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In the Mountain, by the Sea: Dialectics of Language and Identity among Chinese Overseas

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ABSTRACT

To be posed the question of what gives us our name impels us to relate ourselves to traits and attributes that depict familiar characters pervading our sense of social reality. Such is the pertinence of ethnicity as a feature of our daily lives, helping us to make sense of and order the world, which renders it significant. This study takes off from an expansive body of literature on the Chinese overseas and seeks to understand how the Chinese in London are constructing their ethnic identity. Through the combination of historical and ethnographic approaches, the aim is to illustrate the alterity and fluidity in identity by tracing varied historical patterns of Chinese migration and examining the processes of boundary maintenance at inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic levels. In exploring the dialectics between language and identity, it is hoped that more can be learnt about the complexities and subjectivities that govern our encounters with others.

Key Words: Diaspora; Chinese migration; ethnic boundaries; identity; language; race

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PREFACE

The preparation of this manuscript has presented itself as an exercise that is at once familiar yet wholly novel for a novice researcher like myself. It evokes an age-old subject matter within the anthropological discipline (i.e. writing up) and at the same time, lays out the background for another seemingly interesting but seldom broached inquiry into how dissertations are dealt with after we survive the penultimate judgment of our postgraduate studies. This discussion, of course, is clearly beyond the scope of this paper but the suggestion serves as a useful preamble for penning down my motivations and purpose for this research.

In my case, I found myself scrambling to resurrect my master thesis, just recently buried, from the forgotten depths of the computer hard drive when informed of the opportunity to publish my maiden piece of work. Revisiting my personal writings from a different desk in another part of the world after a brief hiatus had a peculiar effect on how I perceived the merits and value of my own research. On the account of this slight adjustment of vantage point, I felt an acute necessity to re-examine the aims and objectives of my original thesis and sought to ruminate on how I hope for this paper to be understood along with its potential contributions to an even wider academic community and audience.

After all, the early seeds of this project were sown in my own reflections of what it means to be a third-generation Chinese, both at home and abroad. I had left Singapore for Geneva two years ago, at a time when the sustained influx of foreign labor (from China, India and elsewhere) and a renewed interest in the learning and acquisition of Chinese dialects[1] among young Singaporeans were beginning to steer the civic discourse on identity and heritage. Nonetheless, it was my experiences of being visibly Asian but ambiguously Chinese in a foreign land that proved to be utmost disconcerting and unnerving. Thus, I was compelled to make a statement about the relevance of being Chinese and speaking Mandarin in the present context (i.e. Europe) that I was situated in.

Lest it be construed that this research is truly groundbreaking in some way, I must first submit the proviso that it is simply not the case for a great number of

[1] Though conventionally termed so, it has been pointed out by linguists that the varieties of Chinese language (e.g. Mandarin, *Yue*, *Min*, etc.) are not mutually intelligible; reference to these varieties as dialects as such is a common misnomer.

instances. Instead I am indebted to many distinguished overseas Chinese scholars whose ideas and works have inadvertently influenced how I saw myself as being Chinese. As such, I would prefer to liken this paper to the humble efforts of an aspiring artist, adding a fresh layer of oil paint on an elaborate well-stretched canvas. For much as the nature and constitution of Chinese identity has been debated, it continues to persist fervently today. And contrary to assimilationist models, the ones who have their arms up in the air with a fit are the latter generations typically deemed to be “lost causes”.

Incidentally, the study of ethnic boundaries only becomes sociologically interesting when it is perpetuated over time. Examining how the Chinese ethnic identity has simultaneously evolved and endured, through language, culture or otherwise, is consequential for understanding the dynamics of social organization. The topic is not new in other parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia, where the presence of significant Chinese populations has prompted multiple ongoing dialogues about Chineseness, language and culture. In contrast, the conversation has been relatively muted in Europe until recent decades. This piece then, is an attempt to initiate the exchange on issues relating to language and identity on a different site.

Even so, I am treading cautiously on these grounds, fully aware of the possible shortcomings in exploring the connection between language and ethnic identity among Chinese overseas. While the tension between Mandarin as an official mother tongue and other Chinese dialects have been pronounced in my knowledge, I was also cognizant of the fact that no two nation-states are exactly the same. I carry the perspectives of someone coming from a country with a majority Chinese population, and where calculated government policies on language education have markedly shaped the link between language and identity. What had perturbed me the most (both in and outside of the field) though was a lack of problematization of the role of language as an ethnic boundary inasmuch as there is general acceptance of the reality that Chinese people around the world do speak different languages.

Bearing in mind reservations about making comparisons between Chinese overseas populations in dissimilar environments, it is my opinion that even the limitations of the research question would be of palpable insight into the very diversity of conditions and Chineseness that I wish to allude to. At the same time, the focus on

language and identity is accompanied by a critical qualification: although arousing considerable attention, the subject merely forms one aspect of the complicated subjectivities we encounter. And finally, we arrive at the frame of mind with which I have written the first version of this paper and would like for it to be re-read in the future.

I had embarked on this research working on hunch shared by myself and other half-/hyphenated Chinese friends. Rather than claiming to be an expert on the Chinese overseas, I am motivated by the desire to understand and say something about a problem that is following around many. It is the reason that I have kept the title exactly the same as my thesis, for it is an allegory of our in-between status. Being Teochew myself I have subscribed to the belief that,

> When the people of the coast speak of our motherland, we do not say China. We do not say we are *zhong guo ren* – when we speak of *zhong guo ren* we are speaking of those people who look like us but who are really from someplace else. We say we are the people of the Tang Dynasty, we say we are the people from the coast. In our language there is no way of saying we are anything else. Even today we say our "home", this home most of us have never been to, is in the mountain, by the sea (Tan 2011).

Perhaps it is a coming-of-age affair, but like everyone else, I am just trying to write a narrative of my own.

1. A TANGLED TALE

Washed by the rain and combed by the winds,
They had ridden the stormy oceans,
Flown across the heavens
And kissed the earth of foreign shores.

From sunrise to sunset, from one day to the next,
Till their hair turned white,
They ate; they slept; they bore children
And watched them grow,
Watched them get married
And in turn bear children of their own.

How time flies, they said to one another.
Then, gazing down at their feet one day,
They were surprised.
A generation had passed.

Roots had grown into the ground
Of their daily living.
Luodi shenggen,
They had fallen to earth and sprouted roots.

– Christine Suchen Lim, *Hua Song: Stories of the Chinese Diaspora*

1.1. The Root of a Problem

Roots, as a biological entity, beget our imagery of the noun as a signifier of origin. Seen as the source of life, it symbolizes genesis and continuity. Correspondingly it has been used to denote our descent, be it familial, ethnic or cultural. In the studies of the Chinese overseas, the word roots (or *gen* in Mandarin) takes on an additional meaning and refers to the unique bond between China and the Chinese in diaspora (Wang 1991, 182). *Gen* also features prominently as a metaphor in the discourse about the history, lives and identity of Chinese overseas and has been used to epitomize the two

competing paradigms – *luoye guigen* and *luodi shenggen* – that have dominated intellectual debates (183).

At the beginning of this chapter, the phrase *luodi shenggen* was invoked in the poem to illustrate the permanent settlement of Chinese overseas as seeds that have fallen and taken root in foreign soil. This was true of the transformation experienced by many early sojourners who departed from Chinese shores and ended up building their lives in remote lands. Local Chinese populations were assumed to accommodate to their host countries and assimilate into the larger social fabric over time. And yet, in spite of cultural changes that accompany the passing of time, many continue to retain their ethnic roots generations after moving abroad. Therefore, we speak of second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants living between two worlds.

This sense of liminality has not been lost on many second-generation overseas Chinese scholars who have experienced for themselves firsthand, the frustrations of being the awkward man (or woman)[2] in the middle. For example, Hong Kong-born Chinese American Rey Chow (1993) writes in the introduction of *Writing Diasporas: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* that,

> If there is something from my childhood and adolescent years that remains a chief concern in my writing, it is the tactics of dealing with and dealing in dominant cultures that are so characteristic of living in Hong Kong. These are the tactics of those who do not have claims to territorial propriety or cultural centrality (25).

Likewise Malaysian-born Straits Chinese Aihwa Ong (1999) remarks, "overseas Chinese operate as an intermediary "contrast category" of Chinese modernity in a structural position between the mainland Chinese and the non-Chinese foreigners who embody Western modernity" (43). In *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, Ien Ang (2001) details a stirring personal anecdote that many 'hyphenated' Chinese could identify with as well. On recalling the first time she was in China, she writes:

[2] An interesting personal observation to note is that many of the prominent second-generation Chinese scholars who have openly spoken out on the interstitiality of living between cultures are female. Perhaps their experience of dual marginality (i.e. being female and non-Western) has helped to make salient the confrontations between different forms of identifications.

> I am recounting this story for a number of reasons. First of all, it is my way of apologizing to you that this text you are reading is written in English, not in Chinese. Perhaps the very fact that I feel like apologizing is interesting in itself. Throughout my life, I have been implicitly or explicitly categorized, willy-nilly, as an 'overseas Chinese' (*hua qiao*). I look Chinese. Why, then, don't I speak Chinese? (23)

Upon reading these texts for the first time, I immediately empathized with these feelings of exasperation and defiance. For I too had been repeatedly questioned about my origins while living in Switzerland and it was as though I had found kindred souls who astutely articulated my pent-up thoughts. During obligatory self-introductions, I recurrently found myself in a similar predicament. While visibly Asian by appearance, I was frequently mistaken as a Korean or Japanese. To the inevitable "Where are you from?" question, I had always replied that I am from Singapore without any allusion to being an ethnic Chinese. Few rarely probed further about my descent[3] and I did not think of it to be necessary anyway. Interestingly, non-Chinese friends and classmates were often more curious about the language(s) Singaporeans speak and mentioned their surprise in finding out that I was fluent in English.

Confusion arises when an "actual" Chinese person shows up; then, to everyone's (Chinese and non-Chinese) bewilderment, I make the switch to converse in Mandarin. No one had expected that I could be fluent in Mandarin, and Chinese friends were confounded by the fact that a discernible Taiwanese accent was detected in my speech! What swept everyone off their feet though was my ability to read and write Chinese too. Supposing that I am more unadulterated than others, questions about the Chinese and China began landing in my lap and I had to meekly admit on a great number of occasions that I had no idea what people were talking about. Under these circumstances, I could not refute the question "Do you speak Chinese?" with a resounding negative; rather, my answer was always a hesitant "Yes, but what difference does it make?"

[3] I suppose that this is a peculiarity owing to Singapore's status as the "little red dot". For those who are ignorant of the four Asian 'dragons' and 'tigers', the island-state is barely showing on the world map. Even today, I still meet people who innocently (not jokingly) ask me which part of China is Singapore located in. The fact that there is a Chinese majority in Singapore seems not to be widely known.

