

‘Refugee’ or ‘returnee’? The ethnic geopolitics of diasporic resettlement in China and intergenerational change

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Abstract: The interrelationship between forced migration, return migration and ethnicity remains relatively unexplored in current scholarship. By using the case of China’s resettlement policy towards diasporic Chinese descendants expelled from Southeast Asia during 1949-1979 and examining their contemporary situation, this paper highlights the way scholarship on forced migration and ethnically privileged (return) migration can mutually enrich one another. The paper, first, examines the geopolitical context of Chinese forced migration and the premises of China’s preferential policy towards co-ethnics, which labelled the ‘refugees’ as ‘returnees’ intentionally. It argues that metaphors of extraterritorial ethnic kinship and ‘return’ are used to justify ethnic privilege but the co-ethnics experienced socio-spatial exclusion in China because of their cultural distinctiveness. Second, the paper explores the impact of the post-1980s reforms on the rural overseas Chinese farms in which the co-ethnics were resettled. This discussion suggests that the rescaling of governance brought about policies that capitalise upon their distinctive Southeast Asian identities to reinvent the farms as economic zones and tourism sites. The sustainability of this economic strategy is, however, questioned in the third part of the paper, which considers intergenerational change now happening on the farms. It argues that international migration histories are transitioning to new internal migration flows. Such migration succession trends may transform the ethnically privileged status of the farms and their inhabitants. The qualitative findings in this paper direct broader inquiry into the complex ethnic geopolitics underpinning mobilisations of diasporic belonging and also the implications of intergenerational change.

Keywords: forced migration, return migration, ethnicity, diaspora, intergenerational change and China

Introduction

‘During that period, there were too many Indonesian-Chinese that had to be repatriated to China. Houses could not be built in time to accommodate them. The builders worked day and night to build new houses’ (He 2008, 85)

The above anecdote from a Chinese periodical captures the mood of the 1960s in China when it received an influx of Chinese diasporic descendants expelled by Indonesia. China took in these co-ethnics and conferred them the dual status of ‘refugees’ (*nanqiao*) as well as ‘returnees’ (*guiqiao*). The Indonesian-Chinese were but one group of co-ethnics allowed privileged entry; the Chinese state accepted three cohorts of co-ethnics under conditions of forced migration from 1949-1979. The Malayan-Chinese fleeing persecution for their communist affiliations in the British-ruled Malayan Union arrived first (1949-1953). Following that came the aforementioned Indonesian-Chinese escaping anti-Chinese hostilities in post-independence Indonesia (1959-69) and subsequently the Vietnamese-Chinese (1978-1979) evading ethnic repression by the Vietnamese authorities¹ (Fitzgerald 1970 and 1972; Godley 1980 and 1989).

These populations in forced exile could have been categorised as ‘refugees’ as they suffered economic and/or political persecution but the Chinese state described them as ‘returnees’ and gave them preferential resettlement treatment. This paper examines the premises of this policy by setting it in the context of ethnically privileged migration (Joppke and Zeff 2001; Tsuda 2009), which is a distinct type of return migration by diasporic descendants (Potter and Conway 2009). Ethnically privileged migration refers to state policies prioritising the return of co-ethnics to the homeland². This paper addresses the fluidity and political value of the labels, ‘refugee’ and ‘returnee’, as used in the Chinese context to justify state decisions on ethnically privileged and forced migrations. The discussion generates new insights by considering the intersection between ethnically privileged and forced migration analyses. This paper will refer to the

abovementioned groups as Southeast Asian ‘refugee-returnees’ (henceforth SEA refugee-returnees) to signal the mixed identities attached to them while bearing in mind the political currency underlying such labels. The Chinese state accommodated them in undeveloped farmland known as the *huaqiao nongchang*, translated as the ‘overseas Chinese farms’³.

The farms also housed other types of returnees such as overseas-born Chinese professionals, intellectuals and students who had returned voluntarily in the patriotic fervour of the early 1950s (Fitzgerald 1972; Godley and Coppel 1999). Many were allocated by the Chinese state to the same farms as the refugee populations, often under the compulsion of internal migration controls. Despite their voluntary return, this other group of co-ethnics underwent internal displacement within China. During the Cultural Revolution, they experienced stigmatisation because of their overseas ties and some were incarcerated. Although their histories are qualitatively different from the SEA refugee-returnees, the destinies of both groups became intertwined through their shared experiences of enforced relocation and the ethnically privileged policies shaping their lives on the farms.

The mixed populations represented on the farms, coupled with avoidance of the negative connotations attached to the label, ‘refugee’, resulted in these sites being called the overseas Chinese farms rather than refugee camps. There are 84 such state-owned farms in China today. From the 1980s onwards, their governance and economic development became devolved to provincial and local governments. This paper draws attention to the

‘rearticulation of state power’ (Ma 2005, 487) in the overseas Chinese farms. It argues that contrary to portrayals of cultural difference as a liability (e.g. ‘outsiders’) in both ethnically privileged and forced migrations (e.g. Fox 2009; Takenaka 2009; Brun 2010; Da Lomba 2010), the situation of the SEA refugee-returnees demonstrates that their cultural distinctiveness lends itself to opportunity for reinventing the farms in the post-1980s reform period.

