

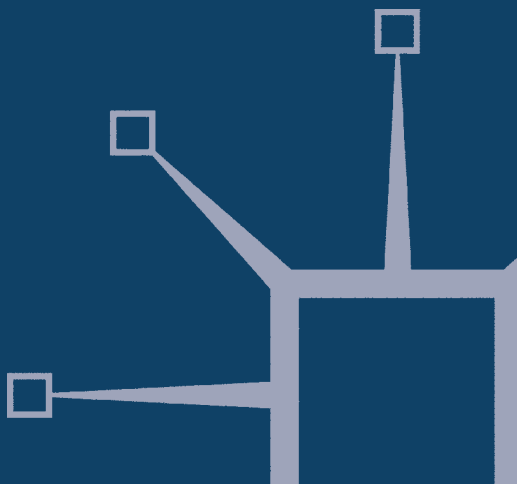
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# The Chinese in Britain, 1800–Present

Economy, Transnationalism, Identity

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Gregor Benton and  
Edmund Terence Gomez



## The Chinese in Britain, 1800–Present

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*For Shen Yuanfang and Sharmani Gabriel*

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# Foreword

This book magnificently fills a puzzling gap: until now, there has been no full, historically grounded study of one of Britain's most important, if smaller, migrant communities: the Chinese. Covering the ground from 1800 to present day, the authors have combined historical research of great depth and rigour with an analysis that questions received wisdoms, and refuses to accept easy answers about the nature of an immigrant population's relationship with the country in which it settles.

This book is a welcome addition to our series in transnational history, for it has something powerful to say to both parts of the series description. For historians of Britain and China alike, there is plenty here to shatter assumptions about the history of either of those countries being enclosed within borders. How many readers will have known about the Chinese presence at the Normandy landings, the moment of Europe's deliverance from tyranny, for which the Chinese were praised at the time, only to be forgotten and discarded a few years later by racist British immigration law? How well known are the attempts by both the Nationalist and the Communist parties to place activists in groups not only in Britain but in a variety of other European countries in the 1920s and 1930s?

The book makes powerful and provocative challenges to the field of transnational studies. The authors stress the importance of historicizing our understanding of transnational phenomena, saying that 'a major shortcoming of transnational studies is their failure to work more consistently in historical depth, without which diasporic communities cannot be fully grasped'. The book questions the nature of ethnic identities proposed by more present-centred analyses of transnationalism among overseas Chinese communities. As it points out, there are clear cross-border influences that have shaped the Chinese community in Britain, such as information from the larger Chinese-American community, whose experiences were reported and transmitted to their British counterparts. However, other frameworks which undermine the idea of a monolithic national or ethnic identity, such as class or provincial differences, have also shaped the community in notable ways. Not all readers will agree completely with the arguments made here, but at the same time, they will undoubtedly have to engage with the depth and seriousness of the scholarship that underpins them. This series takes

pride in taking transnational studies forward by publishing a work which questions key tenets of transnationalism as a framework: for as in other elements of the scholarly enterprise, it is only through such questioning that the sharpness and usefulness of such theoretical frameworks can be maintained, rather than simply becoming a new orthodoxy. Furthermore, we welcome this book as it takes its place as the state-of-the-art study of the Chinese experience in Britain.

Rana Mitter

Akira Iriye

Oxford, February 2007

# Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is the outcome of nearly a decade of collaboration and friendship. The ideas that animate it can be traced back to 1996, when we won funding from the British Academy for a study on the Chinese economy in contemporary Britain (carried out by Gomez). Our primary interest was to find out whether or to what extent culture and shared identities determined the economic activities of ethnic communities, in this case Britain's Chinese community. This aim sprang from our concern that numerous theories based on essentialised patterns of enterprise development among minority Chinese communities in various national contexts were beginning to gain currency. These studies tended not only to homogenise the business styles of Chinese communities of the diaspora but brought into question their claim to national identity in their countries of residence. We felt that a corrective to these studies was needed, as they dangerously distorted the processes of identity formation, particularly the emergence of national affiliations and identification within immigrant groups and their descendants. Some of these ideas were first developed in Gomez's study on the economic history of the Chinese in Malaysia.

Our ideas on the links between culture, identity, economy, and transnationalism were broadened in 2000 when we began a comparative study on Chinese economy and society in Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia, as part of the Transnational Communities programme run by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award No. L214252046). In 1999, Benton received funding (from the AHRC) for a study on the history of Chinese settlements in Western Europe that also tackled these issues. These projects have resulted in numerous publications, listed in the bibliography under Benton or Gomez or both.