Gradually, I rehearsed a standard reply that read like a very comprehensive genealogy and recited it (in English) *ad nauseam* to any interested party:

> Yes, I am Chinese. A third-generation Chinese from Singapore. To be precise, I am actually half-Singaporean and half-Malaysian. My mother is Malaysian you see. But no, I am not half-Malay. My mother is Malaysian-born Chinese. But I am Chinese alright, a diluted one that is […] Well, I do speak Mandarin. We have a bilingual education system in Singapore and it is compulsory for all of us to study our mother tongue. I guess they were very thorough with me […] Also I speak Teochew and Hokkien too. My grandparents were from the southern coastal provinces of China and those are the mother tongues there; they couldn't speak a word of Mandarin although they understood the language. I know a smattering of Cantonese too because I had spent a short period of time living in Hong Kong […] And that Taiwanese accent? I picked it up from my Taiwanese classmates during my early schooling years.

It became apparent that living among Chinese and non-Chinese alike has tested the limits of my identity; I was no longer another stereotypical educated, middle-class member of the racial majority in a well-to-do country. And a key pattern emerging from my interactions was that much of the probing revolved around the language(s) I speak. Therein lies the matter of the relationship between language and the boundaries of Chineseness. This question is not a new one. Though many would readily admit that a Chinese may speak one or more varieties of the Chinese language, there has been insufficient discussion at length on how usage of the Chinese language may function as a marker of ethnicity and identity difference.

Doing so casts doubt over two issues: the first being the boundary between Chinese and non-Chinese identities, and secondly, the multiple variations in Chineseness. They direct us to enquire into how the experiences of being Chinese are mediated by the choice and use of language and analyze the means through which dialects and accents figure into one's conception of Chineseness. In addition, it invites us to speculate on whether the learning of Mandarin (or possibly other varieties of the Chinese language) perceptibly alters one's ethnic association; and if so, the manner in which it changes.

As such, this paper takes to task the problem of ethnic identification and examines the role of Chinese language(s) in maintaining the boundaries of Chineseness. At a time when forces of the global political economy have reshaped our social life, intensifying contact between ethnic Chinese of different origins, socio-economic backgrounds and nationalities, it interrogates the significance of whether one does or does not speak Mandarin. Moreover, it investigates the use of various languages (e.g. English, Mandarin, etc.) and dialects (e.g. Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Teochew, etc.) among ethnic Chinese overseas as a strategy for delineating and emphasizing one's identity. Therefore, the overall question driving the heart of this research shall be how is Chinese identity being constructed and maintained through language among Chinese overseas.

1.2. Uprooting and the Diasporic Imaginary

Central to this research are the concepts of ethnicity, transnationalism and diaspora. The upsurge of interest in these themes itself reflects an evolving shift within the anthropological discipline – away from the structural-functionalist tradition of viewing societies and/or 'cultures' as static, isolated and homogeneous wholes, and towards interpreting the flux, fluidity and flows of our social landscapes (Eriksen 2010; Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995). To a certain extent, this development is attributable to the emergence of two phenomena: the nation-state and regimes of "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1989).

The former not only relates to a flourishing of the form of political organization, but the naturalization of the nation-state as analytical units of comparison in the social sciences too. As Wimmer and Schiller (2003) contend, such methodological nationalism is bereft of any problematization of the nation-state as an entity and principle. Taking for granted its symbolic as well as geographical boundaries, the nation-state becomes a new metaphor for 'tribe' while retaining the same teleological, bounded, essentialized and territorialized properties. Ethnicity then appears to function as a pseudonym for 'culture', but is more specifically synonymous with nationalist and assimilationist ideologies. This view held on for some time in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until technology and a global restructuring of capital brought forth the call to revise the way time and space are experienced and represented (Wimmer and Schiller 2003; Eriksen 2010; Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995).

With post-Fordist transformations in the global economy, market rigidities were overcome by more flexible methods of managing labor processes, labor markets, products and patterns of consumption (e.g. temporary employment, outsourcing, 'Just-in-time' production, etc.), which improvements in communication and transportation technologies have helped to facilitate (Harvey 1989). Following this trend is the growth in mobility and networks; and whereas many have predicted a reduction in cultural diversity given the expansion in cross-border exchanges, globalization commentators were left with the conundrum of witnessing an explosion of ethnic revival. Media and migration, as Arjun Appadurai (2005) underlined, had reshaped our imagination to conceive of flows and transgressions across political and social boundaries.

Regardless it is said that "ethnic and cultural fragmentation and modernist homogenization are not two arguments, two opposing views of what is happening in the world today, but two constitutive trends of global reality" (Friedman 1990, 311). On a similar thread, insofar as new transnational deterritorialized sites for making claims like "global cities" (Sassen 2005) and "diasporas" exist, they continue to be intertwined with nation-states which constrain the options for community making (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). Theoretical debates on ethnicity and diaspora therewithal mirror the twin perspectives.

The word 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek ethnikos, which meant heathen or pagan (Williams 1976, 119). From this original meaning, we can infer that ethnicity "has something to do with the classification of people and group relationships" (Eriksen 2010, 5). Two dominant approaches have commonly been appropriated to make sense of this social organization of difference, of which primordialism features as one of the major groups of theories. Clifford Geertz (1973) describes the primordiality of ties as a form of attachment that stems from,

> […] the givens – or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed givens – of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves (259).

Theorists of primordialism, then, assert that ethnicity stems from an original condition of historical, religious, cultural, linguistic or genetic ties that pre-exists the actualization of a group. As a given characteristic or trait, it is immutable, universal, objective and primitive. Ethnicity fundamentally structures our relationships through strong, inexplicable affective bonds of belonging that compels us to prioritize the group over the individual (Horowitz 2002, 72-75).

Instrumentalists, on the other hand, beg to differ on all points. Fredrik Barth's (1998a) highly influential model on ethnicity has consistently been used to exemplify this alternative view. For him, the emphasis rests on ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance. Ethnic groups are not static bounded collectives that are determined in a social vacuum and their persistence in spite of inter-cultural contact and interdependence requires critical evaluation. Moving away from objective criterion and empirical cultural differences, the study of ethnicity should look at how it is produced and maintained through interaction between groups. Ethnic identity in this sense is characterized by self-ascription as well as ascription by others. It is not established in a one-off occurrence and requires constant expression and validation via social contact in order to stand (9-16). Other proponents of instrumentalism infuse these processes of symbolic manipulation with an additional dimension of power – considering ethnicity to serve as an instrument and/or strategy in the competition over scarce resources (Cohen 1976; Eriksen 2010).

References to the primordialist/instrumentalist differentiation linger on when the scale of study is extended from localized groups to "global" diasporas. Integral to the classical formulation of diaspora is the notion of 'homeland' – the Promised Land from which Jewish peoples had been forcefully displaced and destination for the eventual return of the exodus. It is an irreducible core encompassing a collective vision of the origins, home and history of the Jews that binds scattered communities of Jews all over the world (R. Cohen 2008). Later, William Safran (1991) recast the designation to apply to a wider scope of expatriate minority communities. In spite of the refreshed paradigm, four out of the six criteria drawn up – retaining a shared memory or myth about their original homeland, regarding their ancestral homeland as the true, ideal place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return, commitment to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland, continue to relate to that

homeland in various ways possible and allow that relationship to define their ethnocommunal consciousness – preserve the emphasis on primordial subscription (Safran 1991, 83-84; R. Cohen 2008, 6).

Those dissatisfied that the potential of 'diaspora' has yet to be exploited then subjected the concept to secondary refinements, seeking to break down the 'homeland' and 'ethnic/religious community' qualifications. Such a reading underscored the processes of boundary maintenance above all else and offered generous subjective interpretations of 'home' that included virtual imagined communities and any web of intimate social relations. Thus it yielded putative entities like the queer diaspora, the yankee diaspora and the digital diaspora (R. Cohen 2008, 8-11). The expression came to be conflated with globalization, transnationalism, hybridity and postcolonialism while precariously stretching itself to the point of uselessness; as Roger Brubaker (2005) contends, "if everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so" (3).

A compromise between the two standpoints is evidently required. Even though there is general consensus that "the discourse of diaspora owes much of its contemporary currency to the economic, political and cultural erosion of the modern nation-state as a result of postmodern capitalist globalization" (Ang 2001, 76), we need to guard against adopting a resolutely myopic or overly liberal posture. This paper acknowledges the oxymoron of stable, durable ethnic identities that are diverse and heterogeneous at the same time. It rests upon the very foundation of the anthropological discipline to understand the ways in which human lives are simultaneously unique and similar and echoes the universalist/relativist dualism. Nevertheless, there is much learning to be reaped if we were to treat 'diaspora' as a category of practice, a figurative critique; its value then lies in highlighting non-exclusive political, social and cultural processes and struggles (Brubaker 2005; Clifford 1994).

Consequently, this paper utilizes 'diaspora' as a euphemistic device to tease out the complexities of our variegated social worlds and in particular, provide a lens to comprehend the multitude of claims to Chinese identity. Moreover, as the major signifier of human relations, "language is a vehicle of man's intentionality"[4] (Haarmann

[4] Haarmann (1999) also contends "the best proof of the validity of language as a marker of ethnicity in antiquity is the concept of the "barbarian," which was invented by the ancient Greeks to raise the prestige of their own culture. The

1999). Besides being an instrument for the representation of self and the world, it is the medium through which group attitudes, values and feelings are expressed. Linguistic interaction provides the channel through which we are socialized and, as a salient feature of daily life, language has been held as the marker par excellence of ethnic identity (63-65). Arising out of this postulation, language shift and language maintenance become indicators of the degree to which ethnic boundaries are being sustained (Paulston and Paulston 1980). The presence of diverse speech communities per se, accordingly, reveals how difference is strategically organized as social capital.

main criterion of a barbarian was his language, because the Greek word barbarous means "a person who speaks inarticulately"." (65)

2. TRACING THE ROUTES OF THE CHINESE

> The fact that the Chinese overseas knew so imperfectly about their past is no reason why we should continue to do so.
>
> – Wang Gungwu, *Mixing Memory and Desire, Tracking the Migrant Cycles*

> There is a Chinese expression that travellers eventually come to see the place where they have settled as their homeland.
>
> – Wong Yuen Tai, in *Such a Long Story! : Chinese Voices in Britain*

Following this discussion, it is now expedient to explore the question of whether there is indeed something that could conceivably be termed a Chinese diaspora; and if so, in what way can it be reasonably understood. There have been, in effect, several conceptions of the Chinese as a diaspora, ranging from a trade diaspora, to the Chinese diaspora, to the Chinese overseas. Each represents the movement of Chinese peoples during different periods in history, with different orientations in mind and under different circumstances. Another critical enquiry pertains to who are the supposed Chinese in diaspora. 'Chinese overseas' and 'overseas Chinese' have typically been used interchangeably with 'Chinese diaspora'. Yet, a Chinese overseas by any other name is not the same Chinese in this account. *Huashang*, *huagong*, *huaqiao*, *huayi*, *huaren*, *haiwai huaren* are among the array of terms that have been used to refer to the various categories of Chinese living and working abroad but they have no exact equivalents in the English language.