The generational⁴ cohort of SEA refugee-returnees who arrived in China during 1949-1979 are now in their sixties or older. The earlier inflows from Malaya and Indonesia came as children or adolescents and grew into adulthood in China. They retained their Southeast Asian identities through parental influence or personal memories; their parents, the pioneer refugee-returnees, have passed on. As for the Vietnamese-Chinese pioneers, many are now in old age. The children and grandchildren of all three groups have few, if any links, with Southeast Asia. This paper contributes to forced migration studies by focusing on China, a country not known conventionally as host to refugees, and paying attention to the SEA refugee-returnees who are in old age. The paper further suggests that examining intergenerational change⁵, more common in forced migration analyses, contributes to the scholarship on ethnically privileged migration too. The migration succession from international to new internal migration that is observable presently on the overseas Chinese farms highlights how temporal perspectives can illuminate spatial transitions.

To recap, this paper will, first, argue that studying the intersections between ethnically

privileged and forced migrations can enrich both sets of scholarship. It highlights the way co-ethnicity justified China's extraterritorial reach while labels like 'returnee' rather than 'refugee' helped legitimise preferential policies for co-ethnics. Second, the paper proposes a different perspective on analyses of cultural similarity/dissimilarity in ethnically privileged migration and forced migration studies. Instead of viewing cultural difference as a liability, the paper suggests that cultural distinctiveness has been mobilised as an economic strategy. Third, the paper foregrounds the significance of intergenerational change and migration succession for redefining ethnically privileged migration. Ageing demographics on the overseas Chinese farms call into question the sustainability of their ethnically privileged status and the economic strategy marketing cultural distinctiveness. This discussion also contributes to theorisations on the links between international and internal migration.

The next section develops a conceptual dialogue between the literature on ethnically privileged and forced migrations to stimulate productive lines of inquiry. The section following discusses the methodology informing this paper. Then the paper outlines the geopolitical histories leading to the establishment of the overseas Chinese farms and examines the premises of ethnic privilege so as to achieve the paper's first goal of troubling the assumptions behind labels like 'refugees' and 'returnees'. Thereafter the paper considers the reinvention of the farms from 1980 onwards. This discussion realises the paper's second goal of demonstrating the way the distinctive identities of the SEA refugees-returnees are construed strategically. Finally, the paper highlights the manner in which new internal migrants are replacing the ageing labour of the refugee-returnees in

the absence of their adult children. This analysis underlines the paper's third goal of relating intergenerational change to migration succession trends.

'Returnee' or 'refugee'?

Return migration has received significant scholarly attention lately in line with a growing interest in the complex routes wrought by transnationalism (Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Salaff et al 2008). Return migration can be categorised in two ways. The first type refers to the return of first-generation immigrants to their country of birth, a topic of considerable interest to academics and policymakers because of the purported benefits to be accrued from the financial investments, knowledge and networks accompanying return to the homeland (Saxenian 2006). The second type refers to the return of later-generation diasporic descendants to an ancestral homeland, which is also known as counter-diasporic migration (King and Christou 2006, 818). These writings focus on the way that roots, identity and belonging prompt the return migration of diasporic descendants although they grew up abroad (e.g. Potter and Conway 2009; Tsuda 2009).

Ethnically privileged migration can be considered a sub-set of counter-diasporic return as it refers to the movement of people back to their ancestral homelands even if they have been raised abroad (Tsuda 2009), but it is distinct because the ancestral homeland also provides them priority to admission and special rights because of perceived ethnic affinities (Brubaker 1998). Extant literature provides examples of countries that implement preferential migration policies for co-ethnics⁶, such as in Israel where the Law of Return gives Israelis abroad the right of return and a route towards citizenship (Joppke

and Zeff 2001). To a lesser extent, the *nikkeijin* (who have Japanese ancestry but foreign citizenships) also have preferential immigration visas but they are not entitled to Japanese citizenship (Tsuda 2003). Part of the contemporary literature on ethnically privileged migration has arguably moved away from an historical emphasis on forced migration, such as in the case of Jewish diasporic return, towards analyses that emphasise labour migration from poorer countries to richer homelands (Tsuda 2009, 3). The case of Chinese forced migration presented here re-centres the role that conflict and displacement play in shaping ethnically privileged migration while keeping in view the economic logics that gain prominence over time.

Ethnically privileged migration throws up new conceptual and empirical issues when analysed alongside forced migration. The label, 'refugee', has always been a contested and subjective category. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as a person 'who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (UNHCR 1951). Underlying this definition of 'refugee' is an element of coercion, or difficult circumstances that compel flight. However, as Van Hear et al (2009, 4) argue, migrants have 'varying degrees of choice and [...] experience varying degrees of compulsion'. They point to the salience of 'mixed' migration circumstances and motivations instead (ibid, 11-12). The question this paper asks is why were the ethnic Chinese refugees from Southeast Asia categorised as returnees by the Chinese state, thus connoting choice?

Foregrounding the overlaps between forced and voluntary migrations complicates state-sponsored depictions of refuge and return in telling ways.

In the forced migration literature, 'return' is associated with repatriation to the country refugees left but consider home (Black 1991). However, 'return' in the Chinese context from 1949-1979 referred to those who sought protection in the ancestral homeland, although many of them were overseas-born Chinese who did recognise China as 'home' until events compelled them to seek refuge there. Studying the intersection between ethnically privileged and forced migrations leads us to probe how are identity, belonging and ancestry defined? These concepts are slippery and contested yet they are taken as given in the labels conferred by states to groups, such as 'returnees' instead of 'refugees'. Labels assign simplified meanings to complex phenomena and 'develop their own rationale and legitimacy' (Zetter 2007, 180). Although some scholars suggest that the way refugees are legally defined and treated is decided by the state (Hayden 2006; Chimni 2009), others caution against essentialising state power and argue that notions of the state should be examined with respect to *when* (time period), *whom* (actors) and *where* (geography) (Painter 2006; Gill 2010). This approach recognises the contingency of state power depending on the way these variables play out⁷. Examining the historical circumstances and processes by which labels are made during forced migrations thus helps refine prevailing conceptualisations of ethnically privileged migrations.

