

## Transnational identities, multiculturalism or assimilation? China's 'refugee-returnees' and generational transitions

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the tensions brought forth when transnational identities are juxtaposed against claims of multiculturalism and *de facto* assimilation processes. The paper focuses on the resettlement of co-ethnics who arrived in China under forced migration circumstances during 1949-1979 and the generational transitions of their progeny. The Chinese state resettled these forced migrants from Southeast Asia in state-owned farms known as the overseas Chinese farms and gave them preferential treatment as 'returnees' rather than 'refugees'. They retained transnational cultural identities that set them apart from the China-born Chinese and suffered further stigmatisation during the Cultural Revolution. The paper signals the limitations of using ethnicity as a lens for understanding how 'difference' is negotiated in China. In contemporary times the (multi)cultural identities of the refugee-returnees are promoted as tourism features to help reinvent the farms for economic sustainability. Yet the identity transitions experienced by the progeny of the refugee-returnees suggests they are assimilating into a national identity that subsumes their overseas Chinese cultures, serving to normalize a Chinese identity associated with the locally born Chinese instead. The paper argues that the objectification of overseas Chinese heritage and an assimilation ideology work together to highlight China's historical connections to its co-ethnics abroad selectively while simultaneously projecting a new national narrative of contemporary Chinese identity that is distinct from the overseas Chinese. This paper on Chinese forced migration and resettlement provides useful insights concerning transnational identity negotiations with respect to multiculturalism and assimilation, and further suggests new directions for overseas Chinese studies today.

### *Introduction*

From 1949-1979 China received three inflows of Chinese diasporic descendants<sup>1</sup> that had left Southeast Asia under forced migration circumstances. Under the 1951 Refugee Convention they could have been considered 'refugees' (*nanqiao*), as were their

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<sup>1</sup> The label, 'huaqiao', is often used to describe the overseas Chinese but this term simplifies differences between distinct groups of Chinese living abroad. Diasporic descendants refer to the Chinese that were born and grew up abroad; they have absorbed other cultural influences from their socialisation abroad but it is intermingled with a lingering Chinese identity. Some still have Chinese nationality but many have adopted the citizenship of the countries in which their parents settled. Another group of overseas Chinese were born and bred in China but migrated later in life. They maintain a strong Han Chinese national identity with most still choosing to retain their Chinese nationality because they plan to return to China after their sojourn abroad; Leo Suryadinata, 'China's citizenship law and the Chinese in Southeast Asia' in Michael B. Hooker, *Law and the Chinese in Southeast Asia*, Singapore, ISEAS, 2002, pp. 169-202

counterparts accepted by asylum countries like Australia, the United States and in Europe. However, China labelled those that arrived on its shores during that period as ethnic Chinese ‘returnees’ (henceforth ‘refugee-returnees’) for political and policy reasons that will be explained in this paper. China resettled them in farm clusters known as the *huaqiao nongchang*, translated literally as the ‘overseas Chinese farms’ but known officially as the Farms for Returned Overseas Chinese. While it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which these forced migrants returned involuntary or voluntarily, the decision by the Chinese state to categorise them as ‘returnees’, even though they have not lived there before, signals the privilege of co-ethnicity. Also resettled alongside the refugee-returnees were other overseas Chinese who returned voluntarily from the early 1950s onwards because of patriotism towards China, but they were sent to the overseas Chinese farms by the Chinese state as a result of resettlement policies enforced during that time. These groups of involuntary and involuntary migrants came to be categorised as *guiqiao* (i.e. an abbreviation of *guiguo huaqiao* which refers to overseas Chinese returnees). Many had been born and bred abroad rather than in China. They identified as Chinese diasporic descendants from Southeast Asia and maintained transnational cultural identities even as they re-built their lives in post-1949 China during which the Communist government sought to instill a strong national identity premised upon Han Chinese norms in *xinzhongguo* (‘new China’).<sup>2</sup>

Debates on managing ethnic diversity in China have focused predominantly on cultural and language rights for the identifiable minority ‘nationalities’. Officially it is recognised that China is a multi-ethnic country populated by the majority Han Chinese as well as 56 ethnic minority groups (known in China as ‘nationalities’ or *shaoshu minzu*<sup>3</sup>). However, numerous scholars have identified the tense relationship between inculcating a national identity privileging Han Chinese norms and attempts to provide recognition for ethnic diversity in China.<sup>4</sup> They argue that claims of cultural plurality gloss over assimilation processes that are at work in China. For example, Han migration to minority regions has been taking place in the name of modernisation and development.<sup>5</sup> This led to the widespread use of Mandarin rather than minority languages in these regions and increased competition for jobs and other resources, thus straining relations between the Han migrants and minority groups.

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<sup>2</sup> However efforts to promote an overarching national identity privileging Han Chinese norms can be traced back to the Republican era and these continued into the Communist period.

<sup>3</sup> In Mandarin, *minzu* can refer to nationality, ethnicity or people more generally. For the fluidity of social groups categorised as ‘nationalities’ in China, see Nicholas Tapp, In defence of the archaic: A reconsideration of the 1950s ethnic classification project in China, *Asian Ethnicity*, 3, 2001, pp. 63-84; also Christopher Vasantkumar, What is this ‘Chinese’ in overseas Chinese? Sojourn work and the place of China’s minority nationalities in extraterritorial Chineseness, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 71, 1, 2012, pp. 423-446.