Both topics are pertinent to an ongoing intellectual project to decenter China as the privileged object in academic constructions of Chinese identity and problematize the 'Chinese' label. Bound to a civilization and country that calls itself the 'Middle Kingdom',[5] "being at the center of existence has always been an important aspect of being Chinese" (Wu 1991, 160). Chinese identity as such is defined by an ethnocentric sense of shared belonging that is intimately tied to a unified and powerful China. Additionally, successive invasions and aggression towards China during the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries has led to a habitual obsession among

[5] This is a literal translation of *zhongguo*, or China, in Chinese.

contemporary Chinese scholars to declare everything Chinese as being superior and beyond comparison. Therefore this self-aggrandizement has resulted in a paradoxical kind of cultural essentialism or sinocentrism that encourages affirmation of a homogenous China (Chow 1998, 3-6) and deems those who live in the periphery as less authentic and impure.

Still, there is currently no universally accepted term that includes all Chinese, both Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese, living abroad. And academics such as Ronald Skeldon (2003) and Wang Gungwu (2004) had openly spoken against the application of 'diaspora' in the study of Chinese overseas. Their objection stems not from the historical specificity of the term but is attributable to concerns that it will create the illusion of a homogeneous Chinese community. Abuse of 'diaspora' is feared to revive "the idea of a single body of Chinese, reminiscent of the old term, the *huaqiao*" which might invoke old Chinese nationalism with or without deliberate intention (G. Wang 2004, 158). This form of essentializing counter-essentialism turns into a form of "transnational nationalism… [and] produces an imagined community which is deterritorialized, but which is symbolically bounded nevertheless" (Ang 2001, 83).

From the above, it can be deduced that any survey of dispersed Chinese populations would be fraught with conceptual difficulties unless the variation in nomenclature is properly situated in the history of Chinese migration over the *longue durée*. Unraveling this puzzle shall also help to explain the decision to employ 'Chinese overseas' over other available terms in this paper. Here, a reformulation of Wang Gungwu's (2003a) model on the different patterns of Chinese migration (*huashang*, *huagong*, *huaqiao* and *huayi*) serves as a framework for grasping the multiple and evolving conditions of passage, as well as the assortment of characters involved.

2.1. A Map of the Chinese Overseas Puzzle

International migration has had a long history of nearly 2,000 years in China and falls within a larger pattern of movement that included the flight from rural to urban areas and inter-city movements. Evolution of Chinese international migration, however, only reached its critical mass in the modern period (*circa*. 1842 to 1949). Prior to 1842, China had been long held to be an insular, earthbound civilization with its mythical heartland located in the north-central agricultural plains of the Yellow River (G. Wang 2000). Moving abroad was frowned upon for long periods in history in view of this

continental outlook and a strict neo-Confucian doctrine on filial piety[6] confined most journeys to the boundaries of the empire.

Thus the notion of migration was markedly missing throughout pre-modern times,[7] although the opposite held true for the act itself. In its place stands the concept and practice of sojourning. Considering the official and social censure against emigration, the expression *qiao* or sojourning was both beneficial and essential. Implying a brief trip or temporary stay away from home, sojourning was compatible with prevalent normative ideas on migration and created an acceptable status whereby one was merely momentarily absent from China (G. Wang 2003b, 57). From this experience whereby sojourning was a prelude to eventual overseas settlement, we find that diasporic configurations of pre-modern and modern Chinese migration took on fairly different shapes.

2.1.1. Cosmopolitan pioneers: *huashang* and the trade diaspora

In the beginning, Chinese found in foreign lands were almost entirely made up of traders, or *huashang*. The migration of individuals and/or groups for the buying and selling of commodities is a pattern that has dominated and prevailed since the first millennium A.D. These merchants living among aliens in trade settlements subsequently established interrelated webs of commercial communities that together form a network or trade diaspora (Curtin 1984, 2-3). Earliest hint of the Chinese trade diaspora can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) with the exchange of goods between China and other kingdoms in the South China Sea, or *Nanhai.*[8] Long years of prosperity, good administration and improvements in navigation techniques then led to a gradual expansion of this maritime Silk Route to states in India and the Persian Gulf (G. Wang 1998a; Zhu 2006, 142).

Propitiously, maritime activity flourished through successive Song (960 - 1279), Yuan (1278 - 1368) and early Ming (1368 - 1430) Dynasties owing to investments in

[6] This was based on the reinterpretation of Confucius' teaching, "While your parents are alive, you should not travel far, and when you do travel you must keep to a fixed itinerary" (Analects 4.19).
[7] It has been argued that the notion of a Chinese voluntarily leaving his own country in order to settle overseas is a fairly recent one. Historically, the only terms that referred to migrants were *yimin* (people who were compelled by state officials to relocate in order to defend frontier regions or ease population pressures), *nanmin*, (refugees); and *liumin* (exiles). All these implied that migration was forced, either induced by pressing circumstances or undertaken by deviants, and largely internal (G. Wang 2003b, 56-57).
[8] The area extends, in the west, from the port of Fuzhou to that of Palembang and, in the east, from the island of Taiwan to the west coast of Borneo (G. Wang 1998a, 3).

naval and shipping industries as well as relatively liberal attitudes towards overseas trade. During this golden age of the China Seas, seafaring became a major occupation, port cities multiplied along China's southeastern coast, and the first Chinese commercial settlements were founded in Southeast Asia (Curtin 1984, 125). The legacy of this magnificent maritime epoch ultimately culminated into Admiral Zheng He's seven epic voyages to the Indian Ocean in early Ming (Zhu 2006, 146).

Up until this point, the Chinese trade diaspora was very much tied to the Chinese Empire; trade frequently occurred through tribute missions or expeditions commanded by emissaries and even private commercial dealings were under the purview and control of the state. This endorsement, regrettably, was retracted by the 1430s when northern attacks from the Mongols diverted official attention and worries that free association with foreigners could give rise to plots against the dynasty prompted the Ming court to impose a ban on maritime trade for the next 150 years (Kuhn 2008, 8). Without the auspices of the state this would have possibly meant the end of the Chinese trade diaspora but instead, the laws were practically dead letter – "what rendered them unrealistic, and almost impossible to enforce, was the economic pressure forcing large numbers of people to move" (Twitchett and Mote 1998, 620).

The *huashang* resorted to smuggling and piracy to keep up with the lucrative maritime commerce. And amidst the rise of European expansionism and exploration in the middle of the fifteenth century, the Chinese seized the demand for traders from those who had sought to leverage on merchants to gain access to markets in China and rely on their much-valued services as middlemen in new colonies (Kuhn 2008; Pann 2006). The Chinese, but most prominently the Hokkiens, subsisted as "merchants without empire" from thereon (G. Wang 1993). Injunctions against overseas trade and travel did little to deter these southern Chinese from turning to the seas; instead, it produced one of their most famous sons, Zheng Chenggong (or Koxinga), whose virtual maritime empire that extended from Manila to Nagasaki.

Viewed as a trade diaspora, we can begin to understand the Chinese outside of standardized civilizational myths that denied the *huashang* a place in pre-modern history.[9] Beyond the confines of the nation-state, we are able to identify fluid

[9] It has been contended that the Chinese migrant was upheld as the proverbial 'other' during this period as a result of their multiple marginality (Reid 2008). Southern Chinese communities, where the majority of migrants originated

connections and adaptive identities that restore the stifled voices of the early cosmopolites. As a physical location, the 'home' or 'center' was an ancestral village or hometown rather than the empire. It was also more than a simple collective memory; a 'home' or 'center' was both necessary and profitable, especially after the withdrawal of state backing for overseas trade. Connections to 'home' were essential for access to markets and commercial survival. The dependence on kinships and local/regional affiliations helped to negate the lack of state recognition and protection, in addition to exemplifying the commitment to one's filial duty (R. Cohen 2008; G. Wang 1993).

2.1.2. Subjects of Empires: *huagong*, *huaqiao* and the Chinese diaspora

Hitherto international migration was very much linked to the *huashang*; notwithstanding this, the period of modern Chinese migration (1842 - 1949) was also known in the history of the overseas Chinese as the "Age of the Exodus of Chinese Laborers" (Zhu 2006, 153). The impetus for this pivotal change sprung from the Industrial Revolution, whereby increase in productive powers fuelled Britain's imperial ambitions to expand the frontiers of the empire and fed its lust for new goods and new markets. And at last, China's centuries-old aversion to open borders and free trade were undone by defeat in the First (1839 - 1842) and Second (1856 – 1860) Opium Wars (Pann 2006, 53-56).

Contact with the West had increased as a result of the expansion of global markets and the forced liberalization of travel and trade under the Treaty of Nanking (1842) and the Convention of Peking (1860) (Chang 1968, 91-92). Nonetheless there were two other critical episodes taking place concurrently that spawned the large-scale organized migration distinctive of the coolie trade and brought into being what we know recognize as the Chinese diaspora. Firstly, abolition of the Atlantic slave trade left an enormous void in labor supply and colonialists began to regard Chinese as an excellent alternative source of manpower (Zhu 2006). Secondly, invention of the steam engine during the Industrial Revolution enabled cheaper and more efficient transportation (McKeown 1999) – an indirect consequence was that it also made the carriage of coolies a lot easier.

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from, were historically peripheral (both politically and geographically) to the imperial powers seated in Beijing. "It was where disgraced imperial bureaucrats were exiled" (Siu 1993, 20) and inhabitants of this southernmost region were believed to live in rugged mountains and unhealthy swamps. Being merchants, these sojourners also occupied the lowest stratum of a general class system based on occupational groups and possessed the least prestige and status (Twitchett and Mote 1998, 699). The defiance against travel bans only cemented their condemnation as deserters, traitors, rebels and conspirators.

These macro trends exacerbated troubling domestic conditions – overpopulation, natural calamities, social and political unrest – that afflicted the Qing dynasty (Yen 2013, 73-74). As a consequence, there was a huge glut in Chinese labor by the time the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) swept through the southern China as many were impelled to flee the devastation and poverty. The outpouring of Chinese coolies pattern was unprecedented in terms of volume and geographic distribution. It was estimated that around ten million Chinese set forth across continents as laborers between the First Opium War and the 1920s (Zhu 2006, 155-58). Despite the considerable momentum, abuse of coolies was rife and this trade was brought to a conclusion in the 1920s (Yen 2013). Not all coolies returned to China after fulfilling their debts or contracts though; many sojourning "guest workers" stayed on in order to earn more money for remittances. Subsequently the protracted presence of Chinese overseas raised questions about citizenship and belonging, leading to a dramatic change in the way these populations were demarcated and defined.

Antecedent to the Unequal Treaties of the Opium Wars, there was little, if any, concern for the Chinese overseas. China did not have an official migration policy and its hostile attitude towards overseas trade reflected the sentiments about Chinese overseas as well. Hence, an acute awareness of Chinese populations residing abroad only came about after the mid-nineteenth century (G. Wang 1981, 121). *Huaqiao*, or Chinese sojourner, derived its origins from a special context whereby China was undergoing radical social and political changes. Rather than an actual pattern of migration per se, the term was more of a political, legal and ideological category (G. Wang 2003a, 7).