While the ESRC and AHRC projects were underway, Benton proposed a book on the 200-year history of Chinese migrations to Britain to show that Chinese migrants to the United Kingdom had come from different regions in Asia, to capture identity shifts over time, and to trace how these different identities served to divide more than unify this community. Benton intended his research to encompass several related topics, including the early economy of these migrant communities, their social, cultural, and political institutions and transnational activities, the

ethnic identifications of ethnic Chinese born and raised in Britain, and the causes and effects of British sinophobia. Our earlier research findings and writings helped clarify issues central to the present volume, enriched it factually and conceptually, and provided some illuminating comparative perspectives. We collaborated on the book's theoretical framework and on formulating its research questions and methods. Benton researched and produced Chapter 2, Chapters 4 to 7, and the historical section of Chapter 3, which deals with the economy in the period before Chinese immigrants and ethnic Chinese began joining the professions and the business mainstream in large numbers; and he collected the photographs. We jointly wrote those parts of Chapter 3 which deal with the contemporary non-catering sector, largely on the basis of Gomez's research. We also co-authored Chapters 1 and 8. Those chapters authored solely by Benton benefited from Gomez's commentary and input and drew on our earlier publications on ethnic and migrant Chinese in Britain and other countries. In that sense, the book is a collaborative undertaking throughout.

We would like to thank a number of people who helped us with this volume. The ideas for it were first formulated when we were both based at the Department of East Asian Studies in Leeds University. Fleming Christiansen helped prepare the proposal for the ESRC project and provided in-depth comments on the manuscript. We would also like to acknowledge the help and support of Don Rimmington, Delia Davin, Penelope Francks, and Tom Wingfield, all members of the Department of East Asian Studies when we first began formulating our ideas for this study, and of Steve Vertovec and Jeffrey Henderson, leaders of the Transnational Communities programme. The issues raised in the volume have been presented at numerous conferences and seminars over the past decade. We are grateful to colleagues at these meetings for helping us refine our arguments. The staff at Companies House were extremely helpful when Gomez sought their advice for his research on business enterprises in the United Kingdom owned by ethnic Chinese. We would also like to thank the businesspeople and members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in the United Kingdom who kindly consented to be interviewed. Deng Lilan of Nankai University spent some time at Cardiff University working with Benton on the history of Chinese transnationalism in Britain, and provided much useful data that Benton incorporated into the study. (Deng Lilan's stay in Britain was funded by the Sino-British Fellowship Trust and the K. C. Wong Fellowship scheme.) Benton also visited the Overseas Chinese Office in Tianmen, Hubei. Finally, Benton would like to acknowledge the support

of his friends and colleagues in the School of History and Archaeology at Cardiff University, where much of the book was written.

The research was done at the libraries of the London School of Economics, the School of Oriental and African Studies, Leeds University, Liverpool University, and Manchester University; the archives sections of Bethnal Green Public Library, Liverpool Public Library, Manchester Central Library, and Cardiff Central Library; the Public Records Office and the British Library; the Tower Hamlets Local History Archive; the National Archives of Singapore; the Hong Kong Public Records Office; the National Library of Australia; the National Museum of Labour History, Manchester; the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University; the Working Class Movement Library at Salford; the Institute for Social History in Amsterdam; the Gemeentearchief in Amsterdam; the Centre de Recherches sur la Chine Moderne et Contemporaine, the EHESS Centre Chine, and the Bibliothèque Inter-universitaire des Langues Orientales in Paris; Prato's Centro di Ricerca, Documentazione, Servizi per la Comunità Cinese; Beijing Library and Shanghai Library; and the Free China Centre in London.

Other individuals who helped in various ways include Bobby Chan, Graham Chan, Thomas Chan, Chen Yandong, James Chin, Jenny Clegg, Charles Foley, Judith Gordon, Polly Green, Mary Heidhues, Jiang Guowei, Barbara King, Richard Kirby, Jabez Lam, Tony Lane, Kam Lee, Tong Soon Lee, Li Wei, Rubin Lien, Andrew Potter, Bill Shang, Shen Yuanfang, Wilfred Sng, Pamela So, Frank Soo, Dylan Sung, Kenny Tam, Harry Tharp, Geoff Wade, Wan Hong, Ian Welch, Wen Liangsheng, Ye Zhen, and Zhou Nanjing. To all of them, our grateful thanks.

We are grateful to Akira Iriye and Rana Mitter, editors of Palgrave's Transnational History series, for recommending this study for publication. We thank Michael Strang, History publisher at Palgrave, for submitting our manuscript to the series editors for review and Ruth Ireland for preparing it for publication. We are extremely indebted to Padma Narayanan, a most gracious Project Manager at Integra, who dealt patiently with our many questions and problems when the manuscript was being copyedited.

