

Yos Santasombat *Editor*

Transnational Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia

Case Studies from Thailand, Malaysia,
and Singapore

 Springer

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This research monograph is about contemporary transnational Chinese mobile practices with special focuses on three ASEAN countries: Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, and their interactions with the ethnic Chinese communities in the host countries. Field research and data collection started in 2018. The last phase of our research was rudely disrupted by the pandemic resulting in the inevitable delay of publication. This volume is the fruit of collective efforts made by a team of dedicated researchers who have worked with, argued with, and assisted each other for many years. I am grateful to all the researchers and contributing authors for their untiring research efforts, endurance, and cooperation.

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Yos Santasombat

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Transnational Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia: An Introduction



Yos Santasombat

Transnational Chinese Diaspora and Mobile Practices

Transnational Chinese diaspora is constantly in flux. The term refers to extraterritorial Chinese populations, including temporary, permanent, or circular migrants, as well as their descendants (Zhou, 2017: xi). The Chinese diaspora has been, and still is, one of the largest and oldest groups in the world. History has witnessed successive waves of migration from China to the outside world since time immemorial and from Chinese diasporic communities to other countries since World War II. The transnational Chinese mobility can be divided into five distinguishable moments delineated as follows: (a) The early history of the Chinese trading practices in Southeast Asia and colonial invasion in the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries; (b) the transnational labor movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century; (c) the nationalist movement of the early twentieth century; (d) the period of nation-building and the cold war era; and (e) the post-1978 China's economic reform in the era of globalization and neoliberalism (Dongen & Liu, 2018: 35–36). The latest Chinese diasporic moment, the focus of our study, has just begun.

Chinese diaspora has been central to economic transformation and significant sociocultural and political changes in Southeast Asia for centuries. Scholars of Chinese studies (Wang, 1991, 2002; Suryadinato 2007; Rae & Witzel, 2008, Barrett, 2012) have well-documented the role of the overseas Chinese community and the development of Southeast Asian economies. Conventional thinking was that the China-centered allegiance was replaced by assimilation to local cultures after the Communist Revolution in the 1950s (Skinner, 1957, 1958), and the ethnic Chinese have become Southeast Asians (Suryadinato, 1997). Over the past few decades, however, the fundamental changes taking place in China and in Chinese diasporic communities have challenged this conventional wisdom. The rise of China as a

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regional and global power as well as the vibrant business networks among the ethnic Chinese and People's Republic of China (PRC) Chinese have led some observers to look once again at the integration process of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. Are we witnessing an oscillation between de-sinicization and re-sinicization of the Southeast Asian Chinese?

This book is about contemporary Chinese transnational mobile practices with special focuses on the ethnographic exploration of the lives, experiences, views, and narratives of the Chinese mobile subjects in three ASEAN countries: Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, and their interactions with the ethnic Chinese communities in these countries.

Two critical interpretations shape the starting point of our research. First, we consider mobility/migration to be an integral part of Chinese socio-economic life rather than its exception (Kuhn, 2008). Since Admiral Zheng He's first expedition in 1405, the trajectories of growth in China's maritime trade had provided the impetus for both internal and international migrations of Chinese diaspora over the past centuries (Suryadinata, 2007, Amrith, 2011). We see mobility as an essential part of a process of adaptation that enabled Chinese families to deal with changing environments. Chinese mobility was briefly interrupted when Mao came to power in 1949 till his death in 1976 (Karl, 2010). Since the going out policy was initiated in 1999 by the PRC to promote investments abroad, it has introduced numerous forms of support to assist domestic companies in developing a global strategy to exploit and utilize opportunities in the expanding local and international markets (Yos, 2017). Since the launch of the going out policy, interest in overseas investment by State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and private companies has exponentially increased. Some of the most prominent Chinese business and professional institutions are expanding their investments in the international markets. Along with this expansion, the world has encountered a massive movement of PRC Chinese out of their homeland.