Upon the forced opening up of China, establishment of formal diplomatic ties with other nations engendered a belated realization of the abuse and ill treatment of Chinese laborers abroad. On top of this, there arose confusion and suspicion over overseas Chinese who were indemnified by external jurisdictions in foreign colonies (e.g. British or Dutch) (G. Wang 1981, 121-22). Simultaneously, overseas Chinese were no longer despised and looked down upon under the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861 - 1894) initiated by the late Qing government. By contrast, they were held as a pillar of economic strength waiting to be harnessed for the country's development and a conduit of "Western learning" necessary for modernization (Twitchett and Fairbank 1980; Zhuang 2013, 33-34). Hereafter, all overseas Chinese,

including the earlier *huashang* and *huagong*, were universally regarded as *huaqiao* – a term that conveyed official acceptance and approval of all Chinese residing abroad and was equated with the Chinese diaspora.

Its political connotations only developed during the revolutionary zeal of the early 1900s when interest in the overseas Chinese surged further as reformists and revolutionaries joined the Qing government for the competition over their hearts, minds and wallets. The earliest reference to *huaqiao* as political creed could be found in the Song of Revolution written in 1903[10] (see extract 1 in Appendix) (G. Wang 1981, 123-25). This escalation then transformed the term *huaqiao* into a patriotic cry rallying all Chinese abroad (even those who had assimilated and entered into foreign registers) to commit support towards the homeland cause. Such was the impact of the rally by overseas Chinese that Sun Yat-sen famously dubbed them 'the mother of the revolution' (Pann 2006, 101), and possession of the support from overseas Chinese continued to be relevant through the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937 - 1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1927 – 1937, 1945 - 1949) (Li and Li 2013, 16-17).

The Chinese diaspora that arose from this context called attention to a distinct set of characteristics that diverged from the trade diaspora. Embrace of the 'diaspora' heuristic allows us to abstain from simple push/pull models of economic migration. In its place, we assign newfound importance to networks – complex international systems comprised of linkages between major maritime hubs,[11] agents, brokers and local "crimps" (McKeown 1999; Pann 2006; Yen 2013) – built up by the colonial enterprise in creating the widespread dispersal of *huagong* and *huaqiao*. It also features the agency of the Chinese in this endeavor: for even though migration was a survival strategy designed to divert excess men to alternative avenues of work, it took place with the complicity of local middlemen who actively managed the labor trade and had been made possible by the Chinese family system, which upholds a form of joint estate management that guaranteed one's place in the family in spite of being physically apart (Kuhn 2008, 14-15; McKeown 1999). Furthermore, a deconstruction would reveal that

[10] It later found legal expression in the Nationality Law of 1909, which defined huaqiao "to cover all persons born of Chinese parents whether they were 'entered in foreign registers' or not" based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* (G. Wang 1981).

[11] This includes the five treaty ports (i.e. Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningpo and Shanghai) as well as entrepôts such as Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore (Yen 2013). At these places coolie agencies, shipping companies and brokerages were all located in one place.

the ‘center’ of this Chinese diaspora is no longer an ancient dynastic civilization as it was in the trade diaspora, but an imagined homeland birthed by a new nation-state.

2.1.3. Worldly postcolonials: *huayi* and the Chinese overseas

On this account the unquestioned relationship between overseas Chinese and their ‘homeland’ was put into the spotlight by the middle of the twentieth century, when decolonization and the Cold War swept through the world. After the Chinese nation was split into two de facto states, ties to the new communist regime ensuing from the huaqiao policy made overseas Chinese vulnerable to suspicion and persecution (Zhuang 2013, 36). Realizing this problem and eager to gain diplomatic recognition for the recently established People’s Republic of China (PRC), then-Premier Zhou Enlai encouraged ethnic Chinese overseas to take up citizenship and integrate into their adopted countries[12] (Zhuang 2013, 36). Thereafter usage of *huaqiao* was mostly abandoned, except to refer to citizens of the PRC, the Republic of China (ROC), Hong Kong and Macau living and working abroad; the associated term in English, ‘overseas Chinese’, was rejected accordingly in favor of a more neutral ‘Chinese overseas’[13] too.

For many ethnic Chinese overseas though, taking up the citizenship of their adopted countries at once did not alleviate all their problems. Racial discrimination remained a grave issue for many and the situation was notably bad in Southeast Asia. Between the 1960s and 1980s, numerous Southeast Asian Chinese headed for Western Europe, North America and Australasia in order to break away from the racism and marginalization in their own countries. In doing so, these *huayi* (i.e. foreign nationals of Chinese descent) constituted an example of the latest type of Chinese migration – the descent or re-migrant pattern.

This profusion of circular and/or return migration was further augmented by the exodus of nearly half a million Hong Kong people in the thirteen years leading up to the former colony’s reversion to China, many of whom soon began plying between continents as ‘astronauts’[14] or embarking for another destination yet again (Salaff,

[12] This resolution to relinquish its claims to overseas Chinese was then formally acknowledged through ratification of the Sino-Indonesian Dual Nationality Treaty of 1955 (Suryadinata 2002, 175-76; Zhuang 2013, 36).
[13] From 1978 onwards, ethnic Chinese in possession of foreign citizenship are labeled by the PRC as *haiwai huaren* (or simply *huaren*), which literally translates into ‘overseas Chinese’; however, academics have preferred to use the term ‘Chinese overseas’, reserving ‘overseas Chinese’ to refer to mere sojourners (C.-B. Tan 2013, 2-3).
[14] Dubbed by the media and community-at-large, ‘astronauts’ (太空人 or *taai hung yahn* in Cantonese) were the pioneers of the return stream. They were mostly of men (usually of middle class families) who had returned to Hong

Wong and Greve 2010; Sussman 2011). Among them, we find some who are a new breed of *huashang* – contemporary overseas Chinese entrepreneurs, businessmen, and corporate capitalists who profess, "I can live anywhere in the world, but it must be near an airport" (Ong 1999, 135). And more recently legions of *haigui*[15] have also joined this movement, complicating preconceived ideas about 'Chinese' and Chineseness through their actions and interactions with Chinese nationals at home as well as foreigners (including other ethnic Chinese overseas) (Wang, Wong and Sun 2006).

With the advent of immigration policies and nationalist politics, the uninhibited movement of peoples no longer seemed to be a fathomable notion. What we had known earlier as the Chinese diaspora would have remained a unique relationship between the PRC and its citizens residing overseas notwithstanding changes in the global backdrop. However, as we find an abundance of people with Chinese descent (whether foreign-born or naturalized) engaging in multi-directional/secondary/tertiary migration under different persuasions, the necessity to revise taken for granted notions of the Chinese as a diaspora arises. Be they economic migrants or well educated and highly skilled cosmopolitan professionals called 'flexible citizens' (Ong 1999), all have become part of what I would like to call as the Chinese overseas.

These *huayi* have taken advantage of migration and relational networks as economic and cultural strategies to cope with the global economy and in the process, manipulated the discourse on identity. Moreover when put together with the new breed of migrants from the PRC, standard distinctions between the "domestic Chinese diaspora" and "external Chinese diaspora"[16] are being blurred (Wang, Wong and Sun 2006). Interactions between ethnic Chinese and Chinese nationals, within the PRC and

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Kong while leaving his wife and children behind in the destination country to earn the rights of residence. The term is a metaphor for the frequent trans-pacific shuttle that these husbands/fathers were engaged in which conjures the image of a man straddled between two places in mid-air (Sussman 2011).

[15] First coined by Chinese media, the term is an abbreviation of the Chinese phrase *haiwai guilai*, meaning to return from overseas. It refers to Chinese nationals who returned to the mainland after staying overseas for varying lengths of time and counts those who have: (1) studied abroad and obtained a degree or diploma from overseas universities or schools, (2) went abroad as students but stayed on after graduation and acquired permanent residence or citizenship in the countries of abode, or (3) went abroad as researchers, skilled workers or businessmen and acquired permanent residence or citizenship in the countries of abode (Wang, Wong and Sun 2006, 296).

[16] The "domestic Chinese diaspora" is made up of *huaqiao* (Chinese nationals residing outside the PRC, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) and *guiqiao* (overseas Chinese who have returned to Mainland China for permanent settlement) whereas the "external Chinese diaspora" consists of *huaren* (foreign nations of Chinese descent) and *qiaojuan* (relatives of *huaqiao* and *guiqiao*) (Wang, Wong and Sun 2006, 294-95).

overseas, in turn complicate preconceived ideas about 'Chinese' and Chineseness. Placing Chinese overseas under the scrutiny of 'diaspora' then is a means to take Chineseness to be an "open signifier" (Ang 2001, 35). Above that, it is a response to the calls to locate the struggles of how to be Chinese, how to remain Chinese, how to become Chinese and how to lose one's Chineseness.

2.2. Different Routes, Different Roots

By now we have ascertained our protagonist of this paper and expounded on how their role will aid us in reframing our understanding of 'Chinese' as ethnic and cultural identity. Moving forward, the Chinese overseas in Britiain needs to be ascertained and profiled before we can proceed with the primary task of our research at hand.

Unlike Southeast Asian dominions, there had not been a history of regular contact between China and Britain before the nineteenth century. The first documented Chinese presence in Britain could only be traced back to the seventeenth century when Shen Fuzong, a Jiangxi native, made a stopover with Jesuit priest Father Philippe Couplet as part of a missionary tour in Europe (Parker 1998). During his stay, Shen helped to catalogue the Chinese collection in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford and met King James II, who commissioned a painting of the man to be hung in his bedchamber (Benton and Gomez 2008, 23; Parker 1998, 67-68). A handful of artisans and artists also made sporadic visits during this age of Orientalism and *Chinoiserie* but scant records remain of these trailblazers and they were all too soon forgotten when the fetish for all things Chinese was eclipsed by a new craze (Benton and Gomez 2008).

From the nineteenth century onwards, however, Britain has had a nearly uninterrupted flow of Chinese emigrants that came into two separate waves. The first wave of modern Chinese migration to Britain (circa. 1800 - 1945), like countless other cases of the time, went hand in hand with the expansion of the British Empire. Many left for Britain as seafarers, indentured laborers or students without certainly having the will to settle for good at first. Nevertheless, a good deal of them toiled for long and became pioneers of Limehouse Chinatown – the first Chinese settlement in London which was situated in the Limehouse district of East End (Ng 1968; Shang 1984).

The population of this first wave peaked between 1911 and 1921 reaching 2,419 at its highest[17] (Ng 1968). A subsequent shipping slump, immigration curbs and pressures on housing and employment in the interwar years led to a decline in the Chinese population. By the 1930s, it could be said that the Chinese population in Britain was struggling for existence (Parker 1998, 70-74). Given the destruction of the Limehouse district during the London Blitz and repatriation of wartime contract laborers after the war, the first wave of Chinese migration was admittedly dissolved. Those who managed to linger behind after two world wars were thereupon left to start anew elsewhere.