# 1

## Introduction

This book traces successive waves of Chinese migration to Britain from the early nineteenth century through to the present and assesses the economic and social standing of Chinese in this country over the past two centuries and more. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new generation of British-born Chinese had emerged that can be classified as middle class in terms of educational qualifications and earning capacity, a development that reflects the community's greatly improved economic position.<sup>1</sup> The emergence of this new generation of British Chinese – together with similar developments in other ethnic minorities – has generated new debates about the implications for British society of 'identity change' among migrants and their descendants.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of their entry into mainstream society and economy, British-born Chinese are still commonly viewed by white British as 'outsiders', 'migrants', or members of a 'diaspora' who occupy 'spaces' in British society. This style of reasoning is strongly connected to studies that depict Chinese in Britain as a transnational community, constantly on the move across national borders, rather than as a constituent of the British nation.

The book presents a meta-narrative of the social and economic history of the Chinese in Britain. It strives to capture the past and present experiences of the community at the grassroots. Economic and social transitions and different waves of Chinese migration have contributed to the development of multiple and overlapping identities in the community. At first a largely disenfranchised group without much education or skills and employed primarily in catering and laundering, much of the community today is highly educated, socially mobile, and increasingly represented in the professions and the hi-tech sector. Transnational Chinese companies, predominantly from Asia, are prominent in various

sectors of the British economy, including manufacturing, port services, hotels, banking, and retailing.<sup>3</sup>

The different waves of Chinese migration over the past two centuries resulted in the arrival of different types of ethnic Chinese, in terms of place of origin and class background. What sectors did these migrants look for jobs in? What economic fields did the entrepreneurs among them venture into as they sought ways of surviving in an alien setting? What communal and political associations did they form? How far did such institutions adopt a transnational approach, so that they could maintain ties with the Chinese homeland and preserve their culture, language, and identity? How did institutions evolve and how far did they help reinforce ethnic-Chinese identity in the long term? To what extent have new generations of Chinese distinguished themselves in terms of ethnic and national identity from the migrant generation? In what ways have members of the migrant cohort become ethnically distinct from their kin in the homeland after a long period of settlement in Britain? Why do such differentiations happen? Has social mobility and generational change led to 'ethnic passing', that is, to the decline of a strong Chinese identity?

By asking these questions and focusing on the issues of migration, association-building, community-building, and enterprise development, we show that transnational politics, business, and social organisation happen at multiple levels. The Chinese in Britain are divided along numerous lines, including lines of class and sub-ethnic difference, evident in the intra-ethnic relations among Chinese in the labour market and in relevant economic sectors. These cleavages hinder attempts by Chinese to mobilise collectively against the discrimination and racism they have met in Britain.

A study of migration patterns and community formation among the Chinese and an analysis of their changing social and economic profile form the basis for our analysis of identity formation among members of this small yet diverse population. Their associations and economic activities show how they relate to British society and how the white population impinges on their world. This dual approach also yields insights into issues raised by transnational studies concerning the organisation of capital flows and identity formation among migrants and diasporic individuals.

Among the fundamental factors that determine the decision to migrate and shape identity among migrants and their descendants are state policies and socio-economic conditions. By looking at the state and its policies and at societal relations between native British and

Chinese migrants and their descendants, we identify key factors in identity formation or re-formation. While social and economic conditions persuaded ethnic Chinese from predominantly Asian countries to migrate to and settle in Britain, state policies have had a major impact on inter- and intra-ethnic relations and forms of identity. We use a structural and historical perspective to analyse Chinese social and transnational networks, including community associations, business tie-ups, ways in which these linkages have evolved, and the impact they have had on intra- and inter-ethnic relations. Concentrating on Chinese social and economic activities at the grassroots, both within and beyond Britain, permits us to take into account the specific historical circumstances that shaped the community's evolution and to assess the impact on it of state policies.<sup>4</sup> This mode of analysis brings into focus the rapid changes that Chinese societies in Britain are undergoing – changes to which the British state and white majority have so far failed to adapt.

Transnationalism, a concept much in vogue in studies on ethnic minorities, has given rise to scholarship that claims major theoretical insights into how common ethnicity helps engender global flows of capital and information through international business networks and influences enterprise development. Transnational studies on Chinese and Indians posit a pan-ethnic unity in these diasporas that promotes interlocking economic and social ties and facilitates the development of their enterprises around the globe. New means of communication have supposedly fortified these transnational networks, reputedly a key characteristic of 'ethnic capitalism'.<sup>5</sup>

While transnational studies assume a high degree of diasporic identity,<sup>6</sup> our historical perspective reveals profound differences in ethnic communities, both within and beyond national boundaries. We show how state policies and public discourses on ethnicity sustain, undermine, or re-invent notions of ethnic and national identity. Immigration laws, for example, have played a crucial role in influencing identity formation among British Chinese. British immigration legislation has transformed Chinese patterns of kinship and homeland ties. When migrants were allowed to import their families, they stopped returning to their places of origin and began to see Britain as their home.

