborative cultural basin. This book takes the audience on an ancestor worship journey to uncover the complexity of ancestors and ancestral souls crossing transnational spaces, their choices of ancestral soul homes, the significance of the lineage ancestral house, and the engagement of women through food offering contesting patriarchy. It also explores the increasing role of the Mainland Chinese state in appropriating ancestor and ancestor worship as a cultural icon and during the Qingming festival as a socio-moral capital and cultural bridge to foster closer ties with the Diaspora Chinese in its attempt to bring them into its “Chinese civilizational polity”. The book also takes the audience on a photographic journey to visually experience the various rituals and the vibrancy of the ritual performances conducted during the different stages from pre-communal to communal ancestor worship.

An essential read for scholars of Chinese society and religion, Chinese migration, and diaspora studies.

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*Khun Eng Kuah*

# Ancestor Worship in the Diaspora Chinese and China Universes

The Making of a Collaborative Cultural  
Basin

**Khun Eng Kuah**

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To my daughter Jasmine Pearce, sisters Kuah Thian Fah and Ivy Kuah, and brothers Richard Kuah and A.H. Kuah

In Memory

Of my late parents, Kuah Teng Chew and Low Suan

Late brother T.S. Kuah



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# Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>List of tables</i>	<i>xiv</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xvii</i>
1 Introduction: Ancestor worship in the diaspora and Mainland Chinese universes	1
2 Why do ancestors matter?	26
3 Ancestors across transnational spaces: From <i>Luodi Shenggen</i> to <i>Yeluo Guigen</i>	48
4 Ancestors' soul homes	70
5 Lineage ancestral house and its symbolism	87
6 Chinese women and ancestral food offerings	107
7 Ritual performance of ancestor worship: A photographic journey	123
8 Ancestors' worth in contemporary China: Economic capital and cultural heritage	171



viii *Contents*

9	The Qingming festival as a Mainland Chinese national cultural icon: The reach of the Mainland Chinese state	189
10	Conclusion: Ancestor worship and its future	208
	<i>Bibliography</i>	217
	<i>Glossary</i>	225
	<i>Index</i>	231

# Figures

1.1	Diaspora Chinese universe	3
1.2	Mainland Chinese universe	7
1.3	Worthiness and desirability of overseas-trained talents in Mainland China	13
1.4	Transnational mobility and global intersection of the Global Diaspora Chinese and Mainland Chinese universes	15
1.5	Collaborative Chinese cultural basin	20
2.1	Ancestor worship as shared cultural tradition	27
2.2	Three perspectives on ancestor worship	29
2.3	Transformation of yin spirit into ancestral spirit	31
2.4	Centrality of ancestor worship	33
2.5	A painting depicting Qingming (photo by author)	35
3.1	Parallel universes and shared ancestral space	51
3.2	Global Diaspora Chinese universe and Mainland Chinese universe: mobility, community formation, and interconnectivity in the twenty-first century	53
3.3	Ban-shan-gong appears as the first-generation founder in the Ke lineage genealogy	61
3.4	Relational networks revolving around Qingshui Zushigong	63
3.5	Layout of the main shrine of the Qingshui Ancestral Master Temple in Singapore	63
3.6	Qingshui zushigong's position in the Ke lineage ancestral house in Anxi county, Fujian	64
4.1	Identity transformation from sojourners to rooted Diaspora Chinese	78
4.2	Ancestral souls' experience of deterritorialization and reterritorialization and the formation of dual homes in Mainland China and the Diaspora Chinese community	78
4.3	Ancestral spiritual homes in Mainland China	80
4.4	Lineage ancestral house as socio-ritual conurbia	84
5.1	Ke lineage ancestral house	92

