



'One China'? Beijing and its Diaspora: Opportunities, Responsibilities and Challenges

KEY POINTS

- The Diaspora is difficult to define – many eras and origins of migration
- Protecting China's citizens abroad is now a key Chinese policy
- Soft power is transforming the self-identity of ethnic Chinese who are citizens of other countries, but there are political and ideological splits
- Although Taiwan and China have called a diplomatic truce, the battle for control of the China story continues among ethnic Chinese communities overseas
- South East Asian countries are keen to embrace economic opportunities of a rising China through their ethnic Chinese populations, but also want to foster local loyalty.

DETAIL

With a world-wide estimate of 60 million people, the Chinese Diaspora is the world's largest, encompassing international students, Chinese citizens living and working abroad and ethnic Chinese who are long-established citizens of other countries. Waves of emigration, predominantly by Cantonese and Hokkien speaking southerners, in the 19th and 20th centuries saw ethnic Chinese communities established worldwide. Spread far and wide, these groups lacked a lingua franca and a strong common 'Chinese' identity, largely taking up citizenship in their host countries. In recent years, China's drive for economic development has seen millions of citizens go overseas to live, study and work. Beijing has realised the economic and political importance of embracing this huge Diaspora of both citizens and non-citizens. This paper will examine the engagement between China and these communities.

Diaspora battleground: which China?

Deng Xiaoping saw potential in utilising the patriotism of overseas Chinese to aid China's *Four Modernisations*. The economic reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s saw new waves of Chinese citizens venture abroad, from university students to farmers in Africa. These migrants – products of an economically strong, unified China - left behind a very different country to that of the earlier migrant generations, who lacked even a common language, let alone a strong national identity. Even while choosing to remain permanently in their host country, and to take up citizenship, many of these recent migrants have retained strong ties to China. By capitalising on Mandarin as a common language – and by promoting the concepts of 'One China' and 'blood lines', the Chinese government has been able to call upon a massive resource with which to vocalise China's grievances and support its achievements. This was particularly evident during the 2008 Olympic Torch Relay when huge crowds of overseas Chinese – citizens and non-citizens - turned out (in person and online) initially to cheer the event, then to rally against perceived anti-China protests and media coverage. Nationalistic Chinese living

overseas have also boosted the ranks of the *wumaodang* (literally: fifty cent party), who are allegedly paid fifty cents for each pro-China comment posted in response to online stories that are perceived to be critical of Beijing, even on websites that are typically blocked on the Mainland.

Both China and Taiwan maintain cabinet-level departments to deal with overseas Chinese affairs (China has both the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the Party-controlled All-China Federation for Returned Overseas Chinese, while Taiwan has an Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission). This Diaspora battleground is further complicated by the various interest groups, including human rights groups and perhaps most prominently Falun Gong, which runs the Epoch Times newspaper and New Tang Dynasty Television and is closely associated with the Shenyun Performing Arts company, which seeks to “revive the essence of 5000 years of Chinese history”. Falun Gong also created the Freegate proxy server which allows China-based users to browse blocked websites.

Despite Beijing and Taipei’s diplomatic truce, which has seen a hiatus in the scrap for diplomatic allies since relations improved post-2008, the battle for control of the China story continues among ethnic Chinese communities across the globe. In 2012, Taiwan-born businessman David Lin, from Corvallis, Oregon, commissioned a mural depicting a self-immolating Tibetan monk and a rural Taiwanese scene. The Chinese Consulate in California wrote to the mayor of Corvallis requesting the mural be removed before it “tainted” China-US relations. The head of the Chinese Student Association at Oregon State University in Corvallis, which has around 900 Chinese students warned that the mural would “hurt some Chinese people’s feelings”.

Chinese in South East Asia

There are more than 50 million ethnic Chinese in South East Asia, making up more than 10 per cent of the region’s population and 83 per cent of the global Chinese Diaspora. Chinese communities in South East Asian countries are at the forefront of trade between them and China, but Beijing faces challenges in engaging them more deeply in its political agenda.

In **Indonesia**, ethnic Chinese make up only 2 or 3 per cent of the population but control an estimated 73 per cent of private wealth. Former ruler Suharto’s anti-communist campaigns damaged diplomatic relations between Indonesia and China. After relations were restored Beijing did not closely associate with Chinese-Indonesians even when hundreds were killed in Indonesia in 1998 amid intense public indignation in China. Since Suharto’s overthrow, Chinese-Indonesians have been vital to the bilateral relationship. In 2007, China was Indonesia’s third-largest trading partner, mostly due to Indonesia’s natural resources exports and Chinese infrastructure investment. About 90 percent of this commerce now involves Chinese-Indonesians. While all infrastructure projects and most energy deals are still dominated by non-Chinese Indonesian firms, Chinese-Indonesians – who can act as cultural and linguistic conduits - often act as “fixers” for Chinese companies looking to invest in Indonesia.

The rise of China and the economic opportunities it brings to Indonesia has seen the transformation of the ethnic Chinese community from a liability into a benefit for the Indonesian government. As a consequence the Indonesian government has ended its discriminatory policies against Chinese-Indonesians and encouraged their involvement with China. However, domestic tensions remain and another economic downturn could

result in renewed hostility towards Chinese-Indonesians, potentially sparking a response from a more confident and nationalistic China.