By adopting the host country as 'home', migrants throw into question core arguments of transnational studies. Ethnic minorities that have lived in a country for more than one generation are even more resistant to the transnational label. To apply it indiscriminately can diminish the notion of national identity among people who do not continue

to cross borders and reinforce stereotypes in the majority community about ethnic minorities' supposed lack of a sense of loyalty or belonging to the country they live in. In short, transnational theories have little to say about transformations of identity and the emergence of new forms of national identity.

To discover how Chinese define themselves and how others define them, we look at the links between members of the Chinese community in Britain and abroad. We contest transnational theories that homogenise migrants of the same ethnic background. Instead, we stress the differences among the Chinese, differences upon which new identities form and reform in a seemingly inexhaustible cycle. While they may all belong to the same ethnic group, Chinese do not have the uniform features ascribed to them by transnational theory.

In line with this observation, we note an absence of community among the Chinese in Britain of the sort bonded by ethnic identity. In so far as an ascriptive community exists, it is divided by class, language, place of origin, period of arrival, and reason for coming, as well as by physical segregation within Britain. Not all Chinese come from China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. They lack common genealogies or symbols, boundary markers of an ethnic community with shared identities. They lack the bonds of a common religion, unlike South Asians of the Muslim and Hindu faiths. Instead, the community is heterogeneous and individual identities are increasingly hybridised.

Chinese migrants to Britain over the past 200 years have found different ways of coping with their new environment, depending on the overall context and the opportunities available at the point of migration. In view of their differences, they rarely aspire to congruence. The numerous social and economic institutions that represent their interests, few of which survive for more than a few months or years, are evidence of their collective incoherence. Most of their historic associations have been fraught with divisions and ceased to operate. However, this diversity has not, on the whole, been recognised, either by host institutions or social scientists.

Paradoxically, while the Chinese lack distinctiveness and communality, they are made to feel as if they were a unified whole by the way in which the white majority views them. State policies are another reason for this paradox. Governments have shown little understanding of the issue of generational change and social mobility among Chinese, whose largely uneducated parents have raised children whose educational achievements have allowed them to climb quickly up the class ladder. This mobility strongly influences identity formation among the

new generation, whose self-view, in terms of national identity, differs strikingly from that of their migrant parents.

## The problem with transnationalism

Transnationalism is an emergent, rather ill-defined field whose distinguishing features Alejandro Portes and others have tried to fix. Following Robert Merton's three conditions for 'establishing a phenomenon', they confine the term 'transnational' to activities that involve 'a significant proportion of persons in the relevant universe' (principally, immigrants and their hometown reciprocators), are stable and regular rather than fleeting or spasmodic, and differ in content from activities captured by existing concepts such as immigration (the transnational migrants' contacts across national borders were sustained and regular, those of the immigrants were erratic).<sup>7</sup>

The history of the transnational concept is relatively short. Writing about capitalism and transnationalism, Masao Miyoshi drew attention in 1993 to the evolution of 'multinational' corporations into 'transnational' corporations, able through their international web of investment networks to operate across national borders. In drawing this distinction, Miyoshi argued that a TNC, unlike an MNC, 'might no longer be tied to its nation of origin but is adrift and mobile, ready to settle anywhere and to exploit any state including its own, as long as the affiliation serves its own interests'.<sup>8</sup> Manuel Castells, on the other hand, noted that MNCs 'down-size' by outsourcing jobs as a way of lowering production costs.<sup>9</sup> This outsourcing has led to the development of 'network enterprise' in which a densely interlocking group of firms engages in a range of industries and operates in different countries.

Castells' formulation of 'networks' is similar to Gary Gereffi's concept of 'global commodity chains', in which production networks connect a large number of different enterprises.<sup>10</sup> The networks are designed to cut costs, improve the quality of goods, and smoothe the way to innovation. Castells, however, places greater emphasis on the impact of new technologies and the rise of the 'informational society' as a driving force behind the development of these networks. In the case of Chinese firms, he makes the relatively nuanced argument that most such enterprises are family-owned and the production ties they engender are highly personalised, fluid, and mutable.<sup>11</sup> However, he exaggerates the extent to which companies owned by family members are represented in such networks. In reality, most include firms owned by people outside the family circle.

At around the same time, Linda Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton (writing about Caribbean and Filipino migrants to the United States) pointed up the complexity of the concept of migrant 'belonging'. They argued that the term 'transnationalism' as previously employed by social scientists lacked specificity and failed to recognise that immigrants develop ideologies, lifestyles, and networks that span homeland and host society. Defining transnationalism as 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement', they maintained that immigrants tend to 'develop and maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political – that span borders'.<sup>12</sup> Basch and her colleagues concentrate on the rights of individuals within nation states in an age of growing cross-border movement by corporations and people, though their focus is on migrant communities rather than long-settled communities with several generations of descendants.