6.1	Correlation between categories of ancestors and degree of social intimacy	120
7.1	Ke lineage ancestral house	127
7.2	Primary school pupils lined up at the entrance to the village to welcome the Singapore Diaspora Chinese to their ancestral village	129
7.3	The ancestral patriarch Qingshui zushigong, who is the black-faced deity sitting in the central position. At the front are the guardian gods of different temples/shrines in the district, and they were installed during the duration of the rite to witness this celebration. They would be returned to their own temples after the celebration	130
7.4	The monks performed the <i>yinbun</i> rite to recall the ancestral spirits. On the table were food offerings for the ancestors to eat before their journey back to the lineage ancestral house. In this ritual, the monks led the elders, who paid their obeisance and ritually invited their ancestral spirits to the lineage ancestral house	131
7.5	Two village elders launched a paper boat into the water to smoothen the path for the ancestral spirits to arrive at the scene	131
7.6	A village elder holding a chicken tied with a string. The chicken served as a surrogate body to host the ancestral spirits	132
7.7	Village children looking with curiosity and enjoying the ritual performance	133
7.8	The procession with the ancestral spirits being carried on sedan chairs and moving towards the ancestral house	133
7.9	The sedan chairs carrying the ancestral spirits were placed in front of the ancestral house. In the forefront were placed mats, stools, basins, and toiletries that would be used symbolically for giving the ancestors a bath, i.e. cleansing the ancestral spirits	134
7.10	In front of the sedan chairs were placed paper cylinders that served as temporary “bathrooms” where the ancestral spirits would take a bath. Inside the paper cylinder were placed a mat, stool, towel, and toiletries for the ancestral spirits to use	135
7.11	This was a temporary bathroom where the ancestors took a bath before entering the ancestral house. Inside it were a small stool, towel, soap, and mug for the ancestors to cleanse themselves	135
7.12	The monks preparing themselves to ritually cleanse the ancestral spirits through a series of prayers. After cleansing, the mats (front) would be used as a shelter to allow the ancestral spirits to dress themselves prior to entering the ancestral house	136
7.13	A group of monks chanted sutras and informed the ancestral spirits of the celebration	136
7.14	The lineage elders inspect the temporary bathroom made for the ancestral spirits	137

7.15	The head monk ritually cleansed the ancestral spirits	138
7.16	The monks paid respect to other guardian deities inside the lineage ancestral house and informed them of the arrival of the ancestral souls	139
7.17	The monks led the cleansed ancestral souls and the lineage elders into the ancestral house	139
7.18	The monks led the elders to conduct communal ancestor worship	140
7.19	A banner announced the Ke lineage religious Rite of Gratification for the Completion of the Genealogy in the village setting. Firecrackers were lit throughout the procession to create an exciting and noisy atmosphere that served to inform the villagers of this celebration	144
7.20	The procession stopped at a village shrine amidst a paddy field in the village, and the monks paid their respects and gave incense offerings to the deity of the temple	144
7.21	The completed handwritten genealogy was carried by a lineage village elder as part of the procession as the entourage wound its way through the village precinct	145
7.22	A group of elders carrying the <i>yin-hun</i> (soul-leading streamers) during the Rite of Gratification for the Flow of Descendants	146
7.23	A member informing his ancestors of his and his immediate family's participation in the communal ancestor worship	146
7.24	Display of the handwritten copy of the updated recompiled genealogy in front of the Ke lineage ancestors in the lineage ancestral house	147
7.25	After the ritual service, the handwritten genealogy was placed in a wooden box and padlocked. The lock was sealed with an amulet by the priest to prevent anyone from opening it until the next recompilation. It was then kept under lock and key in the house of a lineage elder	148
7.26	A banner announced the fetching of the sacred water	149
7.27	At dawn, Daoist priests led lineage members to the river source to fetch the sacred water	149
7.28	In the morning, the procession made its way through an agricultural field	150
7.29	The procession gathered more villagers as it wound its way through the market town	150
7.30	The lineage elders led the procession around the village precinct in the Rite of Gratification for the Flow of Descendants	151
7.31	Daoist priests offering prayers during the Rite of Gratification for the Flow of Descendants	152
7.32	Daoist priests reading the names and informing the ancestors of the lineage participating in this rite	152