Beginning from the second half of the twentieth century, a second wave of migration rejuvenated and dramatically restructured the Chinese community in London and throughout Britain. Before 1950, mainlanders, comprising of mostly Cantonese and Shanghainese,[18] made up the majority of Britain's Chinese population. After the Second World War, the country would witness the coming of an entirely different Chinese crowd that encompassed various groups of distinct 'migration vintages' (Kunz 1973). Lacking a unifying force to consolidate all of them together, the postwar Chinese population remained highly fragmented. And depending on the timing and event(s) that led to migration, we can find altogether six groups of Chinese overseas presently in the United Kingdom (UK):

i. *New Territories' takeaway pioneers*: First to reach Britain after the war, the story of the Hong Kong Chinese from New Territories has been frequently recounted from James L. Watson's (1975) seminal research on the Man lineage in Hong Kong and London. Formerly rural farmers, the inhabitants of New Territories were suddenly made redundant by their inability and unwillingness to cope with a vegetable revolution in the 1950s. Failing to adjust to the broader turn of events, they eventually chose to leverage on their status as Commonwealth citizens and immigrate to Britain as a survival strategy.

[17] This number excludes the approximately 100,000 men from Shandong who were hired by the British to join the Chinese Labour Corp between 1916 and 1920 (Xu 2011) as well as the extra 20,000 recruited from Zhejiang and Shanghai to form the Chinese Merchant Seamen's Pool during the Second World War (Shang 1984).

[18] Shanghainese basically referred to all those who were from outside Guangdong province. The label came about because Western custom officials seldom distinguished their different provenance and usually put down the last port of disembarkation (i.e. Shanghai) as the place of origin instead. In addition, there was no clear indication that either of the two groups had greater cultural dominance.

In the UK, they found an economy undergoing a postwar labor shortage and a taste for new cuisines introduced by returning servicemen. Together, these forces shaped an “eating out” culture that resulted in a boom in ethnic catering. Hong Kong Chinese who showed up found their place in this labor-intensive sector that entailed low start-up capital and little knowledge of the English language (Parker 1998, 75). In London they set up restaurants in the Soho area, along Gerrard Street and Lisle Street because rents were cheap in this former red light district.

Although male-dominated at the outset, things took a turn when whole families were sent for in an attempt to beat the implementation of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act (Benton and Gomez 1998, 10). It also encouraged a takeaway explosion as Chinese families begun moving to small towns or suburbs where they can run a modest chop suey house or “chippy” for a fraction of the costs and with less competition. Consequently the New Territories population was dispersed throughout the country in the mid-1960s and 1970s (Shang 1984, 25).

ii. *China-born aliens from Hong Kong*: Following the enactment of the work voucher scheme in 1962, restaurateurs switched to importing China-born aliens from Hong Kong to meet their labor needs. It was estimated that as many as 10,000 China-born aliens were working in the UK between 1963 and 1973, with the bulk in catering. This flow of stateless immigrants from China only subsided when the Immigration Act of 1971 came into force and subjected Commonwealth citizens to the same work permit system as aliens. By then, however, most China-born aliens had achieved settled status after at least 4 years of approved employment (Benton and Gomez 2008, 39-41).

In total, approximately 50,000 Chinese were living and working in Britain during this period while London surpassed Liverpool to have the largest Chinese community in the country. With this second influx of China-born aliens from Hong Kong, a range of businesses burgeoned

around Soho to cater to the needs of restaurant workers and Gerrard Street became the Chinatown that we are familiar with today (Wong 1967). Concomitantly their arrival generated more tension in a community that was already divided.[19] Being stateless immigrants, Chinese aliens were frequently treated as second-class, delegated with menial backend tasks at work and given lower wages (Shang 1984).

iii. *Ethnic Chinese from countries outside of China*: Other than those servicing the catering trade, ethnic Chinese could be found working in different sectors as well. A key contrast was that these Chinese peoples were from countries outside of China (but mostly with colonial ties to Britain) – Singapore, Malaysia, Guyana, Mauritius, Jamaica, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc. (Benton and Gomez 2008; Wong 1967). Many initially came as Commonwealth citizens and/or students and later stayed on. In particular, it is interesting to note that urban Hong Kongers showed up in the 1970s and 1980s to work in white-collar executive occupations (e.g. accountancy, nursing, social services). More came again during the 1990s when the 50,000 Hong Kong families were granted the right of abode under the British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990.

Predominantly re-migrants, ethnic Chinese from countries outside of China resembled twice migrants (Bhachu 1990) in certain aspects – especially with regards to their urban origins, higher qualifications, better command of English, prior experience of living as a minority abroad and the lack of homeland orientation. These people of Chinese descent had a vastly different profile and were assumed to integrate better into British society. Hence they received scant attention in spite of being continuously present throughout the postwar years.

iv. *Vietnamese refugees*: In the late 1970s and early 1980s about Vietnamese boat people were resettled in the UK. Up to 70 per cent of

[19] There was already a rivalry between prewar Chinatown veterans and Hong Kong Chinese from New Territories. The former thought of the newcomers as rude and arrogant while the latter scoffed at the pioneers for being old-fashioned. Furthermore, Hakkas were in general considered inferior to Cantonese Punti (some of whom belonged to elite lineages, such as the Mans) among the New Territories arrivals (Benton and Gomez 1998, 15-16; Shang 1984, 22-24).

them were ethnic Chinese[20] and a great proportion hailed from North Vietnam. They were, in a way, re-migrants save the fact that they were forcibly exiled from their own country (Benton and Gomez 2008, 44). Caught unprepared and fleeing from persecution, the Vietnamese Chinese could barely converse in English and were not highly qualified.

Once in the UK, Vietnamese refugees were spread out in various small towns by authorities and faced lousy employment prospects. In spite of later reorganizing themselves in bigger cities and finding work in unskilled jobs, their relations with the dominant Hong Kong Chinese community were ambivalent. While some restaurants and takeaway owners extended a helping hand by offering work, other Hong Kongers derided them (Benton and Gomez 1998; Shang 1984, 58-61); on the flipside, some Vietnamese preferred to distant themselves from the Hong Kong Chinese because of the poor treatment they received while staying in reception camps in Hong Kong.

v. *New immigrants from the Mainland*: After the PRC opened up in the 1980s, Mainland Chinese made their reappearance on British soil. Since then, there began an influx of Chinese students admitted into British tertiary institutions. Their numbers multiplied rapidly from 2,746 in the mid-1990s to over 30,000 in the 2002 - 2003 academic year (Nania and Green 2004). Over the years, Chinese students in the UK are also increasingly from well-to-do, urban backgrounds and those who remain after graduation typically move on to highly skilled professions.

In the meantime there has been an upswing in asylum seekers and illegal immigrants from the Mainland too (Parker 1998). In light of the Dover tragedy in 2000 and the Morecambe Bay cockle pickers drowning in 2004, illegal immigrants have garnered great attention (Pai 2008) of which the Fujianese have figured more prominently than those from other provinces. Despite driving down wages and benefiting local Chinese employers, they are often condemned for the perceived threat

[20] Even so, they belonged to different sub-ethnic groups such as Teochew, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka and Hainanese (Benton and Gomez 2008).

that they pose to the safety and reputation of Chinatown[21] (Pieke, et al. 2004, 115-16). In contrast to the common image of the Chinese as a model minority, the mass exploitation of these undocumented workers also reveals a grim picture usually hidden from view.

vi. *British-born Chinese*: Co-existing with the aforementioned groups are the second- (or third) generation descendants of the Chinese population in Britain. Commonly referred to as British-born Chinese, the name of the category can be somewhat misleading since it often includes those who were raised in the UK from a young age. Little has been looked into this nascent (but sizeable) community that is still trying to find a voice of its own. Anyhow, it is progressively becoming more visible and vocal as its members come of age and find avenues to express and claim their hybrid identities. And as we shall see, the British-born Chinese might just be an unanticipated broker in the negotiation of ethnic identity among the Chinese overseas in London.

[21] It has been argued that underlying this is a fundamental anxiety that the old Cantonese-speaking majority would be taken over by the Fujianese (just like the case of Manhattan's Chinatown) at the going rate of migration from Mainland China (Pieke, et al. 2004, 110).

3. THE BALLAD OF EAST AND WEST

> Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
> Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat;
> But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
> When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!
>
> – Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*

Written during the height of the British Empire, Rudyard Kipling's famed verse from at the opening of this chapter serves as a parable for the account we are about to describe. The first two lines of the stanza have been said to be the most freely misquoted of Kipling's phrases, presented without its caveat in the next sentence. Likewise there are two faces to the Chinese community in Britain, one of which has been grossly misunderstood and the other widely omitted. The former being the legacy of orientalist fantasies from the Age of Imperialism that has lived on quietly until present day in the ethnic/racial discourse of Britain; while the latter underscores Kipling's original defense that there is admittedly neither East nor West.

The condition of heterogeneity is not new to the Chinese. It is a fact that many, if not all, would readily concede to. As a preamble to the following piece, this statement serves to remind us that an analysis of the Chinese overseas (or Chinese in general for the matter) cannot be solely reduced to language or some other objective criteria. It would be a crude oversimplification of the complex social realities experienced by everyone. Rather, in the case of the Chinese overseas in London, language offers an insightful lens to view the changes and evolution in ethnic identity construction – from one whereby dominant racial attitudes overshadowed all else to one by which language becomes a critical marker of differences between sub-groups that each proclaim to be Chinese in exclusive ways. This decision as such endeavors to reflect an arresting aspect of ethnic identity that is just one among considerable others.

3.1. Journey to the West

As indicated, fieldwork for this study was conducted in London. The English capital was actually not my first choice; for I had planned to carry out my research in Singapore but

was unable to do so due to travel constraints. Alas, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the Chinese community in London (or Britain for that matter) remains understudied despite having the second largest population of Chinese overseas in Europe (Li and Li 2013). Nevertheless I was caught off-guard by the numerous dissimilarities in migration trajectory between the Chinese in Southeast Asia and the Chinese in Britain when I started preparations for fieldwork.

Consequently, I entered into the field with a slightly different posture from the one I had expected at first. I needed to gain a better understanding of Chinese migration to Britain and was unsure whether my research question would be feasible in this new environment. As such I chose to access the site via local Chinese community organizations and ongoing Chinese heritage projects in order to acquire some breadth to my knowledge. On approach, I declared my intention to learn more about the Chinese community and its culture in London and was surprised that most readily agreed to meet up and/or be interviewed.[22] The potential to investigate the community through language though, was only confirmed while undergoing the process of immersion.

In fact it was the moment when I questioned my status as a native researcher that I knew for certain the viability and value of my research. To the extent that I welcomed without hesitation as an ethnically Chinese student, I was an outsider in many ways too. Of course this was plainly obvious because I was neither British nor studying and living in London. But above all, it was loud and clear from the minute I opened my mouth. Throughout my stay, people had commented on my linguistic abilities on many occasions. I was fluent in English but did not have a British accent, my command of Mandarin was equally good but I spoke with a Taiwanese accent, and the poor Cantonese that I used carried an accent that was unique to Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese. Then it dawned upon me that the accommodation of a Chinese like me in spite of all these probably points to the crux of my research question.