The several types and levels of transnational relationship, ranging from the informal and affective to the highly institutionalised, interact and overlap to the point where distinctions blur. Affective relationships with family or kin in the hometown or sending village can intersect with economic and political ties. Transnational cultural practices stretch from émigrés' private consumption of homeland cultural products and their public staging in exile of homeland cultural events to the activities of the transnational media. Politically, transnationals can engage from abroad in homeland affairs, but they can also recruit the ancestral state or other diasporic outposts into supporting their own expatriate interest against threats from the host state or society. In a few cases, transnational dissentients can try to win the support of the host state or society for political campaigns against the homeland state. As technology speeds the globalisation of politics, diasporas become politically more vocal, at either end of the migration process and in the globally dispersed interspaces. Economic transnationalism is mainly the province of big corporations, but members of ethnic groups are also players in the world economy, by virtue of their remittances to and investments in the homelands. Governments know the worth of this inward flow and play on the ethnic loyalty of 'nationals' abroad to gain access to their capital. Economic resources flow through diasporic networks as well as to the homeland. Homeland resources can also flow abroad with expatriate help.<sup>13</sup>

Much new scholarship sees transnational migration as the product of recent shifts in society, economy, and technology. For Portes et al.,

historical examples of economic transnationalism are rare and usually 'of an élite type'. They include trade diasporas (like the early Chinese cross-border traders in Southeast Asia) whose members 'self-consciously preserved their distinct identities' and the circular labour migrations of the nineteenth century (the workers stayed abroad only briefly and relied on home-country networks). Early political transnationalism (usually the championing of a nascent homeland state) is deemed rarer still. According to Portes et al., the preconditions for normative transnationalism – the rich countries' growing demand for migrant labour (a thing of the relatively recent past) and the rise of new forms of transport and space-compressing technologies that facilitate international communications (more recent still) – were not yet available to earlier immigrants. Transnational relations were exceptional because they were unsupported by the 'thick web of regular instantaneous communication and easy personal travel that we encounter today'.<sup>14</sup>

Today, processes such as globalisation, the technological revolution in the means of transport and communications, political changes in society as a result of decolonisation or the universalisation of human rights, and the spatial expansion of social networks 'from below', which aid cross-border migration and trade, are said to have transformed immigration to the point where immigration studies can be reconstituted as transnational studies. The growth in transport and communications allows family and kinship ties to move 'from a local to a global scale where they have been reproduced and extended'. The growth in the volume of remittances 'has now become so important that in many cases they determine the development prospects of villages, towns and entire regions'. As the kin-based economic transactions multiply, 'the "home" and "host" societies dissolve into one another'.<sup>15</sup>

Some studies use 'globalisation' and 'transnationalism' more or less interchangeably. In their book on Fujianese migrants, for example, Frank Pieke, Pál Nyíri, Mette Thunø, and Antonella Ceccagno adopt the term 'Chinese globalization' (although they title their volume *Transnational Chinese*). Defining 'Chinese globalization' as 'multiple, transnational social spaces straddling and embedded in diversifying smaller regional or national systems on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a part of a unifying global system', they argue that due to China's growing presence in the global economy, even migrants with only a distant memory of the 'fatherland' or who would like to dissociate themselves from it find that China 'is rapidly integrating itself into the fabric of their daily life'. They therefore treat 'transnationalism' as an 'empirical issue' and try to

trace Chinese globalisation ‘by mapping the transnational social spaces opened up by mobility, work, settlement, and political involvement of a particular category of Chinese international migrants’.<sup>16</sup> This way of conceptualising Chinese globalisation has two drawbacks: it focuses on recent migrants, who by definition have strong ties with China; and it credits the Chinese state with an influence over migrants, both recent and long-established, that is probably exaggerated. Once having left their country of origin behind, few migrants are strongly influenced by the outlook and rhetoric of its authorities. State leaders have tried to influence the Chinese diaspora by helping to establish and support cultural and business associations in European and other countries, but these organisations hardly matter to most migrants, unless they derive some benefit from participating in them.

Since Pieke et al. understand the concept of Chinese globalisation primarily in relation to migration, the experience of migrants in a global environment, and the ‘spaces’ they create for themselves in order to cope with settling into a new country, they resort far too readily to the term ‘transnationalism’. Transnational studies provide a clear definition of this term, which invites in-depth interrogation.