<sup>4</sup> Dru C. Gladney, Representing nationality in China: Refiguring majority/minority identities, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 53, 1, 1994, pp. 92-123; Elena Barabantseva, Change vs. order: Shijie meets Tianxia in China’s interactions with the world, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 34, 2, 2009, pp. 129-155; Anthony Howell and Cindy Fan, Migration and inequality in Xinjiang: A survey of Han And Uyghur migrants in Urumqi, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 52, 1, 2011, pp. 119-139.

<sup>5</sup> Howell and Fan, Migration and inequality in Xinjiang, p. 2011.

As in other countries, transnational migration further complicates China's attempts to manage diversity. The return of diasporic descendants and the difficulty they had gaining cultural acceptance by the Han Chinese majority who has never left China signals the limitations of using ethnicity as the primary lens for understanding the way 'difference' is negotiated and managed in China. The diasporic descendants from Southeast Asia described in this paper are ethnic Chinese born and bred abroad thus they have incorporated cultural habits, languages and attitudes that are distinct from the Chinese that have never left China.

While countries like Australia, Canada and Singapore have turned to multiculturalism as a political and policy tool towards managing cultural diversity, China has been reticent towards adopting this approach despite its internal ethnic diversity and the complex transnational migration inflows and outflows populating its society in the past and present. Yet, as this paper shows, claims to multiculturalism have been invoked for economic gains from the 1980s onwards since political and economic reforms took place on the overseas Chinese farms. Such framings of Chinese identity and multiculturalism make selective historical connections with Chinese co-ethnics abroad while simultaneously creating a new national narrative about contemporary China that sets it apart from the overseas Chinese. These insights on the historical return of co-ethnics abroad, subsequent multiculturalism framings and contemporary Chinese identity are useful for understanding China in transition now as other types of diasporic descendants converge in the country today to live, study or work in 'immigrant China' (Pieke, 2012).

The next section sets out the research methodology informing this paper. Following that, the paper considers the wider literature on cultural identities and generational transitions. Then the paper presents the case of the overseas Chinese farms, arguing that the transnational identities of the refugee-returnees exist in uneasy co-existence with claims of multiculturalism promoted by leaders of the overseas Chinese farms who are keen to reinvent the farms into tourism destinations. The penultimate section further problematises such claims of multiculturalism by suggesting that the second and third generations are experiencing assimilation processes that subsume the transnational identities of their parents and grandparents. The conclusion reiterates the key arguments of the paper and suggests future directions for research on integration and assimilation as well as overseas Chinese studies.

### *Methodology*

This paper is based on research conducted from 2010-2013. While the arguments are not meant to be representative of all the overseas Chinese farms in China, it reveals insights on forced migration histories, resettlement processes and intergenerational change that help us develop a clearer understanding of not only a phenomenon that is little known outside of Mainland China but also integration and assimilation debates in contemporary China. The research design draws on, first, analyses of Chinese language newspaper articles, federal and local government circulars, and academic articles (1994-2010) focusing on the overseas Chinese farms. Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the inhabitants of two overseas Chinese farms in Southern China. The interviews lasted for forty-five to sixty minutes and the questions revolved around their motivations

for relocating to China, resettlement experiences, family relations, and the impact of farm reforms. While earlier fieldwork visits mainly sought out the original cohorts of refugee-returnees to uncover their oral histories of return and resettlement in China, subsequent visits began to examine the experiences of the second and third generations to understand processes of intergenerational change.

Third, follow-up interviews were conducted with former inhabitants of the farms that have left to settle in Chinese cities. While some of these respondents were contacted through personal networks, others are members of ‘friendship associations’ (*lianyihui*) set up by out-migrants from those farms. These associations function as a means for the out-migrants to stay in touch with one another and with those who remain behind in the farms. The associations organise social events and cultural performances to showcase the distinctive *guiqiao* identities represented by the overseas Chinese farms; most of the events are held in China but some groups have performed in overseas destinations as part of cultural exchanges.

Forty-two interviews were carried out in total. Numerous more unstructured interviews took place during ethnographic observation opportunities, which include home visitations, dinner occasions and participating in social events to which we have been invited. The interviews were not recorded in audio form at the request of the participants. Detailed field notes were taken of the ethnographic observations as well as the interviews. Ethnographic observation and interviews were chosen over surveys because this study is interested to uncover the oral histories and nuances of life on the overseas Chinese farms that qualitative methods are best suited to draw out.

One of the farms studied was established in 1963 and accommodates 3500 refugee-returnees. The other farm was built in 1951 and it has 13 500 refugee-returnees. The majority of the inhabitants in both farms originate from Indonesia, Malaya and Vietnam. The main crop on the smaller farm is sugarcane while the other farm has a more diversified agricultural base, including coffee and cocoa. However, declining demand and falling commodity prices mean that tourism is being developed as an alternative revenue sector for both of these farms. The children and grandchildren of the refugee-returnees who remain on the farm find employment mainly in the tourism industry. The farms and the cities in which research was carried out will not be named so as to ensure the anonymity of the research participants.