3.2. Through the Oriental Looking Glass

According to statistics from the 2011 Census for England and Wales, the ethnic Chinese now make up 0.7% of the population (Office for National Statistics 2012). At

[22] Later I learnt that I had not been the first student to approach these organizations. It is a pity that there is probably a lot more research (in the form of theses) about the Chinese in Britain sitting in repositories and not shared widely.

almost 400,000 people, they make up the third largest visible ethnic minority, though lurking at a distant behind from the South Asians and the Blacks. Furthermore London, having the highest concentration of Chinese in the UK, would naturally be the most appropriate starting point for outlining the contours of the community. It comes as surprise then that it is actually near exasperating to catch a glimpse of Chinese people in this city. If riding the London Underground offers the slightest indication, the Chinese, albeit visually discernible, is everywhere and nowhere – they are the scattered figures in a train carriage clearly outnumbered by everyone else.

Two other images of the Chinese stand out against this flat, inconspicuous portrait: that of the bag-toting, money-waving masses (presumably tourists) striding up and down the London High Street on one hand, and the bustling folk of Chinatown who run the engines of this core establishment on the other. The first image gives a false but impactful illusion that displays the rise of the Chinese economy, which is bringing packs of well-heeled middle-class with spending power on board airplanes and tourist buses. These transients are not the ordinary ethnic Chinese living and working in Britain but their increasing presence has helped to further induce stereotypes about the local population. A more accurate depiction of the Chinese overseas in London is to be found in the second image instead.

Generally, Chinatown has been taken to be a symbol of Chinese overseas communities worldwide. It is an urban morphological phenomenon that developed alongside the large-scale migration of Chinese peoples in the nineteenth century, when immigrants tended to cluster together as a result of racial discrimination and segregation (Luk 2008, 77). Chinatowns in Britain however present a unique paradox: “On the one hand, the Chinese are the most dispersed ethnic group in the country with the least visible residential concentration. On the other, Chinatown exists as the most visible economic concentration in most British metropolises.” (76) This raises the question of the extent to which the London Chinatown represents the Chinese overseas as a community in Britain. For it could be asked,

> When does a group, or groups, of Chinese living in proximity constitute a community? Would a temple, a row of grocery stores, a cemetery, a minimum number of adult males and females be enough? Or would there have to be a club, a minimum number of families, a Chinese newspaper and a school, or

> some place one could call Chinatown? Or is the main requirement simply one major concentration in a country with which small groups spread over wide areas can identify? What if there are thousands of Chinese, or people of Chinese descent, scattered about a large city who no longer feel the need to be a community? Is a complex network of organizations and associations (including secret societies) a necessary feature of a Chinese community and so on? (G. Wang 1998b, 8)

This is not to say that the London Chinatown is not a symbol of the Chinese population in Britain. To be precise, it is the nature of this representation that we need to problematize for "community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships… [and] unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc. it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term." (Williams 1976, 76) So we ought to question the kind of community that the London Chinatown corresponds to. Chinatowns are not simply physical entities with an ethnic population and their facilities. Its space is also a site where social relations are negotiated. On this account, Chinatown is an imaginative terrain where the West meets the East and the product of that encounter. It is a manifestation of the dominant discourse about the Chinese as an ethnic group and Chineseness.

Gerd Baumann (1996) in his study of ethnic communities in Southhall, West London argues, "the tendencies to reify the 'cultures' of ethnic minorities, to stylize pseudo-biological categories into communities, and to appeal to popular biological conceptions of culture are not difficult to substantiate in British politics and media" (20). In this hegemonic discourse, ethnicity and culture function as surreptitious code words for 'race' and ethnic minorities exist as discrete communities of people sharing a common culture / 'race' (21-22). Mainstream notions of the Chinese community in Britain are as such derived from historical racist thinking that has been assigned to and affirmed by the population.

These perceptions were not only drawn from observations of Chinese settlements in Britain. Attitudes and conceptions about the Chinese were also transmitted from British colonies abroad as well as Britons in China. The latter is perhaps that which is lost upon and/or evaded by the Chinese community (since it is

associated with the “century of humiliation” for China and the Chinese). During a community reinterpretation workshop that I attended, it was noted that participants expressed slight disappointment when presented with an assortment of objects, artworks and paraphernalia that were neither produced by the Chinese nor deemed exactly relevant the contribution of Chinese soldiers and workers to British military history. What they had momentarily obviated however was the realization that the Chinese and Chineseness were very much constituted in the previous subjugation and subordination of China by Western powers for the British discourse. If anything, the selection of artifacts put forward a telling chronicle of early European impressions of the Chinese and China –

- A miniature silver replica of the ‘porcelain pagoda’ in Nanjing;[23]
- Early pseudo-anthropological observations of people and places in China in the form of paintings and drawings;
- Objects acquired or looted in the raid of the Old Summer Palace during the Second Opium War; and,
- Trench art produced by the Chinese Labour Corps in the Great War.

Furthermore the importation of Chinese labor in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “had popularized the image of Chinese immigrants as immoral, violent, intrinsically incompatible with white communities, and a direct threat to the British working class” (Auerbach 2009, 50). This portrayal was subsequently exploited and absorbed into English common consciousness by the pen of a small-time freelance journalist turned popular fiction author named Sax Rohmer. He created the the character Fu Manchu who,

> In him the qualities of being exotic and evil are bound together, connecting the characteristics of the Chinese with crime, vice and cruelty. He characterizes the threat of the yellow hordes and links this with the lecherous impulses of ‘Chinamen’ towards white women. He also personifies the dangers of combining Western science with the ancient customs of the Chinese, for Fu Manchu is Western-educated. His villainy is a product of Chinese tradition and so, not bound by the ‘norms’ of the rational civilized West, his behavior is

[23] The structure was the subject of Johan Nieuhoff’s well-known illustration that inspired Chinoiserie and romantic travel writings that had nothing but awe and praise for a fabulous Cathay.

beyond reason: he belongs to a 'race of ancestor-worshippers which is capable of anything' (Clegg 1994, 4-5).

Rohmer's thriller series proved to be so successful that it spawned an entire franchise that included a sequel, films, a radio series, a comic strip and a television series (Clegg 1994). But more importantly, it also inspired many others who instrumentalized this portrayal for their own ends (be it literary, political, etc.) and catalyzed a climate of fear and anxiety. Reminiscent of the situation in turn-of-the-century New York City, whereby writers and white middle-class social reformers mutually reinforced a distorted picture of Chinatown and its residents (Lui 2007), the fabricated tale of a Chinese race inhabiting an area (i.e. Limehouse Chinatown) ridden with vice, miscegenation and exoticism was then corroborated by locals affected by the socio-economic and political crises in London at the end of the First World War (Seed 2006).

A Chinese community was thus constructed based on this prevailing racial discourse, which was also vividly documented in Lao She's novel, Mr. Ma & Son: A Sojourn in London (see extract 2 in Appendix). Being in a disadvantageous position at that time, the Chinese had no choice but to adopt a strategy of quiet acceptance and passive avoidance even though they were completely opposite from the manufactured stereotypes in reality. Because of various reasons withal, they had seldom fought against the prejudice and racist tirades. People were reluctant to seek recourse through law due to concerns of racial bias by law enforcement personnel and uncertainty about differences in legal systems, custom and language (Auerbach 2009).

This practice of refrain persisted with the second wave of Chinese immigrants. Commensurate with the pioneers' experience of discrimination and in response to residual racism, the Chinese kept up with their identity as an insular and self-reliant race and steered clear of open economic competition with other groups by confining themselves to the ethnic catering industry (Benton and Gomez 2008, 314-15). As a consequence, the foremost view of Chinese ethnic identity in Britain is that of a bounded, homogenous racial group sharing common cultural traits. And this self-essentialization still holds currency today.

In the evaluation questionnaire administered to interviewees who participated in the London Chinatown Oral History Project, respondents were posed with the following question:

> Do you think the project has been able to get the wider community to learn about the lives and history of Chinese people living in the UK? If yes, please elaborate on how you think the wider community can benefit from learning about it.

Replying to the second part of the question, a handful of respondents indicated that other segments of the population could benefit from a greater awareness of the Chinese who, as an ethnic group, are hardworking, disciplined, law-abiding and not dependent on social welfare. It is therefore apparent that the Chinese have devised this cultural tactic vis-à-vis the majority and other ethnic minorities in order to avoid hostility from the society-at-large, claim legitimacy and vie for resources. Nevertheless, it is only one façade of the Chinese kaleidoscope. If we take our eyes away from the imposing gates of London Chinatown, with its bright red steel arches and green timber roofs, one will discover an alternative dimension to the Chinese overseas that is marked by different dynamics of configuration and coexistence.

3.3. Different Strokes of the Chinese Character

> When it finally came to my turn, I told him that I wanted the *ngau yoke hor fun.*[24] However he could not hear me properly and I had to repeat myself more loudly the second time round. Then, even though I spoke Cantonese to him, the waiter repeated my order back to me in Mandarin instead! Was it because of my poor pronunciation/bad accent or maybe it was because my companions had all placed their orders in Mandarin before me... Just as I was trying to make out what had happened mentally, M[25] turned to YB and I and asked if I just spoke in Cantonese. I replied him yes, to which he then asked, "How do you know whether to speak Chinese or Cantonese?" Now, I am double confounded! Before I could recover from my temporary mental blackout, YB simply told M that it is because we were in Chinatown and people speak Cantonese there […]

[24] In English, stir-fry rice noodles with beef.

[25] M was the only white British person among us at the table that night. All of my other companions were Mainland Chinese who studied in London and stayed on to work after graduation.

> After a while I turned to H and tried to make small talk with him instead. I began asking him about his job and despite initiating the conversation in Mandarin he kept replying me in English! This night at Wong Kei was truly testing my preconceived assumptions about what it takes to be treated as a Chinese in London.

The following excerpt from my fieldwork diary was about an incident that occurred during late-night supper with some new friends made at an event hosted by the British Chinese Society (BCS). On hindsight, my personal reply to the question "How do you know whether to speak Chinese or Cantonese?" has already been partly revealed. A simple response is that it all depends on the context; and underlying this answer is an awareness of multiple modes of ethnic identification among the Chinese overseas in London (sadly unbeknownst to our inquisitive friend). Interestingly enough, in my futile attempts to fit into at least one of the social categories, I found myself constantly being passed over from one group to the next. It was as though I was always Chinese in some other way in the eyes of my informants, and they it made known through the language chosen to converse with me in.