A transnational community is a social formation best exemplified by ethnic diasporas. It has three dimensions: its globally dispersed self, the states it inhabits, and its ancestral homeland.<sup>17</sup> Researchers claim that such networks work at the level of the diaspora as a whole as well as in its separate ‘homelands’ (ancestral and adopted), and that new technologies connect them ‘with increasing speed and efficiency’.<sup>18</sup> Many assume that institutionalised ethnic networks permit diasporic co-ethnics to move capital across national boundaries. Examples can be found in the triumphalist discourses of Chinese capitalism, which maintain that the creation of intra-ethnic business networks based on a sense of group cohesion facilitates the movement of funds across borders and the mutually beneficial pooling of resources in enterprise development.<sup>19</sup>

Ludger Pries argues that Guarnizo and Smith provide two important insights into the nature of transnationalism. First, it is not a ‘boundless or deterritorialized social phenomenon’. Second, its social practices are not merely transitory, like the ‘ambiguous and contradictory social integration’ of first-generation immigrants. The identity of transmigrants is not free-floating but an emergent ‘embedding and disembedding in different social spaces’.<sup>20</sup>

Although studies are careful to avoid depicting transnational processes as wholly new and allow for earlier instances, they often magnify the

element of novelty. Glick Schiller et al., in their seminal article, called for a 'new conceptualization' of this 'new field of social relations' and draw a sharp distinction between the earlier immigrant, who 'evokes images of permanent rupture', and the 'new migrant population'.<sup>21</sup> Others who allow that contemporary transnationalism may have precedents in the 'high' period of the nation state nevertheless emphasise the concept's emergent character.

Older scholarship, in contrast, holds that ties and identities of an essentially transnational character are not a late twentieth-century innovation but have regularly marked out the immigrant generation, after whose demise an assimilationist trend takes hold and transnationalism falls into disuse and eventual oblivion. Adam McKeown, while agreeing with many of the tenets of transnational studies, also questions the narrow time-frame within which they are usually confined and sets out to write a longer history of Chinese transnational practices. A major shortcoming of transnational studies is their failure to work more consistently in historical depth, without which diasporic communities cannot be fully grasped.

Other issues raised in theoretical writing about transnational communities include the medium through which ties are realised (the network, dynamised by new communication technologies) and the 'consciousness' they engender (one marked by multiple identifications, cultural fluidity, and creolisation or hybridity). We explore aspects of economic networking in the chapter on the British Chinese economy. In other chapters, we extend our analysis to non-economic practices. We also look at the role played by class and cultural difference in forming transnational communities (McKeown criticises transnational studies for homogenising migrants and emphasising the autonomy of global processes) and at the impact of transnationalism on consciousness and identifications.

The above theories and approaches provide a framework for distinguishing between different types of transnationalism, tracing its evolution through time, and measuring its past and present extent. The hypothesis that normative transnationalism depends on certain prerequisites (principally, the power of modern electronics) and the conflicting perspectives of transnationalists and assimilationists are matters that we also try to clarify.

A fundamental distinction is between grassroots and top-down transnationalism – what Luis Guarnizo calls transnationalism 'from below' and 'from above'.<sup>22</sup> Under grassroots transnationalism we count local-place ties (formal and informal), remigration across national

borders, some forms of trade unionism and low-level political activity, and other sorts of initiatives taken by ordinary immigrants in league with their counterparts in the homeland or elsewhere overseas. Top-down transnationalism includes activities by embassies, states, churches, the press, and business corporations.

Between these two extremes of top and bottom lies a less clear-cut halfway field. Hometown associations, for example, sometimes start from a plebeian base but branch out into ever grander forms that are exploited by homeland states and political parties. In some cases, they are captured into larger bodies by the call of patriotism, or by personal or sub-ethnic ties transmuted into political loyalties. In other cases, the prospect of jobs and fame attracts self-promoting individuals who see Chinatown's status hierarchy as parochial and stunted and prefer to strut on wider political stages. Protest movements or political campaigns that emerge spontaneously in Chinatown sometimes join forces with homeland political parties or international parties (like the Comintern). Other movements were the product of such parties' agitation. The trade unions formed by migrant and transnational workers, especially seafarers, are also Janus-faced – they look inwards to local class-based communities and their issues, outwards to the global seaborne fellowship and its distant ports and hometowns.

These perspectives provide the framework for this study on the Chinese community in Britain. In their reader on diasporas and transnationalism, Vertovec and Cohen note that the 'lineaments and links' they make require elaboration and specificity: 'Which state and which transnational groups are we examining and over what period?'<sup>23</sup> In the following chapters, we try to meet this criterion of specificity. At the same time, like McKeown, we look into the longer history of Chinese transnationalism.