Secondly, we think of the PRC as a state keen in stimulating and molding mobility within and across its national borders. Being a tightly-structured political organization, which controls every fabric of social life of its citizens, the PRC government and its going out policy has been a proactive, coordinated machine with all its agents acting in unison to facilitate transnational flows of the Chinese to go global. Since 2001, PRC's economic policy has pushed its SOEs and national champions to go global to develop Chinese brands that can conquer the world market (Callahan, 2011: 9). Chinese transnationalism arose before the turn of a new millennium with a global shift from Fordism to globalized regimes of flexible accumulation (Ong & Nonini, 1997). Transnational forces operate alongside the centralized policy of going out and encourage transnational linkages (Barabanseva, 2011: 8–9). The processes of rethinking nation and nationalism (Darr, 2011), the art of rewriting school textbooks on national history (Guo, 2004), reconstructing a Confucian imagined community and reconstituting a standardized mother tongue (Hartig, 2016) are all essential parts of the PRC state's production of national identities that go hand in hand with the formation of transnational subjectivities in constructing an image of the

modern Chinese patriots. The production of national identities and the formation of transnational subjectivities reinforce each other to strengthen its relevance and primacy.

Several scholars (Liu, 2005, Callahan, 2008, Barabanseva, 2011) have documented the re-emergence of overseas Chinese nationalism that has been mainly boosted by Beijing's transnational strategies seeking to facilitate the growing number of new migrants (*Xin yimin*) in accordance to the going out policy. Duara (1997, 2005) proposed the term "deterritorialized nationalism" to refer to the new form of nationalism among the transnational Chinese. Deterritorialized nationalism has a different reality from the territorial nation. People in deterritorialized nations such as transnational diaspora live in different places and deal with different groups of people. Inevitably, they have to confront and overcome challenges arising for the varied situational contexts. *Xin Yimin* or new transnational migrants differ from their predecessors due to the more extensive and intensive linkages that they have established with the motherland. They are culturally and politically attached to PRC through modern education, state policies and state-supported intermediaries such as Chinese-language newspapers and magazines, radio and television programs, and websites. Networks of *Xin yimin* who are linked by shared ideas of history, culture, and identity have constituted an imagined China that transcends geopolitical borders. The PRC government has also actively engaged with its diaspora through various kinds of support for overseas Chinese organizations that perform cultural and entrepreneurial activities in many foreign countries and regions.

The multiplicity of PRC agencies not only shapes transnational mobile practices but also forms their subjectivities. The scope of these agencies often exceeds the territorial boundaries of the political construct of the state. *Qiaowu* (To, 2014), for instance, refers to the government agencies responsible for extra-territorial policies towards the Chinese diaspora. The main purpose of these agencies is to cultivate, influence and manage Chinese diaspora as part of a global transnational project to rally support for China.

Has the PRC government been successful in its extra-territorial policies? While this is a difficult question, Barabanseva (2011) provided a partial answer when she cited the cases of Tibetan uprising in 2008 that sparked international outcry over PRC treatments of its ethnic minority and subsequent vehement protests by Chinese overseas students against the Western media coverage of the Tibetan incidents that were deemed as anti-Chinese. As millions of Chinese overseas students have been one of the prime targets of the PRC's global project to rally support for China and cultivate a deep feeling and commitment towards China, various groups amongst them have embraced it (Chan, 2009). The sense of patriotism and loyalty is not necessarily confined to the territorial integrity within the nation-state. Transnationalism radically transforms the conventional meaning of territory and sovereignty. On the one hand, the state has continually attempted to cultivate and influence the transnational identities of Chinese diaspora, but on the other hand, individuals and communities have constantly struggled to resist, subvert, or adapt to such influence.

Benedict Anderson (1991) contended that nationalism emerged once people can see themselves as part of an "imagined community" culminating from a shared

language, printed capitalism, and the educational pilgrimages that ambitious youth have made to national centers. Building on Anderson's concept of nationalism, Aihwa Ong (1997) suggested that the imagined communities could be applied to imaginaries pertaining to the reconfiguration of global capitalism. Vanessa Fong (2011), in her study of transnational Chinese students, argued further that the availability of the increasingly globalized nature of the media, language, and educational pilgrimages encourages Chinese youth to aspire to belong to an imagined developed world community composed of mobile, wealthy, educated and well-connected people worldwide. Transnational Chinese students believe that pilgrimages to developed countries would not only help them become flexible citizens of the developed world but also facilitate efforts to make their homeland part of the developed world.