From this anecdote, one could also surmise that divisions among the Chinese overseas in London are not meted out in the same way as the dominant British discourse. Rather than a homogenous community sharing a singular identity, there are several Chinese communities distinguished by a plurality of ascriptions – an assertion that those studying Chinese populations in Europe and/or Britain would attest to. It has been contended that,

> When we take the structural and cultural logic of chain migration into account, the existence of a Chinese community – be it in a town, a region, a country, or in Europe as a whole – is not at all self-evident. An alternative approach would be to think of the Chinese in Europe as made up of discrete transnational communities, such as the Hong Kong Chinese, Zhejiangnese Chinese, Vietnamese Chinese, or even subdivisions thereof. These core communities migrate to and spread out across Europe largely independent of each other. They only interact – and sometimes, indeed, temporarily create what looks like a unified Chinese community – when required to do so by the political, economic or social environment (Pieke 1998, 12)

For the Chinese overseas in London, language is a fundamental trait perceived as intrinsic to Chinese identity. The ability to speak Chinese is part of a 'native model' (Barth 1998b) that provides an ethnically Chinese person with his/her self-image and acts as a benchmark for which the behavior of himself/herself and other Chinese could be evaluated against. Existing studies on language and identity among people of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia support this postulation. Tan Chee-Beng (1998) in particular has elaborated on (and spoken out against) the notion of a "Pure Chinese", whereby the ability to speak is a minimum but insufficient condition and only literacy in the language would qualify one as a bona fide Chinese (32-33). The objective here though is not to devise a hierarchy whereby one's Chineseness can be measured against; rather the crucial point is that the purported tight, homogeneous community is momentarily dissolved once we begin to investigate the fluid boundaries that divide ethnic Chinese speakers of different languages.[26]

According to the unspoken convention observed, there is general consensus that Cantonese is the working language of the London Chinatown. As a rule, it has also been reckoned that older and middle-aged ethnic Chinese would naturally converse in Cantonese. Other than those immersed in the Chinese economy and society in London, ethnic Chinese can be chiefly organized into two additional speech groups – younger, "northern-looking" ones are assumed to be Mandarin speakers while the remaining are said to communicate in English.[27] Henceforth, the generic boundaries within the Chinese community have been outlined. To understand this silent arrangement nonetheless, we will need to return to London in the mid-1900s.

At that moment in time, there was a Chinese population that had dwindled to the point of near-dissolution after the events that occurred in the first half of the century. Chinese ethnic identity was also overshadowed by a powerful racial discourse that obscured other differences within the community. Having said so, the situation began to change when the Hong Kong Chinese from New Territories arrived in the UK. Their appearance dramatically altered the demographics of the Chinese overseas

[26] Of course, the notion of boundaries should not be taken literally here such that it creates real groups per se. What language does is to give some form/shape to categories upon which interaction can be made sense of. We must not forget that language frequently overlaps with other criteria such as nationality. Where it may bring together a particular constellation of groups here, the same people might be reconstituted depending on the circumstance.

[27] However, in uncertain situations or encounters where the speakers of different tongues are gathered, the default language medium is English.

population in London, with Cantonese people now constituting a clear majority. In addition a rivalry was wrought between the newcomers who were making their foray into the ethnic catering trade and old Chinatown veterans whose livelihoods were put at risk.

Wishing to establish some form of dominance over the earlier generation and the Hakkas who followed along to Britain (as well as in relation to other ethnic groups), the Cantonese people conceived an identity that emphasized their shared provenance and mother tongue. As an ethnic boundary, speaking Cantonese implied that one belongs to a unique group that originated from Southern China (i.e. Hong Kong and the Guangdong province) and embraced a culture that is wholly different from those of northerners. Members of the Cantonese community took pride in this heritage and the language vindicated antecedent regional differences in Chinese identity.

Like the three other major varieties of the Chinese language (Wu, Min, Hakka), Cantonese (which is a dialect under the Yue branch) is mutually unintelligible with Mandarin. It has nine instead five different tones and varies in lexicon and grammar as well (Coulmas 1999). In its written form Cantonese frequently employs characters that are different or do not exist in standard written Chinese. For example, the character for "yes" (是) is 係 while "no" (不) is 唔; the word for "pretty" in Cantonese, 靚, has no equivalent in Mandarin. Having been disconnected from Mainland China for long periods, Cantonese speakers in London also write in traditional rather than simplified Chinese characters.[28]

Yet, this internal boundary originally constructed to assert the cultural superiority of a group that spoke a different language (i.e. Cantonese) had to be maintained over time. To do so, the said differences had to be manifested through some mechanism that allowed members to perform and exhibit their supposed ethnic attributes. The London Chinatown was that central institution of Chinese life. It was where Chinese people lived, played and worked, and the location of key community forums such as Chinese schools, associations and community centers. For that reason, Cantonese was made the *lingua franca* of Chinatown. Possessing a command

[28] The simplification of written Chinese characters was only formally enacted in Mainland China by the Chinese Communist Party government during the 1950s (Zhao and Baldauf Jr. 2011). Since it was under colonial rule, Hong Kong retained the traditional table of characters; those who left China in the 1950s and 1960s were schooled before the transition occurred.

of Cantonese became a prerequisite for those who want to work in any Chinese-related business (especially catering) or organization and social institutions are mainly accessible to Cantonese speakers only. In Chinese schools, textbooks and teaching materials deemed more suitable for the Cantonese-speaking population were specially brought in and supplied by the Hong Kong Government Office to ensure continuity (House of Commons 1985, xl-xlv).

Until today, it is noted that the offices of many Chinese organizations still operate in Cantonese. My efforts at landing a volunteer role for community projects confirmed that fluency in Cantonese is a strict criterion for determining the roles one will be assigned to. Without sound knowledge of the language, a person would be delegated secondary tasks (e.g. photo taking, filming, event coordination) and unable to gain first-hand interaction with members of the community. Even so, it is possible to single out members whose first language is not Cantonese and/or are not of Cantonese origin. Moreover it does not mean that one would be treated the same as a person from Hong Kong if he/she could speak Cantonese.

As mentioned, among the New Territories arrivals, the Hakkas were routinely considered inferior to the Cantonese Punti. While they may be part of the larger Chinese/Cantonese-speaking community, Hakkas are set apart from those who are of Cantonese ancestry internally. This distinction could be detected when it was remarked during one of my interviews that:

> And the group of people we interviewed are mainly from New Territories and they have their own dialects. Some of them they speak Cantonese but they carry a Hakka accent. And they speak in a certain way that kind of, you know, the use of the language and the use of the expression are quite “their” fashion, are quite their time [*sic.*].

Likewise, China-born aliens who migrated and settled in London may have been of Cantonese ancestry and/or spoke (or later acquired a command of) Cantonese, but they were still treated as second-class citizens in the beginning because of their refugee status. Later immigrants from urban Hong Kong, on the other hand, shared a common language, ancestry and nationality but tended to distinguish themselves from the earlier Chinese arrivals because of their higher socio-economic

status.[29] Nevertheless given the preponderance of Hong Kongers and Mainland Chinese from the Guangdong province, these differences were considerably minor and could be overlooked.

Newcomers it seems, especially those who wanted to participate in Chinese community life or consume the goods and services offered by Chinatown enterprises, had no alternative except learning Cantonese. The ability to communicate in a common language enabled them to participate in the same lived experiences, and in turn be gradually co-opted by the original Cantonese community. This not only applied to the Hakkas from the New Territories and China-born aliens but was the strategy adopted by some of the ethnic Chinese from other countries outside of China as well. Those who did not wish or were not selected to be incorporated then had to form breakaway groups within the bigger Chinese community. In such cases selective deployment of a different language represents and stresses the contrast in other aspects of identity (e.g. class, nationality, ancestry or culture).

For example, ethnic Chinese from former British colonies (e.g. Singapore, Malaysia, etc.) are frequently pointed out as belonging to the English-speaking community.[30] Typically well-educated and more fluent in English, they were distinct from the Cantonese community who were mostly acquainted with Pidgin English or none at all. At the same time, ethnic Chinese from these places were not entirely Cantonese; they either knew a different dialect (most likely Hokkien, Teochew, or Hakka) or spoke Cantonese with an accent and using peculiar local terms that have been developed elsewhere. Hence language choice for them reflects the disparities in origin and socio-economic condition.

But most of all, the decision to identify with the English language is also a deliberate strategy that is very much influenced the prevailing integrationist paradigm. The ability to speak English properly is equated with being well integrated[31] (i.e.

[29] Occupation, it appears, is the principal marker of difference between Hong Kongers of different migration vintages. The earlier arrivals were so intimately tied to the ethnic catering trade that it stood for a clear disjuncture in the history of British Chinese workforce.

[30] This, however, does not include Hong Kong. As one of my informants mentioned, although both Singapore and Hong Kong were former British colonies, the former has always had a different relationship to China. She argued that the British influence was stronger in Singapore than in Hong Kong; and more importantly, the former was politically independent of the Chinese state.

[31] True enough, an allusion was made to this when I enquired about the lack of participation by Singaporeans and Malaysians of Chinese descent in the London Chinatown Oral History Project.

Westernized) and by extension, becoming independent of the Chinatown institution. Emphasizing this aspect of identity opens up an attractive proposal for upward mobility with more desirable employment opportunities outside of the ethnic economy. It also wins over approval and recognition from the public as well as policy makers. Given their comparatively smaller numbers, it would be reasonable for ethnic Chinese from countries outside of China to make this move; doing so was tolerated as well since it hardly threatens the stability of the existing Cantonese community.

A third Mandarin-speaking group, in comparison, arose out of a very different context and foreboded potential tribulations for the Cantonese group. Their emergence is foremost attributed to the influx of new immigrants from the PRC which is not only immeasurably larger but qualitatively different from previous streams of ethnic Chinese overseas who moved to London. The new immigrants belong to different countries and are poles part in terms of language, class, ancestry, regional customs, cuisine, and the like.[32] Coming from all over the Chinese mainland and in widely divergent capacities, these newcomers could be said to have little in common with each other too.

One of the few things that bind them together vis-à-vis the rest of the Chinese community though is language. Besides being fluent in Mandarin, most do not know or understand Cantonese. Their proficiency in the English language is somewhat limited as well. Economic migrants and undocumented workers do not speak English for the most part while students, businessmen, and white-collar workers/professionals may be somewhat adequately fluent but still carry a (occasional) non-British accent.[33] Without a doubt, Mandarin speakers could nonetheless improve on their Cantonese or English (formally or informally) and possibly allow themselves to be absorbed into the ready categories. As a restaurant worker from Fujian explained, “since most of the bosses who employed us are from Hong Kong and speak Cantonese, we slowly pick up some Cantonese” anyway (Lam, et al. 2009, 18).

And yet, this did not happen. More and more, one can find newspapers, signage, leaflets and notices printed in simplified Chinese. Conversations overheard are uttered in a mixture of Cantonese and Mandarin just as radio stations add Mandarin programs into their schedule. Businesses are recruiting Mandarin speakers

[32] This is because the new immigrants were from either the northern provinces or Fujian.
[33] A further distinction, of course, would be that they are not native speakers of the English language no matter what.

to attend to customers and Chinese community organizations are doing the same for outreach. Instead of being slowly relegated, Mandarin is showing signs of becoming the second working language of the London Chinatown and the bearer of another Chinese identity. To comprehend how it has been instrumentalized as a boundary, the event must be seen in the light of broader events.