The original cohorts of refugee-returnees are now in their sixties or older. The earlier ones from Malaya and Indonesia arrived in China as children or adolescents and are more accurately described as the 1.5-generation. Their parents, the pioneer refugee-returnees, have passed on but the Malaysians and Indonesians we met on the farms still have vivid memories of their family forced migration histories and resettlement experiences. The Vietnamese-Chinese pioneers are now in old age. The children and grandchildren of the three groups mentioned here, namely the second and third generations born in China or who arrived without personal memories of life abroad, span the twenties to thirties age group.

### *Forced migration, cultural diversity and generational transitions*

In a seminal paper on the sociology of forced migration, Castles<sup>6</sup> observes that discussions on forced migration are closely linked to national concerns of border control and national security. Embedded within are debates on how forced migrants should integrate into the national community and adopt its national identity. Forced migrants usually come from a cultural background considered different from the 'mainstream' population in the country where they have settled. As such, forced migrants are subject to integration and assimilation ideals promoted by nation-states. While similar processes are observable in China, a foray into the existing scholarship on cultural diversity approaches and its applicability to China suggests several disconnects too.

First, the fertile literature on integration and assimilation approaches focuses primarily on the experiences of Chinese immigrant populations abroad, especially in Southeast Asia and North America. The well-cited work of Portes and Zhou<sup>7</sup> (1993) on segmented assimilation<sup>8</sup>, for example, is based on the American 'melting pot' model. They suggest that children of immigrants will take distinctive pathways towards occupational segmentation depending on the socio-economic status of their parents and the extent to which they acculturate into a white middle-class society. Zhou's later work applies this conceptual framework to a study of Asian second generation immigrants, including the Chinese<sup>9</sup>. The assimilation variables they study include language, ethnic identification and sense of belonging; these aspects of assimilation will also be discussed in the empirical analyses of this paper. A related body of work by Rambaut and Alba and Nee<sup>10</sup> (1999) argue that social actors negotiate the incorporation process in non-linear ways, depending on the contextual factors involved.

In comparison to assimilation theories, studies of Chinese immigrant populations in Canada focus on the way they fare under state-sponsored integration processes, usually in the form of multicultural policies that advocate cultural pluralism. Critics argue, nonetheless, that Chinese immigrants are subject to de facto assimilation processes despite claims to multiculturalism in Canada.<sup>11</sup> Similar debates characterise the literature

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Castles, Towards a sociology of forced migration and social transformation, *Sociology*, 77, 1, 2003, pp. 13-34.

<sup>7</sup> Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, The new second generation: Segmented assimilation and its variants, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 530, 1, 1993, pp. 74-96.

<sup>8</sup> They posit three trajectories of assimilation: upwards into a higher socio-economic class through acculturation and integration, downwards into a lower socio-economic class or economic advancement through preservation of unique ethnic traits.

<sup>9</sup> Min Zhou and Sao Xiong Yang, The multifaceted American experiences of the children of Asian immigrants: Lessons for segmented assimilation, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28, 6, 2005, pp. 1119-1152.

<sup>10</sup> Rubén Rambaut, 'Ties that bind: Immigration and immigration families in the United States' in Alan Booth, Ann C. Crouter and Nancy Landale, *Immigration and the Family: Research and Policy on U. S. Immigrants*, Mahwah, NJ, Erlbaum, 1997, pp. 3-46; Richard Alba and Victor Nee, 'Rethinking assimilation theory for a new era of immigration', in Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz and John Dewind, *The Handbook of International Migration*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1999, pp. 137-160.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Li, Deconstructing Canada's discourse of immigrant integration, *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 4, 3, 2003, pp. 315-33.

on integration and assimilation processes in Southeast Asia<sup>12</sup>, which will be discussed later in this section.

Second, where analyses of integration and assimilation are applied to China this is usually made with reference to ethnic minority ‘nationalities’ (see footnote 1). Such studies debate the extent to which ethnic minority claims for autonomy have been met or if they are subject to assimilation processes. Ma (2008:2002), for example, argues against the ‘politicisation’ of ethnic minorities and supports a ‘culturalisation’ policy instead. Here, he suggests that the Chinese state’s approach has been to institutionalise ethnic difference and provide minority rights that will reinforce separatist tendencies. Instead, Ma (2008:208-210) supports political unity at the national level and a cultural pluralism that is akin to what he refers as the ‘acculturation’ model in the United States in which ethnicity has been ‘depoliticised’. The claims made by Ma are contentious, not least its claim that ethnicity in the United States has been depoliticised, but also because of the white-Anglo assimilation tendencies in the United States model that, if translated into the Chinese context, would privilege Han Chinese norms inadvertently. Moreover, Ma’s arguments sidestep the more critical question of what is Chinese national identity? While the cultural hegemony of the Han Chinese hold sways currently, Han Chinese culture is also characterised by heterogeneous sub-cultures and dialects. Scholars such as Gladney and Mullaney<sup>13</sup> further remind us that it is by categorizing, objectifying and commodifying minority identities that the normalization of Han majority identity is enabled.