Attentiveness to ethnically privileged migration analyses also bears potential for reconsidering portrayals of forced migrants as 'outsiders' in the host society or recipients

of aid and hospitality (e.g. Brun 2010; Da Lomba 2010). In ethnically privileged migration, co-ethnics ‘returning’ to an ancestral homeland are presumed to cohere easily with the indigenous⁸ population, which is bound by kinship obligations too (Joppke and Zeff 2001; Žmegač 2005). Yet assumed similarities actually accentuate cultural differences, such as in the way indigenous Hungarians see ethnic Hungarians from Romania as unskilled ‘Romanian’ labour migrants (Fox 2009). Likewise, there is societal segregation of the *nikkeijin* in Japanese society and internal differentiations between the *nikkeijin* of different nationalities too (Takenaka 2009). These views suggest that co-ethnics occupy a double-edged positionality as insiders and outsiders simultaneously. This paper factors such understandings into the analysis of Chinese forced migration, but also builds on it to consider how is cultural similarity and dissimilarity construed strategically and for what purpose? This analytical perspective adds theoretical value to understandings of ethnically privileged and forced migrations by bringing into view the malleability of identity and culture in changing societal contexts.

Indeed, ethnically privileged migration does not remain static. Such migration is studied mainly as a type of international migration with implications for integration or assimilation (Cook-Martin and Viladrich 2009; von Koppenfels 2009). Other scholars emphasise the transnational affiliations of these migrants (Takaneka 2009; CB Tan 2010). However, in what ways does ethnically privileged migration become redefined spatially over time? The scholarship on ethnically privileged migration has much to glean from analyses of intergenerational relations (rather than ‘generational’; see endnote 4) found in some forced migration literature (e.g. Liebkind 1993; Lewis 2008). This line of inquiry

opens up new avenues to consider how changes in intergenerational relations (i.e. intergenerational change), within the family and in relation to society, lead to migration succession trends. This paper highlights the transition from international migration by the SEA refugee-returnees to new internal migration patterns that are observable amongst their progeny who move elsewhere, resulting in new inflows by other indigenous Chinese. This analysis also bridges the divide often drawn between international and internal migration (Skeldon 2006). Before examining the above conceptual debates through the empirical analyses, the next section will discuss the methodology informing this paper.

Methodology

This research draws on, first, analyses of Chinese language newspapers, government reports and academic articles (1994-2010) on the overseas Chinese farms. Such an approach situates the SEA refugee-returnees in an historical context that informs analyses of contemporary developments on the farms. Second, the research also includes fieldwork at two overseas Chinese farms in different provinces of southern China. Third, formal and informal interviews were carried out with inhabitants of the farms. The farms will not be named so as to protect the anonymity of the research participants. The farms are situated in sub-tropical and tropical climates that are evocative of Southeast Asian environments, allowing the refugee-returnees to simulate living conditions in their former countries of residence. The rural farms are situated far inland but their provinces are proximate to international gateways like Hong Kong and Macau.

The farms visited were chosen because they belong to an earlier cohort of farms built in

the 1950s and 1960s, thus they have experienced demographic, governance, economic and social changes of relevance to this paper. One of the farms was built in 1951 and it is approximately 110 square kilometres in size, housing 13 500 refugee-returnees. The other farm measures only 28.6 square kilometres and accommodates 3500 refugee-returnees; it was established in 1963. The farms comprise an amalgamation of villages housing the refugee-returnees and indigenous Chinese villagers. These farms produce and process commodities such as coffee and sugarcane. However, agricultural products count for a shrinking share of farming revenue due to declining demand and falling commodity prices. The tourism appeal of the farms is being developed as an alternative revenue sector. Fieldwork was carried out mainly in the smaller farm because gatekeepers in the other farm limited the type and extent of research interactions with the community but the latter provides a comparative benchmark for considering the themes in this paper.

As an ethnic Chinese female researcher from a foreign nationality traveling in rural China, I enlisted the help of research ‘guides⁹’ for safety reasons and also because, as Mainland Chinese researchers, they had contacts and institutional affiliations that could facilitate access to the rural farms and insular communities. Their research credentials and indigenous Chinese backgrounds also improved my credibility amongst the farm communities although, like myself, they became positioned as ‘outsiders’ because of their urban and professional statuses. The SEA refugee-returnees and other Chinese on the farms regarded me as ethnic kin from abroad but my nationality-inflected Mandarin accent and bodily comportment accentuated my distinctiveness from them.

The fieldwork visits allowed for observation of life on the farms and research opportunities made possible as a result of what I would term, 'encounters with intent'. This phrase captures the intentional quality of the fieldwork process but also the serendipitous encounters (Marshall 2002) that act information sources and gateways to follow-on interviews. These encounters took place in homes, gardens, workplaces and tourism sites, resulting in invitations to drop by other socialising spaces such as the porches where cliques of elderly SEA refugee-returnees gather regularly in the evenings to reminisce about the past, which became a productive knowledge portal for me. Observations of life on the farms were recorded in a research diary.

We conducted group and individual interviews with the SEA refugee-returnees, family members returning for visits and new internal migrants that moved from poorer parts of China to work on the farms. These semi-structured interviews focused on their migration histories, lifestyles and familyhood patterns. Supplementary interviews were carried out with the management personnel to elicit their views on the development of the farms. Thirty-two individuals were interviewed in total. The interviews were not recorded in audio form at the request of the research participants. Instead detailed notes were taken after the interviews. All names used here are pseudonyms. As a qualitative study drawing on discourse analysis, observation and interviews, the findings in this paper are instructive for revealing analytical insights of life on the farms and allowing engagement with broader conceptual themes.