7.33	Lineage elders offering incense to their ancestors	153
7.34	Lineage members paying obeisance and offering incense to their ancestors	153
7.35	On the day of the Rite of Gratification for the Flow of Descendants, the “descendant entry pig” was led to the lineage ancestral house	154
7.36	Upon entering the lineage ancestral house, the “descendant entry pig” was “prostrated” before the ancestors	154
7.37	The “descendant entry pig” was offered to the ancestors	155
7.38	The offering of the “three raw” (三生): pig, goat, and chicken	156
7.39	The pork from the “descendant entry pig” was cut into small one-inch cube pieces and distributed to all male members of the lineage	156
7.40	A basket of pork pieces readied to be distributed	157
7.41	Male lineage members carried a “descendant lamp”, a pot with a chicken, and lit incense sticks waiting to enter the ancestral house to give offerings to the ancestors and to collect a piece of the descendant entry pork. The chicken is called the “route-leading chicken” ( <i>dailuji</i> 带路鸡), which symbolically would lead the male descendants to matrimony, i.e. married life. Together, the rite would bless the male descendants with male heirs	158
7.42	A large crowd of members outside the ancestral house queuing to enter the lineage ancestral house	159
7.43	Male members rushed to enter the lineage ancestral house	160
7.44	The gate of the lineage ancestral house was temporarily closed after overcrowding occurred	161
7.45	After entering the lineage ancestral house, male members gave incense offerings to the ancestors before proceeding to claim the descendant entry pork	161
7.46	The happy male descendants with the “descendant lamps”, a pot containing the route-leading chicken, and a piece of “descendant entry pork”	162
7.47	The “descendant lamp” and the pot containing the route-leading chicken and the descendant entry pork. The legs of the chicken were tied together with a red string with two rings tied to it. This red string with the rings tied together is symbolic of the male descendant’s quest for a marriage prospect	162
7.48	A paper ancestral lineage house with colourful tinsel was placed in the main shrine of the ancestral lineage house as part of the offering during the Rite of Gratification for the Flow of Descendants. It would be burnt with other religious paraphernalia at the end of the ceremony	163

7.49	Paper treasury money called <i>kuqian</i> (库钱) was stamped with the names of descendants and offered to the ancestors to ensure that individual ancestors would receive the money	163
7.50	A temporary canopy was erected to shelter the small lighthouses offered by individual families to their family ancestors. Some of these lighthouses were relatively big and elaborate	164
7.51	A monk turned the wheel of rebirth to transfer merits to the ancestors	164
7.52	A lineage member turned the wheel of rebirth to impart merits to his family ancestors	165
7.53	Women carried tables and baskets of food offerings to the courtyard space outside the lineage ancestral house	165
7.54	Women carried baskets of food offerings walking to the lineage ancestral house	166
7.55	A communal image of lineage members offering food to their family ancestors	166
7.56	Women as key participants in food preparation and offering	167
7.57	Members and villagers mingled outside the lineage ancestral house and joined in the celebration	168
7.58	A lineage communal feast	168
7.59	Offerings of lighthouses to the family ancestors by family members	169
7.60	The Finale – All offerings: soul house, lighthouses, and paper money were lit into a bonfire for the ancestors at the end of the ceremony in the night	169
8.1	Transformation of capital	175

# Tables

6.1	Food offerings made to gods, deities, and ancestors	112
6.2	Correlation between categories of ancestors and types of food offerings and motives	119

# Preface

Since my research exploration into China and attempting to understand the connections between Singapore Chinese and Mainland Chinese in the late 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the publication of my book *Rebuilding the Ancestral Village: Singaporeans in China* (first published in 2000, second edition in 2011 and republished in 2022), much has changed in terms of the relationship between the Singaporean Diaspora Chinese and Mainland village Chinese that I have studied. The tenuous thread – that of shared common ancestors and ancestor worship – that bound these two groups together has weakened considerably through the last 30 years with the passing of the first-generation China-born Singaporean Diaspora Chinese. During this period, the Chinese community in Singapore has sunk their roots and spread their branches (*luodi shenggen, sanhua kaizhi* 落地生根, 散花开枝) within the Singapore nation state. Today, we can witness several generations of Chinese who have called Singapore their home. The idea of *luodi shenggen, sanhua kaizhi* 落地生根, 散花开枝 conveys that the Singapore Chinese community has firmly entrenched itself and grown in generational depth in this new nation state. They are the rooted local Chinese functioning within the Diaspora Chinese universe. Their connection to the ancestral home has weakened and is now perceived as part of a distant historical past of the first generation China-born ancestors who migrated out of and with some connections to the Mainland Chinese Universe.

The book *Rebuilding the Ancestral Village* charts the relationship between the Singapore Chinese and Mainland Chinese villagers of Anxi origin. It argues for the development of a moral economy based, in part, on ancestor worship that leads to this group of Singapore Chinese contributing extensively to the rebuilding of the ancestral village.

Today, the emigrant ancestral village is considered relatively prosperous and the phase of rebuilding the emigrant villages in the 1980s and 1990s has now been completed. On normal days, Anxi villages are relatively quiet. Many of those who have received assistance from their Singapore kin have left the villages and now resided in larger towns and cities, and are themselves wealthy by village standards. A large number now reside in Xiamen. On an everyday



basis, there is little communication between the Singapore Diaspora Chinese and the Mainland Chinese.