The demarcation and designation of a separate Mandarin community cannot be explained by their appearance alone. Mr. Edmond Yeo, Chairman of the Chinese Information and Advice Centre (CIAC), clarifies that the demographics have to be analyzed in both absolute and relative terms – the increase in Mandarin speakers is not a solitary phenomenon and corresponds with a parallel decline in the number of Cantonese speakers, many of whom have caught up with age and are passing away successively. The continued relevance and survival of many retailers and service providers as such comes to be dependent on one's dexterity in tapping into the new population. Just as societal bodies have embraced the growing realization that the social exclusion and segregation of Mandarin speakers (especially the disadvantaged and undocumented migrants) can pose serious problems (Pharoah, et al. 2009), business owners are capitalizing on the new large market segment for profit.

Moreover, this coincides with the rise of Chinese influence in the international sphere. The newfound political and economic prowess of the PRC has altered its relationships with other countries.[34] Concomitantly, it has also translated into a pride that empowers Chinese citizens to demand to be recognized in their own right. Their sheer numbers then, posit an antagonism towards the social and economic clout of the other ethnic Chinese. And in the meanwhile, they are accompanied by the British-born Chinese on the cultural front of this confrontation of individuality.

Regularly identified as bicultural children who grew up vacillating between the East and the West, the British-born Chinese have an equivocal stance towards languages. As direct offspring of ethnic Chinese settlers, many would have picked up the Chinese language from a young age at home and attended Chinese community school or weekend language classes when they got older.[35] Nevertheless, practical

[34] For the Hong Kong Chinese, retrocession plays a great deal as well.

[35] Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Chinese language education is debatable. Dropout rates were high due to the shortage of qualified teachers, difficulty of the language and clashes with other school commitments. In addition,

circumstances forbade them from exercise practice their Chinese. For one, the highly dispersed nature of the Chinese population was unable to provide British-born Chinese with regular contact with other members of the community. They grew up almost entirely in the company of British people and only spoke Chinese when interacting with family members. Besides that, racial discrimination in the mainstream caused public displays of identity to be highly discouraged. It is thus compelling for British-born Chinese to claim English as their first language and distance themselves from any associations with the Chinese identity in order to give the impression that they are indeed well adjusted natural citizens of the state (Verma, et al. 1999).

In spite of that British-born Chinese differ from other English-speaking ethnic Chinese by commanding a native mastery of the language and an insistence that they are simply dreadful in any variety of Chinese. Concurrently, they are disconnected from their parents because of the generational divide. As a consequence, the coming of age of this generation (who are assumed to be fully assimilated) has led more members to speak out against stereotypes about them and insisting to be recognized in their own ways. This is especially pertinent because the language criterion has always been problematic for them. British-born Chinese have made the following comments time and again:

> I'd spent the majority of my formative years being told I could not call myself British because I wasn't white. Then I discovered this some Chinese were unwilling to accept me as Chinese because I didn't speak the language. So I was stuck between two very different cultures and backgrounds, neither of which were particularly willing to accept me (Lucy Sheen's Story 2012).

> When I meet other Chinese people, they will usually say something to me in Chinese and I have a bit of a "hmm…sorry, I don't really speak Chinese" moment, and then feel slightly apologetic that you don't speak it. I often then feel like I need to explain my heritage. I'll say something like, "But I do speak other languages, I DO speak Creole!". I don't think many mainland Chinese have heard of Mauritius, so they usually think I've said Malaysia. But when it comes to the language, I have had a few people say things like, "Aw, well, it's

some students lacked personal motivation and confessed to turning up for lessons because of parental pressures (Verma, et al. 1999, 77-80).

> not your fault that you don't speak Chinese," and while they mean it in a nice way, I often feel like that means that they think it's a fault of mine (Julie Cheung-Inhin's Story 2012).

Interrogations of the like even trail the British-born Chinese when they travel or move abroad and they receive similar remarks about how they look Chinese but speak Chinese language with an accent or are chastised for being unable to read Chinese characters or understand Mandarin.

Fortunately, the British-born Chinese are aided in their struggle to break away from this linguistic quagmire. New information technologies and media have helped them to overcome traditional obstacles of distance and dispersal. With new convenient avenues to meet and stay in touch with each other, the British-born Chinese have begun to embark on a project to find their own voice as a distinct group and raise the profile of the population in both the British mainstream and the Chinese community. This progressive rallying and organization urges British-born Chinese to find their place beyond hackneyed labels; in the midst of this, it nurtures new cultural entrepreneurs who are defining the Chinese connection in other ways as well.

A prominent example would be Lord Nat Wei, the first British-born Chinese to become a member of the House of Lords. He famously proposed the idea of a 'Chinese Dream'[36] and expounded on how British-born Chinese can act as bridges between the East and West. In his opinion, the British Chinese "have studied hard and achieved much, and… are among the most law-abiding and… the best-integrated of groups in British society. More Chinese are voting than ever before and more want to enter politics". Hence, he urges the British-born Chinese, as "those who feel a part of China's story living overseas" to serve the community (Lord Wei's Speech on the Role of Overseas Chinese in Britain 2012).

This rendering, of course, is not without its critics. There has been massive debate about its appeal to a highly essentialized image of the British-born Chinese as a 'model minority' and preconceived ideas about the identifications between Chinese

[36] This 'Chinese Dream' is likened to the British Dream and the American dream, and concerns the harnessing of China's economic growth as a force for social good.

overseas and China.[37] Notwithstanding the contentions, it offers a gleam of the multitude of prospects that may spring from this growing movement. Furthermore, it once again neatly leads us back to this paper's main assertion: Chinese identities in London are, in actuality, very diverse. These claims however are not immutable and have to be constantly maintained and adapted in the face of changing external circumstances. And even though language can be a means of organizing differences among the Chinese overseas, it only advances a hint of the many alternatives that we can potentially explore.

[37] The way in which Lord Wei put forth his idea on how the Chinese diaspora in Britain can contribute is especially worrisome. His call for the British Chinese to "take hold of once more our historic role as overseas Chinese" (Lord Wei's Speech on the Role of Overseas Chinese in Britain 2012) bears an uncanny resemblance to the *huaqiao* discourse.

EPILOGUE

And so, it remains to be seen how Chinese identities may continue to develop and the likely ramifications that will result from current challenges. So far, we find Mandarin speakers are taking up Cantonese and vice versa. Can we foresee a day when Cantonese will no longer be relevant as its speakers eventually disappear? Or is it equally plausible to conceive of the Cantonese group accelerate their learning of Mandarin and have its boundary subsumed under the Mandarin group? Alternatively, would a sense of imminent threat prompt a revival of interest in Cantonese and thereby secure the ethnic boundary for an extended period?

All of the above are some of the postulations that can be put forth as food for thought. Likewise, many questions can be asked of the British-born Chinese. After all we must not forget that they are a fledging movement that still lacks leadership and direction. This is apparent from the fact that groups such as the BCS and the British Born Chinese (BBC) are run by volunteers and retain a recreational character. Membership criteria, in addition, are vaguely defined. Heritage and oral history projects (such as Mike Tsang's *Between East and West*) are few and far in between as yet. Whether it will succeed in bring about real changes is not substantiated. Additionally, more needs to be looked into the motivations of cultural entrepreneurs and purported faces of the community – exactly whose voice do they seek to represent and what are the inducements for advocacy?

At this point, it is appropriate to conclude that regardless, we can reasonably infer that much more can be anticipated from the Chinese overseas in London through the study of its cultural process and struggles. As a final note, Paul Gilroy's (1993) instruction that the Black Atlantic identity should not be understood as being marginal to or derived from a dominant national culture is befitting for stimulating further reflections too. This paper has attempted to apply his idea to the case of Chinese identities and in return, we were able to have a very meaningful examination that reflects the original diversity of Chinese communities that have been scattered and gathered under distinctive conditions in various parts of the world. Moving forward, it will be beneficial to pursue this framework further to better understand the many ways in which all ethnic Chinese could be similar yet different at the same time.

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APPENDIX

Extract 1: Excerpts from Song of Revolution

[…] Let me call again to the hua-ch'iao overseas
Compatriots to the distant ends of the earth!
Only because of the need to feed yourself
Did you leave home to wander the seas.
The pestilential Nanyang air fills the skies,
Life is short when the deadly fevers come.
Working hard in the mines making your millions,
Building your gardens to meet your pleasures;
Although the lush trees and bamboos are beautiful,
Longevity cannot be bought with cash.
The day death brings you into your coffin
Bone and flesh will turn blue and guts will rot.
Where are those elegant young dandies?
As dirty as the worms in shit!
To become a major is really difficult,
Next is to try and become a kapitan.
So you rise to serve by imperial command
With face hard as iron and as pitiless.
The day you take the road into the earth
You are no mandarin back in your native home.
Your descendants remain inferior to others
Without protection none can get very far […]

What use is the cumulation of silver cash?
Why not use it to eject the Manchus?
Ten thousand each from you isn't much
To buy cannons and guns and ship them inland.
Buy a hundred thousand quick-loading rifles
Aimed straight at Peking with easy success!
The Manchu babarians destroyed, peace will then follow,
A republican polity immediately assured!

The hua-ch'iao can then vent their feelings
And the Westerners retreat to call you brothers.
Much better than building fortunes and pleasures
Which can do nothing when death appears.
It is hard to be happy all one's life,
You need but little conscience to feel shame.
What then is the most shameful matter?
To forget one's ancestors involves the greatest hate!
If not that, to register as a foreign national
Forgetting that you come from Chinese stock.
In life, you may gain an awesome fame
After death how can you face your ancestors? [...]" (G. Wang 1981, 126-27)

Extract 2: Excerpt from Mr. Ma and Son: A Sojourn in London

> For the most part workers live in the Eastern part of London – in the most degrading of all places for Chinese – Chinatown. When budget-minded Germans, French or Americans who have no money to travel in the East come to London, they always want tot check out Chinatown in order to get material for fiction, diaries, news. There's really nothing spectacular there, and the workers aren't engaged in any fantastic activities. It's simply because Chinese live there, and they want to take a look – because China is a weak country, thus they can casually ascribe a myriad of odious names to the industrious, enduring immigrant Chinese who are simply struggling to eke out a living in a strange place. If there were twenty Chinese living in Chinatown, their accounts would say five thousand; moreover every one of these five thousand yellow devils would certainly smoke opium, smuggle arms, murder people then stuff the corpses under beds, and rape women regardless of age – in short, they would commit every heinous crime deserving nothing less than punishment by dismemberment. Those who write fiction, plays, movies all describe Chinese on the basis of these myths. And all those who read the books, or see the movies or plays – be they children, old ladies, or even the King of England, have these insane images firmly etched in their minds. Hence Chinese have been made the most foul, disgusting, contemptible beasts to walk on two legs! (Lao She [1929] 2001, 25)