Chinese geopolitical claims to ethnic affinity

State policies promoting ethnically privileged migration are often situated in discourses of ethnic affinity that extends not only across international borders but also inter-generationally. China's treatment towards the SEA refugee-returnees can be contextualised in a broader history of Chinese return migration, particularly after the communist victory in 1949 that welcomed educated and skilled diasporic Chinese and their progeny to return and contribute to nation-building (X Huang 2005). It is in this context that the Chinese state could portray the SEA refugee-returnees as loyal diasporic descendants (F Zhang 2006). Although most did not possess the skills desired by the Chinese state, they were described as 'distinctive', 'special' or 'unique' (*teshu* or *dute*) (e.g. Zheng 2003 and Sun 2009). This sleight of hand obscuring their forced migration backgrounds is made possible also by the co-presence of another group of patriots who had moved back voluntarily in the early 1950s but were relocated to the overseas Chinese farms as part of China's internal migration controls (refer to introduction). Earlier government and news reports on the overseas Chinese farms regularly describe both groups as one community of loyal returnees, sometimes placing emphasis on their patriotism and at other times highlighting their 'victimisation' abroad.

Mobilising discourses and spatial metaphors depicting the SEA refugees as ethnic Chinese kin who are returning to the homeland enabled China to extend an extraterritorial reach and justify preferential policies for co-ethnics. Nonetheless, China's view of the overseas Chinese as ethnic kin has triggered sensitive relationships with Southeast Asian

countries that have sizable Chinese populations (Godley 1980). Hence China restricted dual citizenship in 1958 to signal that it encourages the overseas Chinese to assimilate. Its response to communist repression in Malaya (1949-1953) was subdued compared to events in Indonesia and later Vietnam. Fitzgerald (1970, 11) argues that this is because China did not support the Malayan communist insurgency, preferring a policy of 'peaceful coexistence' with its neighbours. It also introduced a resettlement policy for co-ethnics who were unable or unwilling to remain in their countries of residence, presumably to minimise further ethnic disputes with the countries concerned.

However, this policy coincided with tensions over anti-Chinese hostilities in Indonesia (1959-1969) during which droves of Indonesian-Chinese went to China, some due to actual violence and others as a result of perceived discrimination. Later in Vietnam, escalating Sino-Vietnamese tensions after 1975 coupled with repressive policies towards the Vietnamese-Chinese resulted in nearly a quarter of a million people entering China via the land border at northern Vietnam (1978-1979) (Ungar 1987:609). In southern Vietnam, China sent ships to resettle the co-ethnics but negotiations with the Vietnamese authorities collapsed (*ibid*). Significant numbers of Vietnamese-Chinese in the south, presumably those attached to Vietnam or who were cynical towards China, remained in Cholon or made their way to third countries.

Additional tensions simmered during the above episodes due to the nationality status of the co-ethnics abroad, influencing the views of the international community, their countries of residence and China towards their migration status. Some overseas Chinese

had retained their Chinese nationality whereas others became citizens in their countries of residence. The former group China could legitimately claim as returnees. However, China also questioned whether those who naturalised abroad did so willingly or under compulsion by the governments in their countries of residence (see Suryadinata 2002). Those amongst this group who went to China had to renounce their foreign nationalities to signal they returned ‘voluntarily’ (personal fieldwork).

The *Qiaoban*, a government agency with federal powers and sub-national units, managed the resettlement of the SEA refugee-returnees together with provincial and local governments. First, China implemented a dual policy of dispersal and concentration instead of accommodating them in temporary abode. The professionals were sent to cities but the majority resettled in permanent farm clusters built alongside indigenous Chinese villages. Second, the farms came under the ownership of the Chinese state thus entitling its inhabitants to state-sponsored farming equipment, housing, schools, food provisions and fixed salaries regardless of the profitability of the farms. The farms functioned as self-contained units with factories, schools, hospitals and other facilities. Third, in 1991 the Chinese state implemented legislation to protect the rights of ethnic Chinese returnees and their dependents (*guiqiao qiaojuan quanyi baohu fa*)¹⁰. These government measures resulted in the spatial and social segregation of the SEA refugee-returnees from indigenous Chinese populations.

The SEA refugee-returnees faced integration difficulties despite, or indeed, because of government attention. News reports in the 1990s regularly highlight their impoverished

conditions and discrimination by indigenous Chinese who regarded them, not as loyal compatriots, but as scroungers that benefited disproportionately from government assistance (Tang 1994, 12; Liu and Qiao 2002). Some saw them as refugees rather than returnees that had come back to China of their own initiative. Others criticised them for possessing a dependency mentality (*'deng, kao, yao'*) (Zhao 2007). The refugee-returnees also suffered during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) because of their former capitalist backgrounds and overseas links. A number of them obtained exit permits for onward migration. Godley (1989) suggests that several hundred thousand overseas Chinese returnees, including the SEA refugee-returnees presumably, left for Hong Kong and Macau during 1970-1973.

Yao (2009) reports that some paid hefty sums to be smuggled, not only to Hong Kong and Macau, but also farther destinations like North America and Europe. Others left China through relatives who sponsored their immigration to these countries. Those who remained in China continued to receive government-sponsored food packages despite a widespread shortage, thus triggering the resentment of the indigenous Chinese (Godley 1989). Some land conflicts with the indigenous Chinese were resolved only through the amalgamation of surrounding villages with the overseas Chinese farms so that the indigenous Chinese would enjoy the same privileges (F Zheng 1995). As with other ethnically privileged migrations (Joppke 2005; Žmegač 2005; Fox 2009; Takenaka 2009), the SEA refugee-returnees are identified as co-ethnics by the state yet they face degrees of exclusion because of their former nationalities, cultural distinctiveness and the ethnic privileges given to them.