The centrality of ancestors and ancestor worship continues to feature prominently in the Diaspora Chinese and China universes. It is a common practice for Chinese families in each universe to worship their immediate ancestors. Only on the occasions of communal ancestor worship and the religious celebration of the Clearwater grand ancestor, Qingshui zushi gong, do we witness the social connections between these Chinese from the Diaspora Chinese and China universes coming together for this celebration. Ancestors and communal ancestor worship in this sense serve as a cultural bridge to bring together the Diaspora and Mainland Chinese to acknowledge their shared common ancestors and origin and to establish a common feeling among them. It also provides an opportunity for the local-born young generations of Diaspora Chinese to come into contact with their ancestral home, witness elaborate ancestral ritual performances, and understand their lineage history and cultural roots.

This book serves as a sequel to the book on *Rebuilding the Ancestral Village: Singaporeans in China*, but expands beyond it. It focuses on the centrality and the dynamism of ancestor and ancestor worship from the religious and the sociocultural perspectives within the Diaspora Chinese and China universes. It explores the rootedness of ancestors and ancestor worship in the two Chinese universes in modernity. At the same time, there is a transnational mobility of the split ancestral souls crossing the ocean and being positioned in their ancestral hall or domestic household in their ancestral village. This book also examines that beyond the interaction between the Diaspora Chinese and the Mainland Chinese, there is the expanding role of the Mainland Chinese state that adopts ancestors and ancestor worship in its cultural diplomacy to bring Diaspora Chinese into its grand project of the Chinese civilizational polity. This book will also take the reader on a photographic journey to illustrate the richness of the various rites and ritual performances of ancestor worship.

Finally, this book argues for the formation of a collaborative Chinese cultural basin as a new framework to understand the social and cultural connections between the Diaspora Chinese and Mainland Chinese, including the Mainland Chinese state where each universe has its own identity and yet at the same time, there are shared cultural elements of which ancestor and ancestor worship remain as a crucial element between them. Needless to say, there are also similar and different interpretations in the practice and understanding of these cultural elements. As such, the collaborative cultural basin is heterogeneous and pluralistic in nature.

# Acknowledgements

A book project is never the sole effort of the author. Along the lengthy journey, there are many who have stretched out their hands and helped out in all ways, mostly quietly and unnoticed. This book has been long in the making. It is the culmination of years of observations and research in Fujian, Hong Kong, Guangdong, and Singapore. For the last three decades, I have spent much time in Hong Kong and Singapore that provided me with opportunities to observe, talk, and discuss with Chinese in Singapore and Hong Kong who have conducted ancestor worship and sweep their grandparents' graves on an annual basis. Likewise, I have had the good fortune of visiting the Anxi field site in Fujian on different occasions and meeting up with some of my earlier informants. Having been based in Guangzhou for the last few years, I have also had the opportunity to visit two emigrant villages to observe and discuss with the village elders as the lineage embarked on the reconstruction of their lineage memorial hall.

The original intention was to produce a book of photos of the rites and rituals of communal ancestor worship and to present it to the Anxi villagers who warmly accepted me into their fold some 30 years ago. But this has transformed into a full-length book. It was intended as a sequel to my book on *Rebuilding the Ancestral Village: Singaporeans in China*. But it goes beyond that scope and incorporates the expanding roles of ancestor worship as an element of China's cultural diplomacy by the Mainland Chinese state, thus adding a new dimension and broadening the scope of this book.

In this journey, I am grateful to all the informants who have lent me a hand and helped me understand the significance of ancestors and ancestor worship in their daily life and to their immediate family and their lineage. I wish to thank members of the Tan, Qing, and Ke lineages for sharing with me information on their understanding of ancestor and ancestor worship.

I have benefited greatly from discussions and the support of colleagues in different parts of the world. I am also grateful to my colleagues at the School of International Studies/Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies and the Collaborative Centre for the Promotion of Chinese Culture in Hong Kong,

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Finally, I am indebted to my daughter, Jasmine Pearce, who provided me with all the care and concern that I needed to complete this book. I wish to dedicate this book to my daughter Jasmine Pearce, sisters Thian Fah and Ivy, and brothers Richard and Ah Hong, and in memory of my late parents, Kuah Teng Chew and Low Suan, and late brother Thian Swee.