Third, related to the above are debates on transnationalism that have been applied to Chinese communities within and outside of China. The transnational identities borne by the overseas Chinese have been the subject of numerous studies on the *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) abroad and also the *qiaoxiang* (hometowns of the overseas Chinese) in China. The influence of European and Southeast Asian architectural styles on the *qiaoxiang*, such as the UNESCO World Heritage Site of *Kaiping Diaolou*, is well documented by Mainland Chinese scholars like Mei and Zhang.<sup>14</sup> The persistent transnational identities of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia despite integration and assimilation pressures by postcolonial nation-states has also been studied widely by Mainland Chinese and international scholars.<sup>15</sup> They argue that the overseas Chinese retain their ethnic identities even as they adapt to the local societies in which they have settled, such as in the case of

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Suryadinati, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Gladney, Representing nationality in China, pp. 110; Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to terms with the nation: Ethnic classification in modern China*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Weiqiang Mei, Kaiping huaqiao yu diaolou jianzhu, *Journal of Wuyi University*, 4, (2002), pp. 45-49; Yinglong Zhang, Some thoughts about the cultural characters of Guangdong Qiaoxiang: A comparative study of architectural culture of Wuyi And Chaoshan Qiaoxiang, *Overseas Chinese History Studies*, 3, 2006, pp. 63-69..

<sup>15</sup> See Gungwu Wang, *China and the Chinese overseas*, Singapore, Time Academic Press, 1991; Leo Suryadinati, *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, Singapore and London, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1997; Guotu Zhuang, Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, *Shijie Minzu*, 3, 2002, pp. 37-48; and Michael Jacobsen, Navigating between disaggregating nation states and entrenching processes of globalisation: Reconceptualising the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 18, 2009, pp. 69-91.

the Peranakan Chinese in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore who intermarried with the locally born Indonesians or Malays.

This review of the literature on integration, assimilation and transnationalism with respect to Chinese migration and China illuminates a jarring conceptual gap that this paper addresses. How may integration and assimilation debates be used to analyse transnational communities within China? This paper examines this question with respect to the earlier cohorts of refugee-returnees resettled on the overseas Chinese farms as well as the generational transitions taking place on the farms. The refugee-returnees retained their transnational cultural identities even as they rebuilt their lives in China as *guiqiao*. The paper argues that while their transnational identities bearing Southeast Asian influences were once met with disapproval before and during the Cultural Revolution period, it is today capitalised upon for ethnic tourism ventures in the name of multiculturalism. Nonetheless, the extent to which these farm communities are multicultural is debatable and the paper further suggests that indications of assimilation trends are observable amongst the younger generation even as they lay claim to their ancestral overseas origins selectively.

#### *Multicultural China?*

The Chinese state accepted three key cohorts of ethnic Chinese diasporic descendants, mostly under conditions of forced migration during 1949-1979.<sup>16</sup> The Malayan-Chinese arrived first in China (1949-1953). Some had been compelled to leave British-ruled Malaya because of anti-communist sentiments whereas others returned voluntarily to the ancestral homeland during the patriotism fervour following the founding of the People's Republic of China. The latter, nonetheless, became allocated to the state-owned Overseas Chinese Farms subsequently. The return of the Malaysians was followed by groups of Indonesian-Chinese fleeing anti-Chinese hostilities in post-independence Indonesia (1959-69). The last cohort to arrive in China was the Vietnamese-Chinese (1978-1979) escaping tightening restrictions placed by the Vietnamese authorities on the Chinese population in Vietnam. These cohorts of Southeast Asian refugee-returnees are today in their sixties and seventies; most arrived in China as young children. Their children and grandchildren were born in China and the research suggests that the second and third generations have limited personal links with Southeast Asia even though they claim they identify as *guiguo huaqiao* (i.e. returnees with overseas ties).

The Chinese state labelled the co-ethnic refugees from Southeast Asia as 'returnees', thus helping to legitimise an extraterritorial claim over these co-ethnics and the domestic preferential resettlement policies it provided for them.<sup>17</sup> The *Qiaoban* (also known as the

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<sup>16</sup> See Stephen Fitzgerald, China and the Overseas Chinese: Perceptions and Policies, *China Quarterly*, 44, 1970, pp. 1-37; Stephen Fitzgerald, *China and the Overseas Chinese: A Study of Peking's Changing Policy 1949-1970*, London and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1972; Michael Godley, A summer cruise to nowhere: China and the Vietnamese-Chinese in perspective, *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 4, 1980, pp. 35-59; and Michael Godley, The sojourners: Returned overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China, *Pacific Affairs*, 62, 1989, pp. 330-352.

<sup>17</sup> Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, 'Refugee' or 'returnee'? The ethnic geopolitics of diasporic resettlement in China and intergenerational change, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38, 4, 2013, pp. 599-611.

