

The online conference “Reassessing Chinese Diaspora from the South: History, Culture and Narrative” on Apr 15-17, 2021, ANU, Australia

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The Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora (CSCSD) co-hosted a three-day online conference “Reassessing Chinese Diaspora from the South: History, Culture and Narrative” on Apr 15-17, 2021. Eighteen scholars from around the world shared their research on the intellectual history, cultural networks, print cultures, literature and performances related to the Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia and Australia.

For decades, studies of Chinese Diaspora and Overseas Chinese have re-weight the relative influence, both historical and contemporary, between mainland China and Chinese communities outside the mainland, arguing for how the latter impacted and continue to shape the former. These studies are complicated further by the spectacular transformation of mainland China. Of late, heightened sensitivity over the PRC’s global “influence” operations, its attempts to recruit all individuals and communities of Chinese descent to the “China Dream,” as well as the trade war between China and America threaten to return the world to what has been called a “new Cold War” situation. With the so-called “rise of China” looms large as a key driver of the changing global order, both the Chinese Diaspora as a group of people and the field of Chinese Diaspora studies are facing a critical moment. Distinctions between *huaqiao* (Chinese sojourners residing overseas), *huaren* (people of Chinese descent) and *xin yimin* (new Chinese migrants) become blurred, as the PRC attempts to redefine them homogenously as *haiwai qiaobao* (overseas compatriots).

This symposium aims to offer a platform for a critical assessment of the study of diasporic Chineseness since the end of the war, especially in light of the unsettling developments we are currently witnessing. It adopts the perspective of the South to unsettle a China-centric definitive marker of Chinese Diaspora. Most of the papers untangle the complicated narratives that continue to define and perpetuate the Chinese diaspora identity. In her Keynote remark, Ien Ang problematizes the racialized understanding of Chineseness and argues for the jettison of racial thinking in order to make space for more hybrid identities. Sai Siew Min’s paper also argues against the essentialisation of Chinese identity and further proposes a region-specific history of Chineseness. For her, a conceptual scaffolding of the Malay World can help us situate Chinese migration to Singapore within historic patterns of movement, settlement and identity formation in a region disrupted by colonisation.

Other papers presented in the conference trace back the historical formation of the hybrid identities of the Chinese Diaspora by exploring their concrete networks, institutions and cultural productions. On the one hand, scholars examine Chinese-Southeast Asian

encounters and experiences in the pre-and post-war period, in which intellectuals from the mainland conceptualised a *Nanyang huaqiao* identity with certain stereotypes, such as the sociologist Chen Da's works examined by Rachel Leow and women activist Shen Zijiu's writing studied by Show Ying Xin, while royal members in Thailand studied by Wasana Wongsurawat became patrons of the Chinese diaspora and the Chinese state for self-serving reasons. From a different perspective, Zhang Beiyu argues that the reassertion of Chineseness was made possible by performers from both communist China and republican China to the South during the Cold War, which had connected the diaspora with their bifurcated "homeland". Matthew Galway also makes claims on the "homeland mindset" of the Cambodian Chinese radicals who were fanatically affected by the Chinese Revolution. On the other hand, scholars also highlight the articulation of a localized identity such as Jane Ferguson's study of the Burmese filmmaker Shwe Done Bi Aung's study tour to communist China, Tom Hoogervorst's examination of ethnolinguistic diversity in the acculturated Sino-Southeast Asian communities, Jason Lim's inquiry into the Chinese merchants, Ravando's examination of the Chinese Indonesian newspaper *Sin Po*, Ngoi Guat Peng's tracing of the diasporic roots of Confucianism, as well as Zhou Taomo and Pek Wee Cheun's study on the development of the diasporic Chinese enclaves in Shenzhen and Perak respectively.

Moving from the macroscopic historical study, an exploration into the literary and personal writings created by the Chinese diasporic subjects allows us to probe into the emotional dimension and inner psyche of individuals. Hong Lysa studies the works of Singapore communist writer He Jin and argues that the word "diaspora" has been used by the authority to deny a person's national belonging. Writers such as Malaysian-born Xiao Hei, Indonesian-born Hei Ying and Chinese student Joe Tong in Australia, who had been studied by Chan Cheow Thia, Josh Stenberg and Mei-fen Kuo respectively, have shown us their conscious effort in wrestling with the transnational notion of belonging in making sense of their place-based identity, political aspiration and family future.

In summary, this conference is a modest attempt to zoom out from the ethno-nationalistic focus of the study of Chinese diaspora and explores angles of intersectionality in the field, such as aspects of gender, geography, language, and geopolitics. Undoubtedly, much work still needs to be carried out to problematize the binary understanding of "China and its diaspora." By focalizing the locality of the diaspora, this conference opens up a discussion on a possible shift of intellectual focus to the South and seeks more theoretical intervention into the study of Chinese and Chineseness in/from the South.