KEK  
October 2023

# 1 Introduction

## Ancestor worship in the diaspora and Mainland Chinese universes

### Introduction

In this introductory chapter, Chapter 1 tells the story of the importance of ancestor and ancestor worship by the Chinese from the Diaspora Chinese and the Mainland Chinese universes, with the latter including the Mainland China state. It opens with a brief definition of the Diaspora Chinese and Mainland Chinese universes and a discussion of the social interconnectivity among the different groups of Chinese from the Diaspora and Mainland China as they have traversed the migration and transnational circuit. This is followed by an exploration of the roles played by the Diaspora Chinese and the social connections between these two groups of Chinese in the performance of communal ancestor worship in the emigrant ancestral village as they acknowledge their shared ancestors. This chapter also examines the generational divide between the first, second, and subsequent generations of Diaspora Chinese and Mainland Chinese, resulting in diverging interpretations and practices of ancestor worship. Finally, this chapter advances the framework of a collaborative cultural basin that contains selected Chinese cultural elements of which ancestors and ancestor worship are included in the basin and embraced by the Diaspora Chinese and the Mainland Chinese.

### Defining the global Diaspora Chinese universe

Who belongs to the global Diaspora Chinese universe? We define those people broadly having self-identification as belonging to the Diaspora Chinese Universe as one key factor. The second factor is their ethnic affiliation, and the third is their citizenship claims within a nation state. The Diaspora Chinese identity has three layers including nation-state citizenship, Chinese ethnicity, and their self-identification of Diaspora belongingness. This set of three-layered identification convey benefits and responsibilities. Commonly, we hear Diaspora Chinese describing themselves in the following manner: American-born Chinese (ABC), Australian-born Chinese (ABC), British-born Chinese (BBC), and Canadian-born Chinese (CCC) in the Western world. In Southeast

## 2 *Introduction*

Asia, they call themselves Singaporean Chinese, Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese, Filipino Chinese, Thai Chinese, and Vietnamese Chinese.

Studies of Chinese identity within the Diaspora world have been linked to early migration, contemporary mobility, education, marriage, interethnic and intra-ethnic relations, settlement, and the formation of Chinese communities. Within a nation-state boundary, as Anderson argued for the rise of an imagined community, ethnic Chinese who have engaged in migration since the nineteenth century have adapted to a new environment and embarked on community formation. From the nineteenth through the twentieth century, Chinese migrants gradually came into contact and interacted with people of different ethnicities. With the formation of new nation states after decolonialization, they also learnt a new social and political system of government. This led early Chinese migrants to become consciously aware, learn and adapt to a heterogeneous politico-ideological, socio-cultural, and religious landscape. First-generation China-born Chinese have built and developed their own community and rooted themselves in the nation state that they have chosen to call home, and together with the subsequent generations, they are the rooted Diaspora Chinese within a nation state. From the second half of the twentieth century, apart from economic migration, there was increased mobility for education, talent employment, and political and lifestyle considerations. A sizeable number of those who left for education and talent employment have remained in the nation state in which they studied, resided, became naturalized, and made their home.

Rooted Diaspora Chinese, be they first and 1.5 generation or local-born second and subsequent generations, owed their political allegiance to and are citizens of the nation state that they identify as their home. These Diaspora Chinese are situated within the global Diaspora Chinese universe. They embraced two sets of values and cultures. While they continued upholding selected aspects of Chinese cultural practices, they were also educated in the Western liberal ideology where ideas of democracy, freedom of speech, equality of rights, and other social values were intermixed with Confucian values that have become part of their everyday life discourse. They belonged to the rooted Diaspora Chinese community. One area of research has focused on the identity issue and social structural and cultural continuity through the study of Chinese social institutions, economic practices, the *guanxi* network, and socio-cultural and religious practices that the Chinese continued to practice and uphold in their Diaspora home. Another area of research has considered the interethnic relationship between the Diaspora Chinese as ethnic minority and as model citizens where their success in the economic and professional sectors has been highlighted and that brought along tensions and rivalries. A third area of research has examined the transnational socio-cultural relationship between the global Diaspora Chinese and the Mainland Chinese.