Overseas Chinese Affairs Office) took care of their resettlement and allocated the majority of them to permanent farm clusters known as the *huaqiao nongchang* or ‘overseas Chinese farms’ (also known officially as the Farms for Returned Overseas Chinese). There are 84 such farms in total today, mainly concentrated in the coastal provinces of China but also around the Chinese provinces at the Sino-Vietnamese border. During the earlier years, the farm inhabitants could enjoy housing, farming equipment, food provisions and fixed salaries provided by the Chinese state regardless of their farming productivity. The farms contained factories, schools, hospitals and other facilities. Legislation passed in 1991 further protected the rights of the returnees and their dependents (*guiqiao qiaojuan quanyi baohu fa*), including the refugee-returnees. Despite these privileges, the refugee-returnees faced resettlement and integration difficulties as a result of sustained poverty and discrimination by the China-born Chinese that perceived them as culturally different. For example, the Indonesian refugee-returnees speak Indonesian languages amongst themselves, wear *batik* (an Indonesian textile pattern) attire and cook dishes using spices native to Southeast Asia, which they can cultivate in the tropical climate of southern China.<sup>18</sup>

Economic and governance reforms during the 1980s impacted the farms in significant ways.<sup>19</sup> Many farms became marketed as economic zones or tourism sites showcasing Southeast Asian architecture and culture in China.<sup>20</sup> Around the same period, cities in southern China embarked on massive industrialisation. The *Qiaoban* contributed to this endeavour by recruiting promising youths from the overseas Chinese farms to work in state-owned enterprises newly set up in the cities. Strict migration controls at that time meant that in order to find employment outside of the farms, the employee would need documents proving that the *danwei* (work unit) had agreed to the transfer. Those who left under this state-led labour deployment policy (with the endorsement of the *danwei*) counted themselves fortunate because they could escape the harsh conditions of the rural farms. The out-migrants, many of them second generation youths who were born and bred in China, maintained personal ties in the farms with left-behind family members and through the activities of the friendship associations. The extent to which their children born into the third-generation retain this relationship with the farms is questionable though.

The post-1980s economic reforms meant the overseas Chinese farms gradually became marketed as tourism attractions featuring pockets of multicultural communities in China. Domestic tourists looking for an inexpensive holiday but still desiring to experience less familiar cultural environments are the targeted audience. The tourism capital of the farms is realised by the transnational identities maintained by the refugee-returnees. To an extent Southeast Asian culture is still part of the identity and habitual lifestyles of the inhabitants, especially amongst the older generation. Our research trips to the farms were often met by invitations to partake of their Southeast Asian cultural heritage, such as

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<sup>18</sup> Tan Chee-Beng, Reterritorialization of a Balinese Chinese community in Quanzhou, Fujian, *Modern Asian Studies*, 44, 3, 2010, pp. 547-566.

<sup>19</sup> Han Xiaorong, The demise of China’s overseas Chinese state farms, *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 9, 2013, pp. 33-58.

<sup>20</sup> Ho, ‘Refugee’ or ‘returnee’?, pp. 604-606.



visiting an Indonesian home-museum in which one family has put on display personal and donated artefacts collected over the years by the Indonesian-Chinese patriarch. The Malayan and Indonesian refugee-returnees still prepare cuisine influenced by Southeast Asian flavours such as spicy beef *rendang* (dry curry) or *gulai nangka* (a distinctive Indonesian curry made with jackfruit), while the Vietnamese regularly use fish sauce and lemongrass to enhance the flavour of their dishes. Those from similar linguistic groups also speak to one another in the Malay (the Indonesians and Malaysians refer to it as *Bahasa*) or Vietnamese languages.

These transnational identities allow official publications by the farms and their museum displays to highlight to visitors the diverse overseas origins of the farms' inhabitants and their multicultural practices. One of the villages on the farm has been purposefully landscaped to showcase Southeast Asian architectural features, including signboards that point to the 'Malaysian Garden' or other sites of cultural interest. Large restaurants have been established in the farms to receive coaches ferrying Chinese domestic tourists keen to sample Southeast Asian cuisine while on a daylong visit to the farms. The farm inhabitants informed us that during the off peak (tourism) season Indonesian dance performances could be staged for our personal enjoyment at a cost of only 20 *yuan* (approximately 3 USD) for each audience member. Such efforts at marketing multiculturalism on the Overseas Chinese Farms are similar to ethnic tourism ventures in minority regions of China seen as a means to facilitate development.<sup>21</sup>

Although historical connections with the overseas Chinese and forced migration histories are drawn selectively for tourism purposes, the objectification and commodification of the overseas Chinese and their Southeast Asian identities for domestic tourism serves to demarcate China-born Chinese identity from overseas Chinese identity. This dual framing of overseas Chinese and China-born Chinese identity allows the assertion of a new national narrative that simultaneously recognises China's ties with its co-ethnics abroad while downplaying its co-dependency with the overseas Chinese community.