Over the past few decades, millions of Chinese families, especially from the expanding urban middle class, have struggled to send their children abroad with the hope that college education abroad could transform them into citizens of the developed world even if they would eventually return to China for permanent residence (Fong, 2011: 35). Contemporary transnational Chinese are well-educated, well-traveled, well-connected, and well-informed. They can navigate global flows in strategic and flexible ways. The increasingly globalized world and information flow through the internet make them more aware of the challenges and opportunities that the world presents them. Where transnational migration was once a one-way move from the country of origin to a desirable country of choice, it is now more common to see transnational migrants returning to their homes or moving to a third country and beyond in response to available opportunities.

From the perspectives of the host countries, the questions of integration, embeddedness, and loyalty are paramount. If transnational Chinese migration is to help host countries maintain vibrant and innovative economies, these societies are going to have to invest in innovative integration measures and strategies to make it possible for those with high skills to contribute to the economy (Zhang & Duncan, 2014: 4). From the PRC's perspectives, the central government not only legitimizes dual social embeddedness or "dual allegiance" (Nyiri, 2004: 120) but celebrates transnational diaspora as a patriotic act, thus encouraging transnational mobile practices among the younger generations of PRC citizens. Transnational Chinese diaspora is celebrated as patriotic members of imagined communities of modernity, a hybridized third culture (Nonini & Ong, 1997: 11, Callahan, 2004: 48) that is mobile, deterritorialized but contingent on China.

Our research focuses on the questions of integration and social embeddedness. Is it possible that the transnational Chinese diaspora be simultaneously embedded into two or more nation-states and geopolitical spheres? Should their integration at Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and their maintenance of transnational ties with China be mutually exclusive? It is hypothesized that the Chinese transnational migrants do not necessarily assimilate to any host countries; however, they develop multiple social embeddedness where they acquire a deepening sense of integration with the host country while continuing intensive transnational connections with the homeland simultaneously.

Social Embeddedness, Capital, and Person-Centered Ethnography

Among the complex interrelations between transnational Chinese diaspora and their rapidly changing socio-economic and political environment, their mobile practices shift and are transformed under changing circumstances, networks, and business opportunities. Transnational entrepreneurs are never aimless individualistic wanderers. Their actions are purposive and interested. Economic life is by necessity socially embedded; business organizations, enterprises and markets are entangled in social networks. The concept of social embeddedness implies that actors, actions, and relations are in essence ingredients of social production and processes.

The concept of embeddedness was coined by Karl Polanyi whose lifelong study of the linkages between economy and society ranged from the reciprocal exchange and other traditional customs in the South Pacific economies to the political economy of the institutions regulating the global economy in the nineteenth century. In *The Great Transformation* (1944), Polanyi provided a historical description, an analysis of the emergence of the market economy and the destruction of the traditional economies. Polanyi (1944) argued that contrary to popular belief, markets have been of marginal importance in traditional societies throughout history. In traditional pre-capitalist societies, the economic system had been conceived of as a part of the broader society governed by social customs and norms as much as by market principles of profit and exchange. The rise of capitalism involved political efforts to dismantle the linkages between the economy and the social environment. The market economy emerged after a prolonged battle against traditions as a separate domain of human activity disconnected from the ‘social institutions’ in which it was fundamentally embedded.

More recently, the concept of embeddedness has also been adopted by Mark Granovetter (1985) to refer to social entanglements of economic actors or how social networks are implicated in economic transactions. The concept of embeddedness expresses the notion that social actors exist within relational, institutional, and cultural contexts and cannot be seen as atomized decision-makers in maximizing their own utilities. Economic action is embedded in concrete ongoing systems of social relations. The embedded actor exists in a set of social relationships with others whose choices influence and affect his or her own choices as well. This implies that the choices actors make are not wholly determined by facts internal to their spheres of individual deliberation and beliefs. Actions are influenced by the observed behavior and expectations of others. The immediate utility cannot fully explain the meaning of social relations. As a conceptual, embeddedness prioritizes the different conditions within which social action takes place.

