

Studying the Chinese Overseas*

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It has been such a pleasure for me and my wife to join you here to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Luodi shenggen 落地生根 conference organized in San Francisco in November 1992 that led to the establishment of the International Society for the Study of the Chinese Overseas (ISSCO). I want to congratulate the organizers of this conference, and especially Professor Wang Wei and her academic colleagues, for the splendid job they have done in bringing together so many scholars who have done research on the Chinese overseas. In particular, I am impressed by the way the program includes studies not only of the past and present but also papers offering thoughts about the future. That is what Wang Ling-chi and his colleagues at the University of California Berkeley had initiated and I recall how their vision of the growing importance of the subject led to the formation of the society. Ling-chi is here this evening and I am sure he will agree with me that it was the excitement generated at the conference that inspired the formation of our society.

They do not stay

Since this is an anniversary event, it is appropriate to begin with a brief overview. People from northern China had travelled across the sea to the Korean peninsula and Japan from ancient times. By the 2nd century CE, Han dynasty officials and merchants became more interested in the natural products from the south, from the Nanhai (southern sea). After that, Buddhist pilgrims also travelled by sea to Southeast Asia and India. But, for these first thousand years, there was no record of overseas communities. It was only during the three centuries after the 10th century that southern coast Chinese developed their own trade networks and occasional reports of Chinese settling in the region may be found. These Chinese had no official support. On the contrary, private overseas trade was banned after the 14th century. Adventurous Fujian and Guangdong merchants living abroad ille-

gally were considered disloyal, even treacherous. Although the bans were eased during the Qing dynasty, there was no question of acknowledging the communities overseas.

The dynastic governments cared little for their subjects who stayed overseas. When Chinese were massacred in Manila and Batavia during the 17th and 18th centuries, there was no acknowledgement that they were imperial subjects and no action was taken to offer them protection. Until the late 19th century, there was no general term to describe the Chinese living and working abroad. In addition to mandarin indifference to their fates, there were also conventional values against young Chinese leaving home and not returning. Only un-filial sons and criminals would do that. The court in Beijing preferred to control foreign trade through Macao and later allowed some trade through select Chinese merchants based in Guangzhou.

These were centuries of neglect if not denial. It was only after the opening of the treaty ports to the West in the 1840s that a name was found for these Chinese “temporarily” resident abroad; they were called *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese). Although the Chinese had been forming small communities overseas for at least 500 years, this collective name implied that they would ultimately wish to return to their homeland.

Many local towns and villages in South China had come to depend on their men living in Chinese communities abroad, and there is now considerable research about their history. But where Qing officialdom was concerned, they paid close attention only from the late 19th century onwards. That policy change came about largely because of two factors. On the one hand, Western ideas of nationals and imperial subjects made the mandarins aware of their responsibility for their countrymen overseas. This was particularly striking when their diplomats encountered anti-Chinese policies in the goldfields of North America and the plantations in the Caribbean. On the other, they also noted how successful many of these Chinese merchants were in Southeast Asia and saw value in engaging them directly in China’s economic development.

Huaqiao assets

The *huaqiao* attracted wide attention when political figures like Kang You-

wei, Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen reached out to engage them in the future of China. Whether the message was to seek reforms or to overthrow the regime, these Chinese were responsive to the calls for help. Some of those who had recently come from China had anti-Manchu backgrounds while others were ashamed that China was repeatedly defeated by the West and alarmed that China was backward and getting poorer. This not only affected their pride but also their status and security abroad, especially those who already felt discriminated against one way or another. Even though some in the Southeast Asian colonies became rich despite that, they were successful only because they were very adaptable and were willing to take many risks. Many others were not so fortunate and ended up destitute. Under the circumstances, the more successful merchant classes were ready to help their idealistic kinsmen to connect with China and help the country become modern and competitive and thus keep up with the rest of the world. As a result, more Chinese officials and politicians became aware that these external communities could be assets in China's future development.