Despite claims to multiculturalism as a lifestyle of the farm inhabitants, there are indications of simmering cross-cultural tensions. Deeper probing into the attitudes of some refugee-returnees revealed covert racisms towards their counterparts from elsewhere in Southeast Asia. For example, the Malayan and Indonesian refugee-returnees are prone to describe the Vietnamese that were resettled after them as poorer Southeast Asian counterparts who benefited disproportionately from the toil of the earlier cohorts. In another instance, one of the Malayan refugee-returnees that we interviewed expressed disdain towards Indonesians from Bangka whom he regards as particularly narrow-minded. During the interview, it emerged that he came to China as a young boy with his parents in the late 1950s but during the Cultural Revolution his parents had been imprisoned because some Bangka-Indonesians accused them of anti-communist

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<sup>21</sup> Gladney, Representing nationality in China, pp. 102; Li Yang, Geoffrey Wall, and Stephan L.J. Smith, Ethnic tourism development: Chinese government perspectives, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35, 3, 2008, pp. 751–771; Su Xiaobo, The imagination of place and tourism consumption: A case study of Lijiang Ancient Town, China, *Tourism Geographies*, 12, 3, 2010, pp. 412–434.

ideologies. The family became caught up in the political climate of that period, described by Peterson<sup>22</sup> as:

During the Cultural Revolution, all *haiwai guanxi* were regarded as contemptible, if not treasonous. Domestic overseas Chinese, because of their historically rooted and continuing close economic, social, and personal ties abroad, were an especially conspicuous target. *Qiaojuan* and *guiqiao* were denounced and at times persecuted as “enemies of the people”, and “foreign spies”...<sup>23</sup>

In like manner, the family of the Malayan refugee-returnee interviewed suffered greatly as a result of similar accusations. The memories of those difficult times remain etched deeply in his memory even though he is now in his sixties. Up till now, he wants little to do with the villagers in the farm who come from Bangka and responded to further questions about them with a disapproving sneer.

Concerning the tourism development of the farms, the farm inhabitants expressed reservations over the sustainability of this economic strategy as a revenue-generating enterprise for the farms. As the research progressed through repeated visits, respondents from one of the farms gradually revealed that the farm’s tourism venture has been making losses for consecutive years. A respondent identifying as a second generation inhabitant said half-jokingly that the local cultural performance venue known as the *fengqingyuan* (‘cultural custom garden’; see Figure 1 for an example) ought to be renamed the *fengrenyuan* (‘madhouse’) because ‘the wages there are so low that it would be crazy to work there’. Another respondent told us that he had scratched away his house number on a signboard that pointed tourists to his home, presented by the tourism planners as an example of how the Southeast Asian refugee-returnees lived. He said the tourism planners had not obtain his permission to put his house number on the signboard and he felt like his family has been put on display like animals in a zoo.

[Insert Figure 1]

**Figure 1 Example of an abandoned performance venue modeled after Indonesian architectural style (Source: authors’ own)**

The discussion in this section shows that tourism planners have capitalised on claims to multiculturalism and diasporic consciousness to reinvent the overseas Chinese farms as revenue-generating ventures. However, the multiculturalism featured is superficial and glosses over the tensions between plural cultural groups. It also trivialises and commodifies the Southeast Asian cultures represented on the farms. The next section further highlights how assimilation processes have subsumed the transnational cultural identities of the later generations.

*Generational transitions, assimilation processes*

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<sup>22</sup> Glen Peterson, Socialist China and the huaqiao, *Modern China*, 14, 3, 1988, pp. 309-335.

<sup>23</sup> Peterson, Socialist China and the huaqiao, p. 312.

Despite claims to multiculturalism, a prevailing Han Chinese national identity has absorbed aspects of the transnational cultural identities once embodied by the original cohorts of refugee-returnees. Visits to a local school in one of the farms showed that the school projects a multicultural educational environment for the students that come from the farm and neighbouring villages. The walls are decorated with colourful large information posters featuring Southeast Asian geographies, festivals and the multicultural cuisines of the farm's refugee-returnees (see Figure 2). However, there is no mention of the difficult forced migration circumstances experienced by the earlier cohorts of refugee-returnees. The language of instruction in school is Mandarin and the only second language the school children learn is rudimentary English. The school principal divulged that children of new internal migrants and the locally born Chinese from villages in the vicinity make up the population composition of the school now. The grandchildren of the refugee-returnees, though likely to have returned to the farm to be cared for by their grandparents temporarily, usually move back to the cities to join their parents once they are of school-going age. This is because their parents want them to have a better educational environment in urban schools.

[Insert Figure 2]

**Figure 2 The multicultural cuisine of the farm inhabitants as featured on an information board in the school (Source: author's own)**

Able-bodied adults from the farm have been out-migrating independently to prosperous Chinese cities to find employment (*dagong*) as peasant workers (*nongmingong*) after strict internal migration control was lifted in recent years. This mobility is different from the earlier labour deployment policy in which the *Qiaoban*, acting on behalf of state-owned enterprises, sent the second generation youths to take up jobs in the cities. The later batch of out-migrants sometimes start small businesses selling cooked food, clothing or electronic items in the cities. Others take on low-paying jobs as factory workers or kitchen help through the recommendation of fellow villagers. Such waged work pays around 2000 *yuan* (300 USD) per month. These jobs are still considered better paying than what they would earn on the farm as cultural performers for the tourism venture. The enterprising out-migrants that persevere save enough to buy a small apartment in the city and succeed in relocating their *hukou*, or household registration, to the city.<sup>24</sup>

But as Han<sup>25</sup> documents, the *nongmingong* experience racialisation and discrimination in the cities on the basis of their physical comportment and 'caste' backgrounds. So life for the children of the refugee-returnees, unless they are in white-collar professions, is not easy outside of the farms too. Some in the younger generation are unable to endure the

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<sup>24</sup> As 'returnees', their parents had been entitled to the non-rural hukou (*fei nongye hukou*) therefore enabling their children to inherit this status that can be transferred to the cities if they are able to prove their long term urban residency. The hukou refers to the household registration system in China, which distinguishes the social rights of urban residents from rural residents.