In so doing, we confront a popular narrative about Chinese business that has grown up in reciprocal interaction with transnational studies. According to the exponents of this narrative, contemporary Chinese capitalism has distinctive characteristics that facilitate its growth. Chinese culture and value systems determine decision-making among firms owned by Chinese, while intra-ethnic networks based on trust and kinship ties help reduce transaction costs and diminish risks.<sup>24</sup> These business networks are said to be tightly knit and embedded in interlocking ownership and interlocking directorships with strong ethnic and solidaristic dimensions. A failing that many such studies share with transnational theories is that they treat Chinese as a homogenous and monolithic group.

While transnational studies assume a high degree of diasporic identity, an emergent body of literature argues that ethnic identity is of little importance in national and transnational business transactions.<sup>25</sup> True, ethnicity can be used by politicians to justify state policies and endeavours (at the national level) and to promote trade and business (at the international level). However, in neither case is there much evidence that common ethnicity helps unify a community or promotes economic pursuits, with or without state support. New migrants employ ethnic identity strategically in their host societies to get jobs in firms run by co-ethnics, establish businesses with other immigrants, or venture into economic sectors that provide goods or services of an 'ethnic' kind, for example, in the catering domain. However, these co-ethnic ties seldom survive once businesses begin to embed themselves in their new environment and new generations emerge.

Aihwa Ong 翁爱华 sets out in her work on transnationalism to 'reorient the study of Chinese subjects' by means of the concept of 'flexible citizenship'. She argues that 'global capitalism in Asia is linked to new cultural representations of "Chineseness" (rather than "Japaneseness") in relation to transnational Asian capitalism'. In her view, 'overseas Chinese' and mainland China are becoming ever more closely tied in production, trade, and finance 'circuits' that generate a form of 'fraternal network capitalism' or 'Chinese capitalism'. These ties are said to have 'induced long-assimilated Thai and Indonesian subjects to reclaim their "ethnic Chinese" status as they participate in regional business networks'.<sup>26</sup> But Ong fails to ask whether these long-assimilated Thais and Indonesians are not instead, as business investors, using their ethnic identity to facilitate investment in China. In our view, such investment does not result from an atavistic impulse but is usually made in response to political exhortation by state authorities. Ong's thesis, on the other hand, suggests that all ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, even the 'long-assimilated', celebrate as well as profit from the supposed rise of 'Chinese capitalism' in Asia.

This tripartite link between transnationalism, capital, and identity is explained most lucidly by Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini in their *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*.<sup>27</sup> Ong and Nonini argue that in the course of the transnational experience, Chinese migrants develop a 'third culture', defined as a 'modern Chinese transnationalism' that 'provides alternative visions in late capitalism to Western modernity and generates new and distinctive social arrangements, cultural discourses, practices, and subjectivities'. This culture includes the deployment of economic strategies such as the

family firm and networks of social relations (or *guanxi* 关系) as a means of accumulating capital.<sup>28</sup>

Ong and Nonini point up the strength of the state in Asia and its capacity to control 'globalisation'. They make the case that much of the 'new capitalism of the Asia-Pacific is state-driven and state-sponsored'. However, their argument that 'modern Chinese transnationalism is expanding ever more rapidly across the Asia Pacific and indeed launching the capitalist development of China itself' is hard to sustain, for while Chinese-owned firms in East and Southeast Asia have invested in the mainland, it is an exaggeration to suggest they have generated China's economic expansion over the past decade.

Some of Ong and Nonini's other contentions are similarly dubious. These include their assertion that 'Chinese transnational capitalists act out flexible strategies of accumulation in networks that cut across political borders and are linked through second-tier global cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou (Canton), Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur. These overlapping business, social, and kinship networks stitch together dynamic, productive, financial, and marketing regions that are not contained by a single-nation or subject to its influence'. In the same study, they suggest that 'diasporic capitalist interests can subvert state disciplining by transferring economic capital out of their host countries to overseas locations, and thus act to transform national economies under the rubric of "market forces"'.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, they exaggerate the role played by Chinese-owned capital in driving the East Asian economic boom; on the other hand, they minimise the capacity of the state to discipline Chinese capitalists and exaggerate the capitalists' ability to transfer their assets across borders. Their claim that Chinese capitalists in the region act through tightly knit ethnic 'networks' as a dynamo for economic growth in Asia is wrong in two respects. By linking transnationalism, identity, and capitalism, it tends both to essentialise patterns of enterprise development among Chinese and to homogenise diasporic communities.

Theorising such a tripartite linkage essentialises capitalism and intra-ethnic business networks. Gordon Redding and Gary Hamilton<sup>30</sup> have been the most vocal proponents of the growing transnational impact of Chinese businesses and networks (though they do not write within the framework of transnational theory). Studies on ethnic enterprise, particularly the work of Ivan Light and Roger Waldinger, have taken the essentialising of Chinese-owned enterprises even further. Huntington's<sup>31</sup> theories about the 'clash of civilizations' and concepts like 'bamboo networks'<sup>32</sup> and the 'Chinese commonwealth'<sup>33</sup> are the

most extreme examples of the homogenising of ethnic communities and culture.