Within the Diaspora Chinese universe, there are also those who hold a long-term pass and are awaiting residency. This group includes spouses, children, and parents of those recently conferred citizenship of the nation state

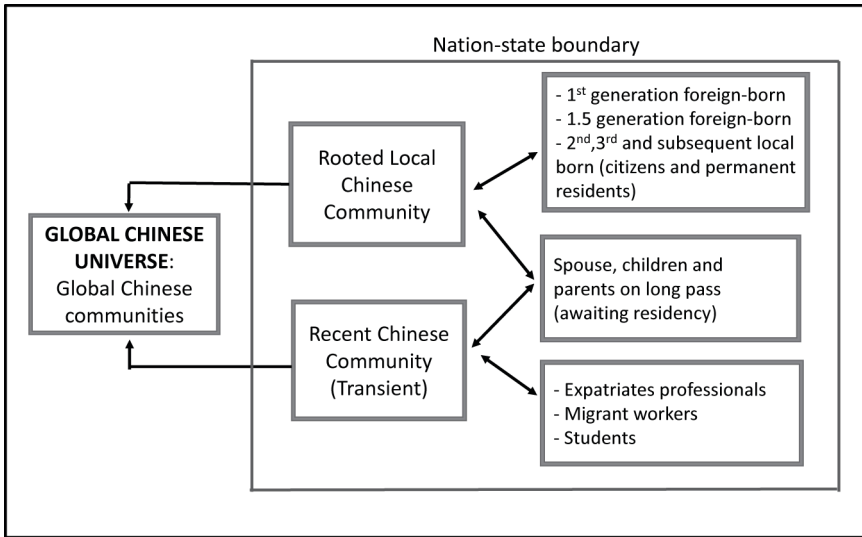


Figure 1.1 Diaspora Chinese universe.

and they transit between the transient and the permanent local Chinese community. Within this universe are also Chinese expatriates and professionals, migrant workers, students, asylum seekers, and others who are part of the recent transient Chinese community (see Figure 1.1).

### Mainland Chinese universe

Mainland Chinese in the Mainland Chinese universe comprise five categories of Chinese living permanently or transiently in Mainland China and the territories under China's sovereign rule. The first group are the Chinese and ethnic minorities born in Mainland China and who are People's Republic of China (PRC) citizens. In China, apart from the majority Han Chinese, there are 56 ethnic minority groups. Together, they are part of the 1.4 billion citizens of the Mainland Chinese state.

The second group are the PRC sovereign subjects. Within this category are the Hong Kongers and Macauese who were formerly under British and Portuguese rule until the return of sovereignty to the Mainland Chinese government in 1997 and 1999 respectively. They are postcolonial subjects and with the return of the former colonies of Hong Kong and Macau to the Mainland, they became part of China, yet in terms of status, they functioned semi-autonomously as a result of the postcolonial arrangements with Britain and Portugal. They became Mainland Chinese subjects of the PRC because of the Special Administrative Region accorded to Hong Kong and Macau. Prior

#### 4 Introduction

to the return of sovereignty, the British and Portuguese colonial governments signed a joint declaration with the Mainland Chinese government under the rule of Deng Xiaoping. Under the joint declaration, both regions functioned under the “one country, two systems” framework where they were guaranteed a high level of autonomy and were exempted from laws of the PRC except those pertaining to security. The two regions were governed by the Mini Constitution of Hong Kong and Macau respectively which is effective for 50 years after the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997 and Macau in 1999. Hong Kong and Macau issued their own passports, their own identity card, and continued to issue their own currency that is fully convertible in the global financial market. However, with the passing of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020, autonomy in Hong Kong has been increasingly restricted.

Under this arrangement, the Hong Kong and Macau populations continued to have rights to have dual citizenship. After the change of sovereignty, Hong Kong and Macau were governed by the existing laws but also came under the Mini Constitution where the ultimate governing control is with the central government of the PRC. For the Hong Kong and Macau populations who make visits to Mainland China, they were issued the “home return permit” (*huixiangzheng*, 回乡证), which allowed these Hong Kong and Macau residents to visit their home village, that is, China freely without the need for other permits. As Hong Kong and Macau residents are bound by their own constitutional laws and the Mini Constitution, they are thus Chinese subjects of the PRC until such time when the special administrative status comes to an end, and thus they observe all Mainland Chinese laws and regulations that apply to all regions in Mainland China. In the case of Hong Kong, the special administrative status would end in 2047 and for Macau in 2049. In terms of identification, the Hong Kong people see themselves as Hong Kong Chinese, while those in Macau see themselves as Macauese Chinese.