The concept of social embeddedness with its emphasis on action and actor is in line with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which stresses that all action “is interested” (Bourdieu, 1977:178). The French sociologist extended the logic of economic calculation to all practices as oriented towards the maximization of material and symbolic profit. Thus, material interest and symbolic interest are perceived as two equally objective forms of interest in every human society. More recently, Bourdieu (1990:

16) also spoke of action as “strategy” to convey the idea that individual practices are basically interested where actors attempt to derive advantages from situations.

In Bourdieu’s view, all actors are capital holders and investors seeking profits. He extends Marx’s idea of capital to all forms of power, whether they be material, cultural, social or symbolic. In everyday life, individuals and groups draw upon a variety of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic resources in order to maintain and enhance their positions in the social order. These resources are capital when they function as a social relation of power, that is, when they become objects of struggle as valued resources. In peasant societies, the livelihood of every household depends not only on its land, animals and farming instruments but also on its kinship ties and networks of alliances that represent a heritage of commitments and debts of honor. According to Bourdieu (1977: 178), this is “a capital of rights and duties built up in the course of successive generations and providing an additional source of strength which can be called upon when extraordinary situations break in upon the daily routine.” In modern societies, access to jobs and income in the labor market depends upon cultural capital in the form of educational credentials and work experiences as well as social capital in the form of networks of family members, friends and colleagues.

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, as Swartz (1997: 75–77) has noted, covers a wide variety of resources including educational credentials, skills and expertise, and such things as verbal facility and aesthetic preferences. This concept emerged from his attempt to explain unequal scholastic achievements of children coming from families with different educational though similar social backgrounds. He contended that the concept offers an alternative explanation for the received wisdom attributing academic excellence or failure to natural aptitudes such as intelligence or giftedness. School success, as Bourdieu argued, is better explained by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu than by measures of individual talent or achievement. From his research, Bourdieu (1986: 242–243) distinguished between different forms of cultural capital delineated as follows: (a) its embodied form as internalized culture through socialization constituting schemes of appreciation and understanding; (b) its objectified form in material objects such as books, works of art and scientific instrument; and (c) its institutionalized form by which Bourdieu refers to as the educational credential system.

Bourdieu’s contribution to the sociological study of power relations is the forceful illustration that various forms of capital—economic, social, cultural and symbolic—can be interchangeable. Yet the interchange is not equally possible in all directions and may vary from society to society. In general, economic capital appears to convert more easily into a cultural capital and social capital than vice versa. In other words, certain goods and services can be obtained through the economic capital, whereas other goods and services are accessible only through the social and cultural capital. Hence, while culture and social networks are forms of capital, they are not exactly on equal footing with money and property.

The concept of culture as capital persuasively calls attention to the power dimension of cultural dispositions and resources, especially the ways in which cultural

capital can be transformed into symbolic power. Bourdieu (1986: 242–250) insightfully argued that the traditional Marxist emphasis on economic and class structures underestimates the importance of the symbolic dimension of power relations. He contended that even in industrial societies the principal form of domination has shifted from coercion and the threat of violence to those of symbolic manipulation. This emphasis has brought him to focus on the role that cultural processes, cultural producers and institutions play in symbolic manipulation and power relations. In other words, there is symbolic power as well as economic power.

Symbolic power is the power of domination through legitimation, or what Marx termed as ideology. Symbolic capital, like other forms of capital, can be accumulated, changed to other forms of capital, or used to legitimize certain power relations. Bourdieu assigned a key role to cultural producers (such as teachers, writers, artists and religious leaders) in legitimating the social order by producing symbolic capital. Cultural producers mediate the relationships between culture and class, between infrastructure and superstructure, by constituting cultural markets or fields that are vested with their own interests.

In this research, we employ an actor-oriented approach (Yeung, 2004) to examine how transnational diaspora as cultural producers and socio-economic actors accumulate and strategically utilize and change different forms of capital in everyday action to maximize their material and symbolic benefits under particular circumstances and transnational locations of belonging. Data on the Chinese diaspora are gathered through intensive interviews and collection of life history materials.