The idea that Chinese diasporans have a strong collective identity that influences their business style and the development of their enterprises has given rise to a prodigious literature sometimes called the 'culturalist perspective'.<sup>34</sup> Its proponents, who favour an old-fashioned anthropological approach, argue that members of ethnic groups share patterns of values, behaviour, and cognition that distinguish them from other such communities. Anthropologists and economic geographers assume a typically Chinese pattern of enterprise development. Diasporic Chinese enterprise is, in essence, said everywhere to have the same 'ethnic style', namely family firms and intra-ethnic business networks. The family firm and intra-ethnic national and transnational social connections and networks play a crucial role in capital formation and accumulation. These two modes of business and social organisation are central to the 'Confucian ethic', a perennial theme and key explanatory tool for analysts of Chinese enterprise who think culture matters a lot.

Few scholars would disagree that family and kinship ties are a key constituent of Chinese enterprise.<sup>35</sup> It is commonly accepted that kinship ties are an important consideration in hiring staff and acquiring funds in the initial stages of enterprise formation. At the point of its creation, a firm is usually under the control of its founder and his close relatives, who play a crucial role in setting its style of management. (It should be added that this phenomenon is not uniquely Chinese.)<sup>36</sup>

The argument about 'networks' is more contentious. Redding, for example, maintains that Chinese networks in Taiwan and Hong Kong share commonalities that indicate 'cultural predispositions, most of which are traceable to Confucian values'.<sup>37</sup> Supporters of this view argue that Chinese enterprise is a form of 'network capitalism' or '*guanxi* capitalism'.<sup>38</sup> Networks are said to be a unique institutional feature of 'Asian capitalism', one that distinguishes it from the Western notion of bureaucratisation and efficiency.<sup>39</sup> This form of capitalism supposedly provides Chinese firms in Southeast Asia with major competitive advantages.<sup>40</sup>

Others go even further, and talk about 'Chinese diaspora capitalism'. Lever-Tracy and Tracy argue that this form of capitalism is based on personalised, long-term horizontal networks that bind together Chinese-owned family companies. These networks are 'embedded in relations of reciprocity' and rest on the principle of trust. This type of capitalism is said to pre-date 'modern capitalism' and to attach less weight

than other forms of capitalism to corporate expansion and maximising profit.<sup>41</sup>

Few scholars would deny the existence of ‘networks’ created by Chinese-owned enterprises. The main problem for critics of the ‘culturalist perspective’ is not the idea of networks as such but the notion of ‘Chineseness’, which in the critics’ opinion plays only a minor role in determining how Chinese businesspeople make decisions and develop their enterprises.<sup>42</sup> In the critics’ view, culturalist analyses misrepresent the basis for and extent of business ties among Chinese firms. Networks do not form in a single dimension but primarily comprise chains of producers or sub-contractors that operate at multiple levels and whose membership changes over time. Co-ethnic cooperation for the benefit of the community, the basis according to the culturalist analysis on which such networks form, fails to explain these ties.

The history of ethnic-Chinese communities in Southeast Asia suggests that triadic-style definitions of transnationalism apply (if at all) only to migrants.<sup>43</sup> Even the identity and national allegiance of some longer-settled members of the migrant cohort undergo a profound reconfiguration. This transformation is evident in the rising number of immigrants that seek and secure political office in Australia, Canada, the United States, and Britain.<sup>44</sup> The Chinese communities in Southeast Asia provide the most interesting examples of the complexity of ethnic and national identity, its evolution over time, its reconfigurations in the context of political and economic change, and the erosion of migrant solidarity and cohesion.

Unlike Southeast Asia, Britain has been receiving ethnic-Chinese migrants more or less uninterruptedly since the nineteenth century. New arrivals constantly replenished the Chinese community, but added to its complexity and cleavages. The cleavages, based on place of origin, class difference, generational difference, and sub-ethnic difference, stand in the way of a pan-Chinese identity. Moreover, ethnic Chinese lack an equivalent of Islam, which helps to some extent to unify Muslim migrants of different ethnic backgrounds.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the number of Chinese in Britain was small. Most were seafarers who had deserted their ships or been abandoned by their employers after landing in British ports. In the 1880s, some Chinese migrants fled the United States during an anti-Chinese campaign and settled in Britain, where they started up businesses based on their experience in America. There is little evidence that these ‘double migrants’ established close ties with Britain’s longer-standing Chinese community. By the middle of the twentieth century,