Over time the majority of the refugee-returnees have obtained identity cards affirming their legal status in China through possession of the *hukou* (household registration) status. The wait for identity cards can be longer than 30 years and until this is obtained, they did not have the legal right to work, apply for a driving license or savings accounts nor loans to buy farming equipment (R Huang 1997). Lacking an identity card limited their access to better-paying jobs and made them vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. There is an internal differentiation within China's *hukou* system between *fei nongye hukou* (non-rural or urban hukou) and *nongye hukou* (rural hukou). Those with rural hukou status have restricted residential and employment rights (Kam 1999; Fan 2002). In earlier years, China's hukou system kept the SEA refugee-returnees from relocating. Despite the ethnically privileged migration policies bringing about initial international migration and resettlement privileges, the internal migration controls and the hukou system limited their mobility and rights. However, the spatial restrictions have been relaxed partially in recent years, bringing about changes to the population composition and character of the overseas Chinese farms. This will be examined in the penultimate section.

The preceding discussion investigated the manner in which the Chinese state legitimises preferential resettlement policies by capitalising upon co-ethnicity claims. The SEA refugee-returnees have been resettled in China with special rights unlike other non-Chinese refugees who face difficulty obtaining legal recognition by the Chinese state and conferred any type of temporary or permanent status. This discussion demonstrates the

way that spatial metaphors of co-ethnic extraterritorial relationships and ‘return’ are drawn upon by homeland states as a strategy to justify ethnically privileged and forced migration decisions. Nonetheless, the discussion also illustrates the discrimination and sustained inequality experienced by the SEA refugee-returnees, positioning them as cultural outsiders despite co-ethnicity. The next section develops this argument further but also highlights the opportunities made available to them during the post-1980s reform era as a result of their distinctive identities and cultures.

Reinventing the farms

Many scholars have documented the re-scaling of governance and economic development in urban China (e.g. Lin 1999; Ma 2005; Smart and Lin 2007). Similar events characterised the evolution of the rural overseas Chinese farms in the 1980s though in distinctive ways. The most significant of the farm reforms pertained to the devolution of governance from the federal level to sub-national units. Concerns that the productivity of the farms are lower than non-state owned farms led to farm reforms in the belief that provincial and local governments would be more responsive to local conditions and the need for change. They were also thought to be better suited to meeting the social welfare needs of the SEA refugee-returnees and integrating the farms with the surrounding villages (Liu and Qiao 2002; *Yuefu* 2005). The federal government still gave the overall directions but immediate responsibility for the profitability and social stability of the farms became vested in the hands of provincial and local governments who interpreted the central directives according to the distinctive geographical resources, societal composition and cultural heritage of each farm.

Provincial and local governments, such as in Guangdong, implemented systematic *shebao* (social welfare protection) for the SEA refugee-returnees, including housing improvements, pensions, medical, unemployment, work injury and maternity privileges (Liu and Qiao 2002). Despite that, in Guangdong a subsequent provincial government circular reports persistent problems such as poor farming productivity, low salaries, dilapidated housing and inadequate medical and employment protection (*Yuefu* 2005). Zhao (2004, 12) also found that after the reforms, 70 percent of all such farms in China still made net losses from 1985-1995. In 2006 a systematic inspection of the farms was carried out at the behest of the federal government and a subsequent report suggested that the majority of the farms continue to be unprofitable while the refugee-returnees endure poor quality housing, low salaries and limited social welfare protection (F Zhang 2006; Gao 2007).

As such, some local governments have been reluctant to take over the management of the overseas Chinese farms, which are seen to be a liability because of the costs of education, healthcare, pensions, salaries and policing the farms. The farms are often depicted as problematic because of an historical baggage (*lishi baofu*) of bad debts, poor management and the dependency-prone habits of its inhabitants (Liu and Qiao 2002; S Zheng 2003). Such portrayals naturalise the purported differences between the SEA refugee-returnees and the indigenous Chinese who claim the former has been adulterated by capitalist influences from abroad. It also augments images of the Chinese state (*guojia*), a common point of reference used by the refugee-returnees during interviews, as

the provider and protector despite its strategic retreat after decentralising governance downwards. However, the refugee-returnees interviewed said that they face shrinking benefits and eroding representation after the devolution to local governance. In the past they could send representatives to direct their concerns to the federal level of the *Qiaoban* but now they can only turn to the local authorities for help.

Significantly, the reforms resulted in many farms being revamped, on the one hand, as economic zones targeting overseas Chinese investment from ASEAN¹¹, and on the other hand, as tourism sites with Southeast Asian architecture and culture. In Fujian province alone, 17 farms became converted into economic zones (Ruan and Xie 2004). The government planners believe that the historical ties the refugee-returnees and other inhabitants have with Southeast Asia, and which they might still maintain, would help facilitate inward investment. The tourism potential of the overseas Chinese farms lies in its reputation as the ‘Mini United Nations’ in China (He 2008), featuring multicultural communities and Southeast Asian architecture and culture.