It is interesting to recall that Europeans trading in Southeast Asia had long been conscious of the range and vitality of Chinese entrepreneurship. From the 16th century on, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and later British writers had been describing, some in considerable detail, the valuable role of Chinese merchants, their versatility and skill. Although none of the studies were systematic, these records led to studies of Chinese potential as partners and competitors, as cheap labour, as immigrants, but eventually also as threats to colonial and imperial interests. Later and elsewhere in the Americas and Australasia, the reactions were different. Chinese labour was considered cheap and crime-ridden and, for decades, the numbers allowed to stay were severely cut down. During the first half of the 20th century, the republican Chinese government could do little to help them. Thus in most of these places, the Chinese who remained had almost become "invisible people".

Thus during the early decades of the century, it was the Nanyang *huaqiao* who became particularly significant to the Chinese government. The response from these overseas communities was enthusiastic, notably with the establishment of modern media outlets and schools that were politically committed. These were so successful that their activities began to be a source of alarm among the

colonial administrations and increasingly also of the nationalistic local leaders. With growing numbers of Chinese arriving in the Nanyang, the study of overseas Chinese questions took on new dimensions.

The subject became significant also with the authorities in China after the revolution in 1911. The transfer from a Confucian dynastic state to a modern republic itself demanded fresh thinking. Most Chinese did not understand what a republic was, but they knew that embarking on the process of modernization required a major cultural transformation. To catch up and be as progressive and as developed as the very powerful West was necessary if China was to free itself from dominance by the foreign imperial forces active on the China coasts.

Chinese leaders realized that the country was starting from a very low base. Their defeat by Japan was an eye-opener. Japan showed how to modernize quickly and the Chinese saw that they too could do the same. But it was not easy. China was exposed to greater internal divisions and, during the warlord period, the country weakened even more rapidly. Then came the Kuomintang's war against the Communist Party followed by the Japanese invasion. For over thirty years, the Chinese state controlled less than half of the country, its financial affairs were burdened by growing debt and the economy steadily shrank.

Republican China was more divided than the last years of the Manchu Qing Dynasty. The weakest moment came during the course of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945. Were it not for the intervention of the Western powers after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and invaded Southeast Asia, most of China would have fallen and the country could have become a bundle of puppet states of the Japanese empire. By itself, China could not have won the war.

During those decades of weakness, the reactions of overseas Chinese became more important. Many of the communities volunteered to support the national salvation movement, a sort of external frontline for a heightened nationalism to save the country from destruction, not only China as a country but also as a civilization. I am old enough to remember growing up in that atmosphere of fearing that the country would be completely defeated.

There was a sea change in the way Chinese saw themselves. Prior to this, most felt that what they shared was a common set of cultural values and had not known China as a nation. Now they saw that the country had to become a modern nation-state. But what was normal was still to think in terms of their hometowns,

their families, and their particular groups, localities where their personal commitments were. The idea of China as a great ancient civilization was vague. The literati classes had defined that, but there was a great gap between the small group of elites and the bulk of the ordinary people who lived rural lives in an agrarian economy or made a living in commerce. Even when that changed among those overseas, and when more people in China became competitive in the coastal ports and began to understand the capitalist economy, there was still a large competence gap that had to be bridged.

Choosing nations

Given these disadvantageous conditions, it would have been very painful for China to transform itself. With the added problems of civil wars and invasions, and with continued economic displacement by foreign economies taking advantage of the treaty concessions, the various republican governments simply could not overcome the difficulties they faced. It was under those circumstances that the role of the overseas Chinese gained importance to all concerned. The *huaqiao* were drawn into the politics of China. Many Chinese leaders went out to engage the communities overseas and get them to support those in power or to deter those who were seeking to replace the regime. The term “patriotic *huaqiao*” became widely used wherever Chinese overseas resided.

This development did have negative results, especially in Southeast Asia where former colonies began to establish new nation-states. After the Second World War ended in 1945, most overseas Chinese were joyful that China was united again even when it was the Chinese Communist Party that won the civil war on the mainland. Although not every Chinese abroad was nationalistic, the outside world and to the Chinese government saw them as closely linked to the future of China.

In the post-colonial nation states, nation building had the highest priority. Nationalism developed in every country that had been colonized, all now, at least in theory, equal members of the United Nations. In this new world, Chinese nationalism was not welcome and, among some of the local nationalist leaders, the new Chinese government in Beijing was highly suspect. In Southeast Asia, the concept of *huaqiao* went through a period of de-politicization or denationalization during

which many Chinese families had to endure very difficult conditions in order to adapt to new relationships with local national leaders. As it turned out, the Chinese more than any other migrant peoples elsewhere became victims of the ideological Cold War that spread to the region. The nationalistic *huaqiao* that were happy to see China united now came to be treated as potential fifth columnists for Red China.