Life history or person-centered ethnography is a method of qualitative research employed in anthropology since the 1920s when Paul Radin wrote *Crashing Thunder*, a narrative of a Winnebago Indian, which reflected a fascinating insight into an American Indian culture (Langness, 1965: 8–10). Since then, person-centered ethnography has been perceived as a method to elucidate the workings of society and culture through personal narratives. Life history allows the researcher to probe deeper into a person's micro-historical experiences within a macro-historical framework. Life-history narratives challenge the researcher to understand an individual's experiences, current attitudes and behaviors including how these attributes have been influenced by initial decisions made at another time and in another place. Hence, it is a common practice for researchers to follow a chronological path to interviews, that is, to begin with the subject's family history, early childhood before proceeding to other stages of life till the present.

In *The Children of Sanchez*, Oscar Lewis (1961) juxtaposed a number of life histories from within a family to give a cumulative, multi-faceted, panoramic view of each individual and of the family as a whole, which represents many aspects of lower-class Mexican life. In this sense, the person-centered ethnography provides a linkage between subjectivities, class and cultural practices. Another writing, *Nisa*, presents a life-history of a Kung woman in her own words as described to the anthropologist Marjorie Shostak (1981). Her narrative presents a powerful challenge to the prevalent misconception of gender equality and egalitarian life of hunters and gatherers in Africa's Kalahari dessert. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in "narrative" across the human and social sciences due to its potential to emphasize

subjectivity, agency, a plurality of viewpoints and the richness and complexity of human affairs not only to anthropologists but historians, geographers, psychologists and philosophers as well (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Caplan, 1997).

The centrality of our collection of transnational Chinese migrants' life histories is concerned with the "embeddedness" or "legitimacy" of economic activity. In daily life, capital holders make decisions based upon self-interest and rules of competition as constant factors conditioning their actions. As with Granovetter (1985), we maintain that the ongoing concrete systems of social relations are another factor influencing socio-economic action. For Weber (1978), an action is economically-oriented if it is concerned with achieving certain goals. These goals can be defined as specific, concrete, real or imagined advantages or opportunities for present or future use. Economic action is differentiated from economic social action by the absence of reference to the behavior and expectations of others. An action is "social" insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the expectations of others. Weber also distinguished between "associative" and "communal" relationship. Communal relationship entails a sense of belonging together whilst the associative relationship has to do with rational, calculated agreement typically involving material interests. Weber (1978: 41) contended that no matter how calculative such associative relationship may be—as that of an entrepreneur to his customers—it is quite possible for it to involve emotional attachments, which transcend its utilitarianism. This communal component is "social embeddedness," a value we can discern from the observable actions and self-reflexive narratives in the life-histories of the transnational Chinese subjects.

The analytical focus of our endeavor is on the micro level of social relations, networks, interactions, cultural content and meanings that inform actions rather than institutional patterns. In the world of diaspora, transnational migrants utilize their acquired life orientations and their specific ways of engaging business opportunities for social negotiations. The personal experiences of the transnational migrants throughout life impinge upon their business agency or their specific way of doing business. However, rather than reducing the Chinese diaspora to their business roles, our research views them as full persons with broad social involvements they have become entangled with at different stages of life. Hence, it is pertinent to explore the following issues: (1) How have diverse ethnic and gender experiences impinged upon the entrepreneurial forms, economic social actions and communal relationships of the transnational Chinese? (2) How do transnational mobile practices evoke a tension between the migrants' cultural capital (knowledge and acquired skills) and the requirements of the host countries' situations in which they operate? (3) For a business to succeed, what types of cultural creativity, meaning-making and innovations are required in specific socio-cultural contexts? (4) How are market niches created through social engagement with diverse forms of people from different cultures and ethnicities in face-to-face interaction? (5) What are the mechanisms and institutions utilized in the process of embedding in local forms of sociality? (6) As business profits may be used to support a local charity, ethnic associations, or religious obligations, does religious affiliation and conversion after migration (Tan, 2015) allow the