For example, the smaller farm is landscaped with palm tree leaves swaying gently in the wind and rustic pavilions made from *attap* leaves, a material that formerly characterised housing in Southeast Asia (

1). Plants used in Southeast Asian cuisine, such as Thai lemongrass, are also grown on the farm and labelled for Chinese tourists. When tour groups visit the farm, cultural performances are carried out by youths from the farms. The repertoire consists of Indonesian music and dance intermingled with Chinese pop music and impromptu karaoke songs by audience members. Not all of the youth performers are from Southeast Asian backgrounds; indigenous Chinese youths are roped in to fill staff shortages. Some are married to descendants of the SEA refugee-returnees but others are from the neighbouring villages. The other farm features a restaurant in which the VIP room is decorated in the ornate style of the Malay sultanate and its menu showcases a variety of Indonesian dishes, including *otah kueh* (a nine-layer cake made from tapioca flour). The interior of another café on the same farm is modelled after Malaysian-style verandas and reflects elegant Balinese architecture. The roads of the farm are lined with rows of busy construction and the real estate boom here courts wealthy domestic buyers from other parts of China looking for a second home in a tropical holiday destination.

The refugees-returnees became producers of tourist attractions as a result of the 'opportunity structure' (Rath 2007, 6) opened up by the post-1980s reforms in China as well as the realisation that their cultural identities can be marketed for tourist consumption. For example, an official publication by the smaller farm emphasised that it houses more than 3000 refugee-returnees originating from 13 countries (W Huang 2005). According to the publication, the two main languages spoken on the farm are Bahasa Indonesia and Vietnamese. It also claims the refugee-returnees cook their cultural cuisine on a daily basis featuring spicy dishes such as curry and *satay* (marinated meat served on

skewers), and during festive occasions the different cultural groups don their traditional dress. Personal fieldwork visits paid to the farm indicate that it is common to see older men dressed in *batik* shirts, characteristic of attire in Indonesia, or women wearing conical Vietnamese hats (*non la*). In this manner, the language, cuisine and attire of the SEA refugee-returnees lend potential for tourism revenue.

In a study of a farm in southern Fujian, CB Tan (2010, 549) argues that the refugee-returnees have ‘reterritorialised [sic] their Southeast Asian community in China’ by recreating their lifestyle outside of Indonesia. This paper supports this argument but further adds that the re-territorialised cultural identities of the refugee-returnees intersect with the re-scaling of state power in the post-1980s, resulting in the distinctive reinvention of the overseas Chinese farms as economic zones and tourism sites featuring ‘Southeast Asia’ in China. Markers of cultural difference are mobilised strategically by local leaders and the community for adapting the farms to a reform era emphasising self-sufficiency and profitability. As Mitchell (1993) argues, cultural identities and multiculturalism may be appropriated to advance economic purposes.

However, much of the cultural heritage portrayed for tourism is done in a kitsch manner that commodifies the remnants of lived culture remaining for the ageing refugee-returnees. A farm management personnel interviewed said that dances are performed only when they expect a tour group and it is no longer part of the habitual lifestyles of the younger generation. The cultural representations presented to tourists are a pastiche that trivialises the heterogeneity of Southeast Asia both regionally as well as within a country.

Moreover, the sustainability of this economic strategy is questionable in light of intergenerational change and migration succession that are changing the demographic and cultural make-up of the farms, which will be discussed next.

Intergenerational change and migration succession

Migration analyses on the 1.5- and second-generations vary between assimilation (e.g. Zhou 1997; Levitt and Waters 2002) and transnationalism perspectives (e.g. Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Salaff et al 2008). However, these analyses are limited to international migration trends and focus on immigrant adaptation across generations. To avoid compartmentalising age categories, some geographers advocate studying intergenerational relations instead (Hopkins and Pain 2007; Vanderbeck 2007). Horton and Kraftl (2008) question the extent to which this approach is productive but as Hopkins and Pain (2008, 289) respond, ‘intergenerationality does things and is made to do things’. This paper extends the research frontier by asking what are the spatial manifestations of intergenerational change, not only within the family unit, but also in relation to the society in which migrants and their progeny are situated? The focus on intergenerational relations is thus broadened to an analysis of demographic and spatial change (i.e. intergenerational change and migration succession).

Migration processes underpin economic and social transformations in contemporary China. Extant literature on Chinese migration focuses predominantly on either international migration (Xiang 2003) or rural-urban internal migration (Kam 1999; Fan 2002). In contradistinction, this section examines the relationship between international

and internal migration, two processes that are considered separately usually (Skeldon 2006). Its aim is not to provide a macro-theory of migration but, drawing on forced migration analyses of intergenerational change, signal the way this leads to migration succession thereby redefining ethnically privileged migration too. Of particular significance to this discussion is the transition from international to internal migration. King and Skeldon (2010) propose reasons to explain this migration sequence, such as when emigration results in labour shortages that are filled by internal migrants or when remittances by international migrants lead to development and demand for internal migrant labour. The following discussion contributes to their theorisations by highlighting the way intergenerational change and migration succession propel a shift from international to internal migration.

The majority of the population left on the overseas Chinese farms are the elderly, youths and children. The depopulation of able-bodied adults presents challenges for those who remain behind. For example, Malayan-born Mrs Li, who is in her eighties, walked with a limp when we met her; she had broken her leg during a fall but her children work in distant cities, leaving her without a caregiver. One of her sons was instructed by his siblings to return home with the assurance that they will provide financial support. However, this is an interim measure and when her injury is better he will return to the city, leaving her behind again. Mrs Li's sorry situation is not unusual on the overseas Chinese farms where care for the fragile aged proves difficult in the absence of children who are working in the cities for better wages. If grandparents remain active then their children working outside the farms are likely to enlist their reproductive labour for the

care of grandchildren who are sent back to the farms. This arrangement allows the second-generation, oftentimes *nongmin gong* (peasant migrants) in precarious employment conditions (Fan 2002), to work longer hours. As *nongmin gong* based in cities where they do not have hukou status, the second-generation has limited social rights outside of the farms. In this way, their situation resembles other *nongmin gong* making up the ‘floating population’ in Chinese cities (L Zhang 2001).