As far as I know, no other major migrant group has been put in this doubly tainted position in which their ties with their homeland opened them to distrust for questionable loyalties as well as to fear for their ideological proclivities, both at the same time. That was why the subject of overseas Chinese became for quite a while a sensitive subject. Not merely among overseas Chinese themselves, but also among officials of the governments that were concerned about their Chinese communities. In that context, the subject divided the Chinese communities abroad among those who were linked to the People's Republic, those who looked to Taiwan and those who tried to demonstrate local loyalties in their respective adopted countries. For two decades in the 1960s and 1970s, the subject of *huaqiao* was taboo and scholarly research was very thin. Within many countries it had to be played down because it was either anathema to local nationalists or subversive to anti-communists.

There were moments when the subject almost died out among the Chinese themselves and was only of interest to foreign historians and anthropologists. I recall this as a time when only few among the Chinese overseas would take the trouble, or run the risk, to keep the subject alive. I want to mention one of them because he was the most persistent and deserved all the credit he received. I refer to Leo Suryadinata, a former President of ISSCO. He did his work on the Chinese Indonesians when the subject was one of the most sensitive anywhere in the world. He continued his writing and research when almost no one was paying much attention. I followed his efforts with interest, not only because it was important in itself, but also because his writings helped me understand what other Chinese communities were undergoing elsewhere in the South East Asian region and even in other continents.

It is interesting that attitudes elsewhere in North America and Australasia began to change from the 1960s and their "invisible people" began to speak proudly of their Chinese ancestry. Wang Ling-chi would agree that I should single

out Him Mark Lai (Mai Liqian) as the pioneer who set the community recovery process going in the United States. Ironically, once research began, the scholars found that records were better preserved and there was less sensitivity about the subject than in Southeast Asia where many more Chinese had made major contributions to the region's development.

By the 1980s, conditions began to change again. Before that, most Chinese were adapting themselves to new conditions, settling down and showing how they were loyal to their nation-states and were seeking new ways to deal with a China going through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. They focused their energies on activities useful to their adopted countries, notably in commerce and industry. It was significant how many of the new nation-states did not want their citizens of Chinese descent to be active in politics or dominate their professions, but preferred to let the Chinese make money, especially for the country. That was the one area where the Chinese were left with more room to develop and be regarded as least harmful to nation-building programs.

With the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in China, a small revival of interest in their activities had begun. Linda Lim and Peter Gosling organized a major conference in 1980 at the University of Michigan to examine the complex relations of ethnicity, identity politics and economic activity. Three years later, my colleague Jennifer Cushman helped me organize another focused on the theme of identity at the ANU in Canberra. Another reason for the fresh interest was the success story of Singapore where a majority Chinese population was building a special kind of nation after unexpectedly gaining its independence. Both meetings concentrated on Southeast Asia. Neither anticipated the wave of new migrations that began soon afterwards.

Ending the hiatus

It was Wang Ling-chi who ventured the bold idea that the Chinese overseas was now a global topic of growing concern around the world when he organized the 1992 conference in San Francisco. His call to look at the subject again placed the stress on how the Chinese were not sojourners but immigrants. It was time to move away from old stereotypes to examine the new role that Chinese overseas were now playing and describe the differences this was making to received wis-

dom. After a dozen years of the Deng reforms, China was changing rapidly from a revolutionary communist regime to one that was adapting itself with notable success to a global market economy.

In retrospect, it was a confused world we faced in the early 1990s. On the one hand, the Chinese had crushed the 1989 Tiananmen activists and the world was uncertain where China was going; on the other, the Cold War came to an end and we had to think about a world where there was only one superpower. It was a timely moment to think about the future of the Chinese overseas. That was also when new kinds of Chinese were moving out on a scale that matched the numbers last seen during the first decades of the century.

When Ling-chi called for that meeting, he was concerned to distinguish between those who had settled down and sunk roots in their adopted countries and new departures who intended to be temporarily resident abroad and ultimately, as in the past, return home to China. This reminds me to add that, in Singapore about this time, the same distinction was being emphasized when Chinese community leaders initiated a drive that led to the establishment of the Chinese Heritage Centre under Lynn Pan and eventually to the publication of her excellent *Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas* in 1998.