The third group of Chinese are the overseas Chinese returnees (*guiqiao*, 归侨) and overseas Chinese refugee returnees (*nanqiao*, 难侨). This group of returnees were closely intertwined with the political development of the region where they first migrated to as sojourners and settled as migrants in the Southeast Asian region. After the Second World War and in the 1950s and 1960s, there were communist cells established in British Malaya and Singapore with a sizeable group of Communist Chinese operating in the region. At the same time, parts of mainland Southeast Asia, namely Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, were falling into communist hands, leading to the “domino” effect that the other Southeast Asian countries feared. During the 1950s and 1960s, anti-communist actions were taken by the British colonial government to eliminate Communism. As such, some Communist Chinese returned to Mainland China. They were dispersed to their ancestral villages and townships. They became the overseas Chinese returnees. Among them were also the overseas Chinese returnees from India, Thailand, and Myanmar.

In the 1960s, a sizeable group of Indonesia-born Chinese were studying in China. During this period, political turmoil occurred in Indonesia, culminating in racial riots where Indonesian Chinese were persecuted by the Indonesian government. Some Indonesian Chinese emigrated back to Communist China, while the Indonesian Chinese students who were studying in Mainland China remained behind. In the 1970s, Vietnamese Chinese suffered persecution and many left Vietnam on boats and by other means as refugees. A sizeable number were accepted by the Mainland Chinese government into China. Indonesian and Vietnamese Chinese were considered overseas Chinese refugees and overseas Chinese refugee returnees.

Since the 1950s, the Mainland Chinese government had established and placed the overseas Chinese refugee returnees on “emigrant Chinese farms” (*huaqiao nongchang*, 华侨农场) that were segregated from the mainstream population. During the 1950s through the 1970s, the number of overseas Chinese refugee returnees numbered 160,000. Today, this number has been reduced to 84,000. There was a total of 84 “emigrant Chinese farms”. Of these, 41 were built in the 1950s and 1960s and housed over 80,000 Chinese refugee returnees from Malaya, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar, and India. In the 1970s, an additional 43 “emigrant Chinese farms” were constructed as a result of the acceptance of 26,300 Vietnamese Chinese refugee returnees into China. Today, these “emigrant Chinese farms” are scattered in different provinces, with 23 in Guangdong, 22 in Guangxi, 17 in Fujian, 13 in Yunnan, five in Hainan Island, three in Jiangxi, and one in Jilin (<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%8D%8E%E4%BE%A8%E5%86%9C%E5%9C%BA/5269318?fr=aladdin>, accessed 6/4/2022).

The overseas Chinese returnees and overseas Chinese refugee returnees were resettled on these farms where they were provided with housing and basic amenities, and they were allowed to work in state-owned factories and start their own businesses. However, through the years, the conditions of housing have deteriorated and today, the elderly returnees lived in them. They continued to be regarded as a marginal group within the Mainland Chinese society, separated from the main population. In the world of international relations, the overseas Chinese returnees as a social group have been showcased as part of Mainland Chinese policies to gain recognition and embracement of these Chinese as part of the Mainland Chinese polity. In short, this group of overseas Chinese refugee returnees was regarded as a social capital for the Mainland Chinese government to utilize to build up their international public image.

They were treated as a separate group of Chinese with regional cultural differences. Through the years, they were encouraged to highlight their cultural differences with the Mainland Chinese. Today, language, food and cuisine, dressing, and other cultural practices of the Indonesian, Malaysian, and other groups of Chinese have been reified by the Mainland Chinese state and are treated as key markers or signifiers of the differences between them and their mainland counterparts. Contained within the spatial confines of an overseas



## 6 Introduction

Chinese farm boundary and encouraged to practise a hybridized version of the Chinese culture, this group of Chinese continued to live at the margins of the main society as the “other Chinese”. Their status as the “other Chinese” continues right up until today as they and their younger generations continue to be tagged as such even though many no longer live on the “emigrant Chinese farms”.

For the Taiwanese Chinese, the One-China policy framework was adopted that grouped the status of the Taiwanese Chinese community within this framework but with its own self-governing structure and institutions. It is also noted that there continues to be tension between Mainland China and Taiwan as the Taiwanese state seeks to put political distance between itself and Mainland China, while the majority of the Taiwanese population is content to adhere to a more ambiguous notion of “One China” but with two interpretations of its meaning.