The ageing demographics of the original cohort of SEA refugee-returnees also mean they are unable to do farming anymore. New internal migrants (also known as *nongmin gong*) from poorer parts of China take over their agricultural labour, resulting in migration succession. Our fieldwork on the smaller farm indicates that the newcomers rent the shabbiest housing costing less than 100 yuan per month (equivalent to US\$15). For instance, when invited into the homes of research participants we found that, unlike the settled refugee-returnees who have enclosed kitchens with gas cookers, the new internal migrants cook on makeshift open-air stoves using firewood. The new internal migrants also said that they are not privy to the same entitlements as the refugee-returnees who have pensions, housing improvements and free education for their children.

The new internal migrants are mostly from the southwest uplands of China and they rent agricultural land or are employed for their labour. Others are fishermen whose catch determines their income, ranging from 1000 yuan in a good month to net losses if the catch is poor. When we visited, the fishermen had no income and spent their days mending fishing nets because they are not allowed by the authorities to fish for two

months in the year (to allow the fish stock to replenish). Many of the new internal migrants bring along their immediate families but they remit money to their hometowns. Most are transient migrants and they stay for two to five years usually although some families have remained for eight to fifteen years. Their children grew into adulthood on the overseas Chinese farms. What these ‘new’ internal migrants thought would be a temporary stint away from home has turned out to be a longer-term arrangement.

The children and grandchildren of the refugee-returnees have little personal affiliation with Southeast Asia as they are born and bred in China. During fieldwork on the smaller farm, we met the youths practising their Indonesian dance routine. They speak Mandarin fluently but have not learned the Southeast Asian languages spoken by their grandparents. Foreign dance instructors are recruited from Indonesia to train them so that they can perform for tourists. The declining youth population of Southeast Asian descent makes it necessary to enlist the cultural labour of indigenous Chinese youths. The local school, initially set up to educate the children of the refugee-returnees, has also experienced intergenerational change. According to the principal, Mr Zhou (an indigenous Chinese), few of the students are descendants of the SEA refugee-returnees. Most come from neighbouring villages or are children of the new internal migrants.

Despite the school’s changing composition, it continues to feature Southeast Asian culture and histories; its mission statement states that it promotes multiculturalism. The corridors are lined with colourful boards providing information on the geography, history and culture of Southeast Asia alongside that of the Communist Party. This school stands

on new premises built by donations from a hometown association in Hong Kong. In comparison, the old school grounds located in one of the villages is hidden from view by an unlocked rusty gate and tall grass. A monument in the school indicates that it was sponsored by the UNHCR: High School Teaching Programme while another plaque features names of philanthropists who contributed to building the school. However, the old school has fallen into ruins and now it is the temporary residence for new internal migrants squatting illegally on the premises. At dusk there is no lighting in the school grounds and they slip away furtively as soon as they detect an unfamiliar presence.

This discussion of the contemporary situation demonstrates the interlinking demographic and migration trends that characterise the farms today. International migration by the original cohort of SEA refugee-returnees has conferred upon the farms a special status and unique character. However, intergenerational change results in an outflow of the second-generation who seek better employment outside the farms while the ageing labour of the refugee-returnees is replaced by indigenous Chinese from neighbouring villages and new internal migrants. To make sense of the shift from international to internal migration, it is necessary to bring into view intergenerational relations in a cultural context where it is common for parents to leave young children in the care of grandparents while they work in distant places. The demographic shifts in this cultural context produce incoming migration succession by younger but poorer migrants from elsewhere who fill the void left by the ageing refugee-returnees and their absent children. This study prompts further consideration of intergenerational change as a propelling factor influencing the organisation of spatial flows. The concomitant spatial outcomes,

namely the passing of the first generation refugee-returnees and the outflow of the younger generations, result in the repopulation of the farms by Chinese from elsewhere, which will redefine the cultural distinctiveness and ethnically privileged status of the overseas Chinese farms.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the forced migration of Chinese diasporic descendants from Southeast Asia and their resettlement in China exemplify a type of ethnically privileged migration. The paper demonstrates the manner in which labels such as ‘refugee’ and ‘returnee’ are used as a matter of political and policy choice. Depicting the ‘refugees’ as a broader category of ‘returnees’ enables the Chinese state to use extraterritorial claims of ethnic kinship to justify its protector role during Chinese forced migrations from 1949-1979. Moreover, the Chinese state also argues that the special rights given to them are premised on notions of co-ethnicity that do not apply in other types of forced migration. The paper underlines the manner in which spatial metaphors of co-ethnic extraterritoriality and ‘return’ are integral to discourses and practices of ethnically privileged and forced migrations. The paper also adds to understandings of ethnically privileged and forced migrations by underlining the interplay of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion experienced by the SEA refugee-returnees as their co-ethnicity becomes juxtaposed against cultural distinctiveness.

The paper then draws attention to the re-scaling of governance and economic developments in the post-1980s and its impacts on the rural overseas Chinese farms. This

discussion suggests that the Chinese state placed responsibility for managing the social welfare and profitability of the farms onto the shoulders of provincial and local governments. The farms became reinvented as economic investment zones and tourism sites by capitalising upon the Southeast Asian histories and cultural identities of the refugee-returnees. The paper then argues that the re-territorialised identities of the refugee-returnees are commodified for tourist consumption; cultural difference is thus deployed strategically as a way of adapting to changing societal contexts. The paper thus complicates portrayals of cultural difference as a liability in analyses of ethnically privileged and forced migrations.