Let me now turn to one of the results of the San Francisco conference, the formation of ISSCO. I am not sure if Ling-chi expected to see the subject change as fast as it did any more than I did. The people leaving China to live and work in the rest of the world from then on were extraordinarily varied. It was not only a question of numbers, but also how they represented a different kind of migration. These were voluntary migrants who included large numbers with post-secondary education, people with high levels of professional skills, adventurous people with capital and assets. It was also was a time when the Chinese economy was undergoing a veritable revolution, and changing at speeds no one predicted could happen. Who could have anticipated that China today will be the world's number two economy? Now people both within and outside see China as an alternate power to the United States.

Of course this is not entirely China's doing. To a large measure, the United States contributed to that rate of growth and the emergence of this new perspective. In addition, no one expected the politics of the United States to make other leaders wonder if the country could continue to maintain the global leadership po-

sition that it enjoyed for so long. That was quite unexpected. It is not surprising when Chinese leaders now look to see what advantage they can gain from a condition where the United States seems less willing to lead the world. I was astonished at the speed of China rising and of the West losing confidence. It is one thing to expect the dynamic economic centre to shift eventually from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. It is quite another to hear the US President change his strategic focus from the Asia-Pacific to the idea of a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, a condition that was the norm for millennia before the expanding West undermined it with their powerful navies over 200 years ago. To speak of the Indo-Pacific reminds us that the old world of maritime Afro-Eurasia had always been free and open. It also suggests that President Xi Jinping’s reference to a “new era” at the CCP’s 19th Party Congress may come from his perception of the changes that the world is going through, and his hope that there could be some return to older norms.

The question relevant to us is how will all this affect the position of the Chinese overseas? Knowledge and understanding of these communities have attracted more attention during the last 25 years. We may claim that some of it can be attributed to the work of our ISSCO members. But credit has also to be given to the many more institutions that now do research and publish on the subject. I do not know how many scholars have entered the field in the last 25 years. But clearly the field has expanded. Unlike 40 years ago, when the numbers were relatively small, many now venture forth to study a greatly expanded range of issues pertaining to the much larger numbers of communities. From private lives, their families and their adjustment and adaptation problems to the use of education for upward mobility, the way their children and other descendants respond to local civil life, the way they meet new and unexpected challenges, and how they now face a rising China, there is hardly any part of these overseas lives that are not being explored and explained. This is most encouraging and we must commend all those dedicated to the field for their achievements.

New roles to play

Finally, I come back to the rise of China and the future. It does not matter much what Chinese overseas think about China. As China globalizes, it will continue to have greater impact on their lives wherever they may be. And no matter

how we look at China's population or its economy, the renewal of a major civilization is a process that we must respect. The bottom line of China's ambition is now clearer. The country will not be satisfied to be just another nation-state. Its people wish to shape their own distinctive culture and restore it to its old position but this time as both a multiplex state and a modern civilization. Their search for modernity is now being done on its own terms. That may not be what everybody likes, not even what the Chinese overseas would like to see. But it is going ahead anyway; it is big and ambitious, and now strong enough to map its own course. I do not know what that will eventually look like but expect it to be part and parcel of what ISSCO and all those studying the Chinese overseas will have to take into account in their studies.

There is now little that the Chinese overseas do that can be totally free from the impact of a risen China. When I was young, it was only once in a while that I saw news about China in newspapers. Today, in newspapers online or in print every day, there is likely to be a page or more that touches on what China does or does not do. This has happened in just in my lifetime alone, and I find it an amazing turnaround. It is relevant to the role of the Chinese overseas and of an organization like ISSCO. How ISSCO members respond to the challenge to study the changes, and how they try to reassess what is known of the past and how that might help scholars think about the future are questions that we cannot avoid. I hope that the light we can throw on these issues can help the lives of people who come after us. These include people born and brought up overseas, and those who are leaving China now to live overseas. Like it or not, they will also have to learn to deal creatively with those in China who want all those overseas to be part of one big family of Chinese while they live abroad.