The fourth group of Chinese are the highly skilled talented Mainland Chinese who have lived a considerable period of time in an overseas environment. Many are highly educated with skills that Mainland China desperately needs for its rapid development in science, technology, economics, maths, finance, and business. These Mainland Chinese are the seagulls (*haiyou*, 海鸥) and sea turtles (*haigui*, 海龟) who have soared and have obtained high positions and status in an overseas environment. Many of them have naturalized citizenship or permanent residence in Western parts of the world including America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and European countries. In recent years, they have also moved to Asian countries including Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries. With the aggressive economic strategies, China requires skilled professionals and these highly talented individual Chinese have been lured back to China with high salaries and perks to work for big private corporations and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). They are considered talented Mainland Chinese. Among this group, many have retained their foreign citizenship but resettled in the Mainland China environment.

The last group are the transient Chinese with foreign nationality and who work as expatriates and guest workers. Among them is also a sizeable group of foreign students with Chinese ethnicity. They come primarily from Southeast Asia, but also from all over the world. These different groups of Chinese within the Mainland Chinese universe are summarized in Figure 1.2.

### **Migration, transnationalism, and global intersection**

The first big wave of migration of the nineteenth century were the Chinese from the two southern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong in China who embarked on an outward migration journey to different parts of the world in search of greater economic opportunities. Poverty had been rampant in imperial China right through the Republican era where the majority of the peasantry were tenant farmers subjected to oppressive landowners. In Fujian and Guangdong, apart from tenant farmers, there were smallholders.

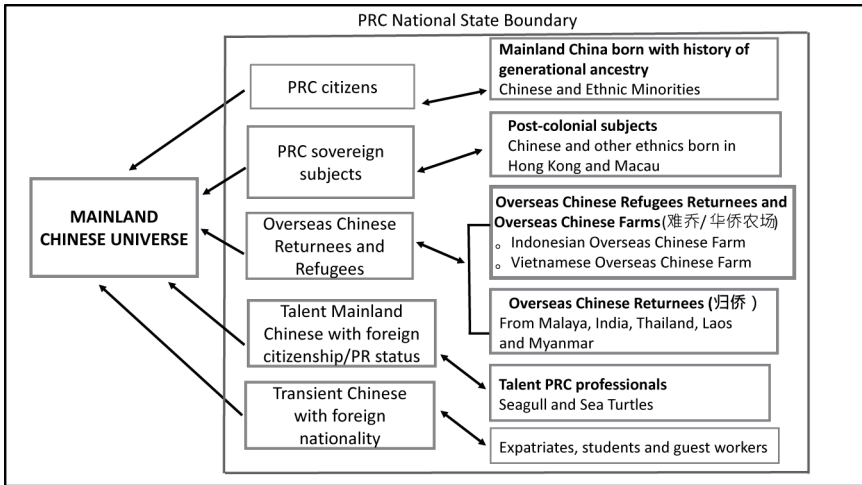


Figure 1.2 Mainland Chinese universe.

However, there was insufficient land to feed the growing population. As such, the majority of peasants were seeking new economic opportunities outside the region and across the oceans. At around the same time, gold mines were opening up across the world, in North America and Australia, while tin mines were opened in the Malay Peninsula. Along with this was the opening up of various types of plantations including rubber plantations in the Malay Peninsula, gambier plantations in the Indonesian archipelago, and sugar cane plantations in Central America. To facilitate the transportation of gold and tin ores, there was a need for the construction of railway tracks and roads in these regions. All these required labourers who could withstand the back-breaking and long hours of hard labour. Chinese labourers as well as Indian labourers fulfilled the requirements.

Hence from the nineteenth century onwards, Chinese from Fujian and Guangdong began a long arduous journey moving northwards and southwards. From the regions of Kaiping, Sunde (Sun Tak), and Si-yi (Sye-Yap), Shantou and others in Guangdong, the Cantonese-speaking Chinese sojourned to North America and Australia and helped open up the gold mines as well as railroads (Mountford and Tuffnell, eds., 2018). Some also made it to the Nanyang region. From Fujian province, Fujianese, Chaozhouese, and Hakka-speaking Chinese from the regions of Anxi, Nanan, Yongchun, Yongding, and Xiamen (Amoy) migrated to the Nanyang region (Purcell, 1967).

During the early period, these Chinese migrated as sojourners with an intention to work on a temporary basis, earn sufficiently to rebuild their home, and start a small business in their village, and subsequently retired in their home village. Hence during the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century,