Lastly, the paper suggests that it is important to bring into view issues of intergenerational change in the study of ethnically privileged migration and also in theorisations of the relationship between international and internal migration. This does not mean deriding the significance of other approaches that highlight economic motivations, development imperatives or emigration pressures. However, there is much value in foregrounding processes of intergenerational change, as forced migration studies have done, so as to advance understanding of the way ethnically privileged migration becomes redefined spatially over time. The ageing demographics of the refugee-returnees, coupled with the depopulation of their adult children from the farms as they flock towards larger Chinese cities, results in an influx of new internal migrant labour. There is also reason to infer that the new internal migration, observable amongst the poorer Chinese arriving in the farms alongside an outflow of the progeny of the SEA refugee-returnees to cities, converges with broader migration succession trends and social change

in China that will become of significant interest to academics and policymakers.

Intergenerational change is dynamic and continues to put its imprint on the farms even as this paper is being written. Months after our first visit, we returned to the farm again. We found that the elderly lady from Malaya we had interviewed previously was in poorer health. Dementia had set in and her daughter-in-law, an indigenous Chinese who came back from the city to provide care, told us that her mother-in-law shared little of her Southeast Asian histories and stories of forced migration with the family. This scenario is not uncommon. With the passage of time, the overseas Chinese farms have become a part of marginalised histories in China. Yet in another way, other indigenous Chinese are performing the identities of the Southeast Asian inhabitants deliberately in order to preserve the economic viability of the farms. The population dynamics of the farms are also changing with new inflows of internal migrants and it leaves open to question if these processes will one day transform the ethnically privileged status of the farms and its inhabitants.

This case study also prompts broader reflection on the longer-term tensions and contradictions apparent in the way ‘Chinese-ness’, as an ethnic identity by birth and descent, is called upon in new ways by political elites today, not only in China, but also in other places where Chinese hegemony is practised. The contemplations triggered by this case study can also be extrapolated to examine critically the geopolitical and identity constructions underpinning contemporary mobilisations of ‘diasporic’ and intergenerational belonging by countries elsewhere.

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Notes

¹ The events triggering successive waves of forced migrations are qualitatively different for each group and some tense situations preceded the events discussed here. For instance, the circumstances contributing to Vietnamese-Chinese forced migration antedated the events of 1978-1979 (see Fitzgerald 1970). As for the Indonesian-Chinese, they arrived in China over three episodes: the 1959 anti-Chinese trade ban in Indonesia, the ethnic riots in 1963 and the anti-communist purges from 1965-1967. Opinions differ on the actual violence they suffered or whether they left in response to the charged political overtones of these events (e.g. compare Mackie 1976 with You 2010). This paper adopts the position that some degree of persecution prompted the Chinese diasporic descendants to depart from Southeast Asia. The arguments derived are drawn from the perspective of events in China as it is the paper's research site but a broader literature on Chinese communities in Southeast Asia also informs this writing.

² Such state-sponsored claims of co-ethnicity are prone to essentialising complex subjectivities. Literature on the Chinese diasporic descendants in Southeast Asia suggests they differentiated themselves from the China-born Chinese living abroad; Chinese communities from individual Southeast Asian countries also had local orientations that distinguished them from one another (CB Tan 1997; MG Tan 1997). These distinctions of 'Chinese-ness' are important for understanding the paper's later discussion on the complex permutations of ethnic and other axes of identity that separate the SEA refugee-returnees from the indigenous Chinese. Of the indigenous Chinese population in the overseas Chinese farms, the new internal migrants from distant parts of China are also regarded as 'outsiders' because they are not native to the farms (also see Fan 2002).

³ Also known as the 'Farms for Returned Overseas Chinese'.

⁴ 'Generation' is defined here as an aggregate cohort of people who share experiences of forced migration under conditions of ethnic violence during a specific historical context (see Eckstein 2002).

⁵ Although the literature on ethnically privileged migration incorporates 'generation' into its analyses by considering later-generation return migration, this is not tantamount to studying intergenerational change, which focuses on the relationships *between* generational cohorts (see Hopkins and Pain 2007; Vanderbeck 2007).

⁶ Other examples include the Germans from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union who migrated to Germany after the Second World War; the Poles who left Kazakhstan for Poland from 1944-1948; the French *pieds-noirs* who moved from Algeria to mainland France after Algerian independence in 1962; the Russians who departed from former Soviet territories for Russia after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991; and the Croats who went to Croatia so as to flee Serbian persecution from 1991-1995 (Brubaker 1998; Igllicka 1998; Žmegač 2005).

⁷ During the Maoist period, the Chinese state functioned as the centre of decision-making from which policies trickled down to be implemented at the sub-national levels. From 1980s onwards, the Chinese state retreated tactically to put the onus of governance and economic development on provincial and local governments (He and Wu 2009).

⁸ In this paper, 'indigenous' refers to those born in the source country in order to distinguish them from diasporic descendants.

⁹ I describe them as 'guides' because their role in the research process is dissimilar from

research assistants and collaborators. They are accomplished Chinese academics who are keen to explore the overseas Chinese farms through this fieldwork but our research interests, though complementary, are also distinct from one another. Still, they played a significant part in enabling research access and providing a sounding board for my research ideas. Thus I regard them as partners in the research process and acknowledge their role by using the plural pronoun in this paper.

¹⁰ This law was amended in 2000 and 2005 to enhance the welfare of returnees and their dependents. It addressed issues of legal protection, political representation, housing and social welfare, education and investment (*Xinhua* 27 January 2003).

¹¹ ASEAN is an acronym for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand originally and later also Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.