<sup>25</sup> Dong Han, Policing and racialisation of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33, 4, 2010, pp. 593-610.

toil of working in the cities or have been retrenched from their jobs and they end up returning to the farm, waiting for their fellow villagers working in the cities to introduce them to new job opportunities. During conversations with youths who have returned under these circumstances, they confided that they are the subject of village gossip and scorn because they are seen to be ‘failed migrants’. Apart from the young adults who stay behind to work in the farms, this is the other group of youths are still living in the farms but only because their stints in the cities had been unsuccessful.

Unlike the first-generation’s sentimental recounting of their lives in Southeast Asia, the second and third generations still remaining on the farms could tell us little about the countries their parents and grandparents had come from. They recognise their bicultural identities as Malayan-, Indonesian- or Vietnamese-Chinese but few have been to visit the countries their parent and grandparents had fled. Sometimes with a sheepish grin and at other times matter-of-factly, the Indonesian-Chinese and Vietnamese-Chinese youth would admit that they no longer speak *Bahasa* Indonesian or the Vietnamese language. They say in schools they had not been taught these languages since the language of instruction is Mandarin. At home they are unable to communicate with their older family members in *Bahasa* Indonesian or the Vietnamese language too. Few of the younger generation members we met on the farm have visited the Southeast Asian countries their parents or grandparents come from. This is not only a matter of travel expenses but also because they lack familiarity with those countries and they don’t speak the languages of those Southeast Asian countries anymore. In comparison, several of the older generation have returned to visit the countries they left. One Indonesian respondent in his seventies told us proudly, ‘it was easy for me to get through immigration in Indonesia because I spoke *Bahasa* to the immigration officer. She even chatted happily to me for a while’.

At a karaoke bar one evening, amidst the cacophony of a sing-a-long and *caiquan* games (a popular finger-guessing ritual accompanied by alcohol consumption), we asked one eighteen year old youth if he knows where his peers’ families had come from in Southeast Asia before they arrived in China. His lackadaisical reply was, ‘I don’t know and we are all *guiqiao* (returnees) so it doesn’t matter from which country we came’. Upon further probing he added, ‘when we are together we don’t ask each other things like this’. Indeed, his response is typical of the later generations who have little interest in family histories that pre-date their arrival in China. Due to their forced migration backgrounds and earlier societal and migration controls implemented by China, there is a period in which their family and cultural ties with Southeast Asia were severed. Unlike the older generation, they have little personal memories of family members remaining in Southeast Asia. This limits even the ‘emotional transnationalism’ described by Wolf<sup>26</sup>, in her study of second generation children of Filipino immigrants, that is characterised by sentimental relationships towards extended family members left in ‘the home that constitutes their parents and grandparents’ primary point of reference.’<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Diane Wolf, ‘There’s no place like “home”’: Emotional transnationalism and the struggles of second-generation Filipinos’ in Peggy Levitt and Mary C. Waters, *The Changing Face of Home: The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2009, pp. 255-294.

<sup>27</sup> Wolf, ‘There’s no place like ‘home’, p. 285.

One parent, himself a Malayan returnee who is married to a Vietnamese returnee, related bitterly, ‘my children don’t want to listen to our stories when we try to tell them about the difficulties we faced. They say to us “do you want us to feel grateful to you for suffering on our behalf?”’ Unlike the older generation that negotiates transnational identities, the sense of belonging experienced by the later generations is not oriented towards Southeast Asia anymore. However, it would be incorrect to claim that their sense of belonging is rooted in China because interactions and interviews with the younger generation suggest that even in China they experience rootlessness as they seek direction in their lives. As Zhou<sup>28</sup> notes of the children of Vietnamese refugees in America:

Most the refugees lack education, job skills, and measurable economic resources. They also suffered from the trauma of war and flight and from the severe emotional distress that they experienced at refugee camps... The parents’ low socioeconomic status makes it difficult for the children to succeed, even though both parents and children desperately want to get ahead.<sup>29</sup>

The same can be said of the children of the refugee-returnees who grew up in rural China. Even though their parents received state assistance when resettling in China, their families remain impoverished. The younger generation generally have low levels of educational achievement.<sup>30</sup> Those who move to the cities are doubly excluded from the urban population because, first, their forced migration family histories disadvantage them as a group within Chinese society that arrived with few resources, both materially as well as by way of human capital. Second, their rural backgrounds identify them as a ‘caste’<sup>31</sup> group in urban China. The social capital that they have through chain migration networks limits them to the blue-collar jobs in which their fellow villagers are employed in at the cities.

The passage of time leads to forgotten forced migration histories and in conjunction with language and other assimilation processes, the Southeast Asian cultures featured as multiculturalism in the farm are fast becoming little more than kitsch displays of ‘cultural exoticism’<sup>32</sup> for tourism consumption. Alongside this, inter-marriage trends are common between the progeny of the refugee-returnees and the locally born Chinese from neighbouring villages or the new internal migrants from other parts of China, resulting in the later generations becoming increasingly distanced from their Southeast Asian heritage.