I was very cheered by the speech given by Professor Hamashita because he gave us an optimistic account of a future that is based on the past, something that I appreciate. In one of his maps, he showed that it is possible to think in terms of the old Hanseatic League returning in the future. He conjured an image of those maritime linkages across borders in which peaceful developments can be free of politics without the involvement of nation-states. These would involve only those dedicated to trading, education, cultural exchanges and other civil tasks, people devoted to developing new networks based on successful older networks. I found the picture intriguing.

But I cannot help thinking that he may be too optimistic. I fear that the world of nation states established out of the national empires of the 19th century may not be easy to change. The national empires were successful nation-states and they won converts among new nationalist leaders to reproduce more nation states. Thus all the new states are narrowly focused on their own nation's interest. This is of course understandable and it would be pointless to criticize the logic behind that. All political leaders are ambitious for their own countries and their people have great expectations. They will all have their country's sovereignty to protect. And they will behave in different ways from their predecessors who ruled at a time when national borders did not exist. Today it is doubtful that any nation-state, big or small, will surrender any part of their sovereignty to allow their people to operate freely as networks with minimal state interventions.

In this context, the country that is actively concerned with issues of sovereignty and determined that the state should be involved in everything is China. If China continues to be a highly centralized state that controls everything, including its relationship with as many Chinese overseas around the world as possible, that would add a new dimension to what was never there before. I had earlier shown how traditional Chinese governments were never interested in their Chinese abroad. On the contrary, they wanted their peoples to stay home. That attitude really changed only in the 20th century.

It then began in a passive way by recognizing the Chinese outside, and seeking to bring back all those who could be useful to China's salvation. But that is no longer true. What China expects in its new phase of development is to be economically number one before long. It will not be satisfied to be a passive actor and would hope to have the power to be active in every field. It would then be natural that they would want to push their agenda to include all those who identify themselves as Chinese in one way or another. That would be seen as the normal duty of a caring Chinese government. They would even see it as their responsibility to reach out actively to Chinese communities everywhere.

How then should the Chinese overseas respond? If they simply sit back to wait for the Chinese government to extend its hand in their affairs, they could lose their ability to do what they have been doing on their own initiative in the past. Some of their achievements show that their experiences have much to offer, for example, seeing China critically from outside can be of benefit to those who

see China only from the inside. In the long run, China cannot afford to think about the world only in its own way. Chinese overseas can still help China better understand the world from the countries where they are citizens. The world order out there is one consisting of at least 180 nation-states that need to be handled in many different ways and there are significant Chinese communities in many of them.

Chinese leaders are quick learners. Note how they learnt to operate in the international world order in the forty years since Deng Xiaoping's reforms. That was remarkable. They understand the international laws and the value of the United Nations and its organizations. In many ways, as has been pointed out, they have been more observant of United Nations rules than the United States. It is not true that Chinese leaders do not play by the rules, what is true is that they skilfully make use of rules that are favourable. When they are not happy with some that were made without China's participation, they look for opportunities to renegotiate them. When satisfied that rules are fair, they have played the international game as well as anybody else.

Nevertheless, they cannot assume that the world outside understands them. They cannot assume that the world would readily accept their way of doing things. To the extent that those of Chinese descent outside understand the aspirations of their adopted countries, they can help China to minimize differences and any misreading of China's motives and ambitions. And insofar as Chinese overseas are sympathetic with what China has in mind, they may be able to enable others to accept China's peaceful goals. The world has always hoped to have more people who could make it a happier place, not just peace for the Chinese people but for everybody. This will be increasingly complicated in the decades to come. But Chinese overseas who are spread around the world still have a role to play. Not only with money and investments as in the past, but also with ideas and knowledge about the outside world that people in China still need to know. This goes beyond the old days when they were expected to be "patriotic *huaqiao*", it would in future be more like "foreign" admirers of a modern Chinese civilization. Not everyone in China will appreciate what Chinese overseas can do but such Chinese can be assets to everyone concerned if more people did. In short, there is a lot that Chinese overseas can do and there are new roles that ISSCO can play. So play on so that there will be more to celebrate when ISSCO meets for its next 25th

anniversary.

*This is the revised text of the transcript of the closing lecture at the ISSCO 25th anniversary conference held in Nagasaki, 17-19 November 2017.