There is, however, an added dimension to the socially complex trends described above. A number of the earlier out-migrants deployed by the *Qiaoban* to work in the cities

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<sup>28</sup> Min Zhou, ‘Straddling different worlds: The acculturation of Vietnamese refugee children’, in R.G. Rumbaut and A. Portes, *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*, Berkeley, L. A. and London, University of California Press, 2001, pp. 187-227.

<sup>29</sup> Zhou, *Straddling different worlds*, p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> This observation is corroborated by Han’s (2013) study of the Vietnamese refugees that were resettled in China. He notes that, ‘the lack of education and skills has made it difficult for [the refugees] to venture into non-agricultural sectors of the economy. When the reform of the state farms started to threaten the existence of their farms... many of them felt inadequate and became distraught’ (ibid, 42); Han Xiaorong, *Exiled to the ancestral land: The resettlement, stratification and assimilation of the refugees from Vietnam in China*, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 10, 1, 2013, pp. 25-46.

<sup>31</sup> Han, *Policing and racialisation of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities*, pp. 596-597.

<sup>32</sup> Yang et al., *Ethnic tourism development*, pp. 753.

continue to cherish the memories they have of growing up in the farms and the cultural identity associated with the overseas Chinese farms. This group that settled in the cities have limited personal ties and contact with the Southeast Asian countries in which their parents claim belonging. However, they filter claims to transnational identities by invoking the labels, *guiqiao* or *huaqiao*. To emphasise the patriotism associated with their parents' decision to return to China, they lay claim to a *guiqiao* (returnee) identity while downplaying the forced migration histories prompting return by the *nanqiao* (refugees). To highlight their distinctive cultural identities fomented from growing up on the overseas Chinese farms populated by Southeast Asian communities, they claim to be *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) even though they have not lived overseas. What these observations attest to are the slippery ways in which the categories of *huaqiao*, *guiqiao* and *nanqiao* have been used historically and even in contemporary times; this is what Spivak<sup>33</sup> terms as 'strategic essentialism' but with a Chinese twist.

### *Conclusion*

This paper considered the way that transnationalism, multiculturalism and assimilation processes co-exist in tension in contemporary China. The historical forced migration of Chinese co-ethnics from Southeast Asia and their resettlement in China are a phenomenon little known outside of Mainland China. But their experiences provide a useful analytical lens for understanding the resilience of transnational identities in the lives of forced migrants more generally. The case of China, however, also demonstrates how state planners capitalise upon the distinctive cultural identities of the refugee-returnees to market the farms as multiculturalism communities for tourism as a result of wider economic reforms in Chinese society. The end-result is a semblance of multiculturalism that is trivialised and disassociated from the everyday experiences of the refugee-returnees, some of whom bear racist attitudes covertly towards their fellow villagers.

This paper also moves the focus of integration and assimilation debates away from the existing scholarship on Chinese immigrants based in North American, European and Southeast Asian experiences. The paper further enlarges debate on majority/minority relations in China to examine critically the nuanced social differences observable within the category recognised as Han Chinese through the return migration experiences of co-ethnics born and raised abroad (*guiqiao*). The *guiqiao* had adopted the cultural habits and language of their host societies in Southeast Asia, which sets them apart from the China-born Chinese. The objectification and commodification of their *guiqiao* identities for domestic tourism serve to normalize the culture of the locally born Chinese and assert a new national narrative of contemporary China that is distinct from the overseas Chinese identity.

The discussion of the second and third generations signals that the younger generations are experiencing assimilation processes. Amongst the second generation that had been deployed by the state in earlier years to work in the cities, a sustained period of time away from the farms triggers nostalgia that materialises as efforts to maintain the transnational identities of their parents. However, the cultural practices they retain are

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<sup>33</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York, Routledge, 1993.

limited by the lack of personal immersion in the Southeast Asian cultures their parents knew well. For them and their children in the third generation, claims to *huaqiao* and *guiqiao* identities are situationally invoked but their identity framings can be more appropriately described as anchored in and filtered by their experiences of growing up in the overseas Chinese farms, rather than an overseas experience in itself.

As for those that moved to Chinese cities independently when internal migration controls were lifted, the research suggests that they experience a rootlessness arising from their doubly disadvantaged rural and forced migration backgrounds. Their low educational levels coupled with the dynamics of chain migration networks that trap them to low-paying casual labour jobs limits their upward social mobility. This paper thus suggests that further research can be conducted to study the lives of the younger generation that is considered *guiguo huaqiao* (returnees from abroad) but whose experiences are inflected by the intersection of forced migration family histories, bi-cultural backgrounds, class subjectivities and rural locations. Moreover, as China opens its doors to new immigration, other types of Chinese diasporic descendants are arriving (or ‘returning’) to study, work live in the ancestral homeland. Their identity negotiations as persons of Chinese ethnicity born abroad but who are more removed from the nation-building project of contemporary China and its assimilation inclinations provide new research avenues for overseas Chinese studies and will help develop a better understanding of China in transition