There are six million ethnic Chinese in **Malaysia** (26 per cent of the population). Many arrived during the British colonial era and worked in the tin mines, later establishing themselves as money lenders, middlemen, contractors and manufacturers. As in Indonesia, they have faced difficulties and discrimination, from the Malaya Emergency (1948–1960) to the 1969 ethnic riots.

Many ethnic Chinese in Malaysia see the rise of China as positive, but are confident of their status as Malaysian citizens. The nationality law, which granted citizenship to the ethnic Chinese made it more difficult for the Chinese government to justify a direct stake in their welfare. In 1974 Malaysia and China re-established diplomatic ties and China is now Malaysia's largest trading partner and its second-largest export destination. Malaysians see China as an important destination for overseas investment. Malaysian-Chinese have acted as a bridge between Malaysia and China and have facilitated trade and commerce between the two countries.

Malaysian-Chinese commercial, educational, and cultural links with China are rapidly displacing ties with Taiwan which, prior to the 1980s, was the main external source of cultural reinforcement for the ethnic Chinese community. In 2004, prominent community and business leaders formed a Malaysian Association for the Promotion of One China, a grouping that basically endorses Beijing's position in the cross-straits dispute with Taiwan.

Seventy-five per cent of **Singapore's** 4.4 million citizens are ethnic Chinese, and can be divided into four major groups; Singapore Chinese, Malaysian Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, and Mainland Chinese and are labelled variously by the state as foreigners, permanent residents, or residents. According to the 1991 White Paper, under then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Singapore adopted single citizenship to enable the country to "evolve and anchor a Singaporean identity". Consequently Singapore Chinese tend to see themselves as Singaporeans and other Chinese groups as aliens associated with other nations. Internal division, however, exists among Singapore Chinese, between a large group who are English language-educated and a much smaller Chinese-educated group. As the Singapore government pushes for greater economic ties with China, the ethnic Chinese population holds a distinct advantage. Mandarin Chinese has been promoted among ethnic Chinese communities since 1979, with the majority of Chinese Singaporeans now speaking the language in their homes, and as in China, simplified characters are in official use.

Bilateral economic relations between Singapore and China are strong, and as the world continues to recover from the global economic crisis, bilateral trade has risen more than 25 percent to US\$74.5 billion in 2010. China is currently Singapore's third largest trading partner, second largest source of tourist arrivals and top investment destination. China signed its first Asian Free Trade Agreement with Singapore. It is estimated that 20,000 Chinese Singaporeans are working in China and scores of joint ventures are underway, including the twin bilateral projects - Tianjin Eco-city and Suzhou Industrial Park - as well as the China Cultural Centre, which will soon be set up in Singapore. As a result more and more young Chinese Singaporeans are seeing China as the future, and rather than migrating to the West for employment they are either staying in Singapore or migrating to China.

However, Singapore demonstrates the limits of diaspora influence at a strategic level. Singapore has the most developed political and economic engagement with China of any SE Asian country, but as an ethnic-Chinese majority island in a Malay-Muslim 'sea', its security concerns are still primarily shaped by its neighbours. To counter the impression of being a proxy for Beijing, Singapore keeps deliberate distance from China, being the last ASEAN state to normalise relations, while pursuing a balance-of-power approach to its diplomacy, drawing in external powers including the US and India, as well as maintaining active defence links with Taiwan.

Thailand's ethnic Chinese population is arguably one of the most successfully integrated anywhere in the world. Traders and merchants were encouraged to come to Thailand and by the early 1930s over ten per cent of the population was ethnic Chinese. Chinese nationalism began to flourish following a fundraising visit to Bangkok by Sun Yat Sen, with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce acting as a front for his Kuomintang. In response the Thai leadership passed a law granting nationality to those born within Thailand, and enabled all resident Chinese to adopt Thai nationality provided they renounced loyalty to China and spoke Thai. Many Chinese immigrants did so and appended Thai surnames to their Chinese ones, creating the long Thai surnames common today. The defeat of the KMT in 1949 was a turning point. Thailand considered the communist regime to be a threat and refused to engage in diplomatic relations. Further immigration virtually halted, ethnic Chinese married ethnic Thais, and the lines between the Thai establishment and Chinese business became blurred. The opening up of China's economy in the early 1990s allowed ethnic Chinese businessmen to use their link to exploit the business opportunities that arose. Thai-Chinese businesses (e.g. CP Group) are among the largest investors in China. Many of Thailand's most influential citizens, in both politics and business, are ethnic Chinese, including several prime ministers. Today's ethnic Chinese generally observe their ancestral traditions while strongly identifying themselves as Thai, and their links to China are based on pragmatism, rather than any sense of shared identity.

Chinese in the UK

The diversity of South East Asia's Chinese Diaspora is matched by the **United Kingdom's**, whose first settlers arrived in Liverpool in the early 19th Century. Today's *British Born Chinese* (BBCs), as well as first-generation immigrants, can trace their origins to the port cities of Tianjin and Shanghai, the southern Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, former British colonies such as Malaysia and Singapore, and Hong Kong. While many of the original communities are Hokkien and Cantonese speakers, recent arrivals include a sizeable population of Mandarin-speaking students and migrant workers (both legal and illegal), from both Fujian and Northeast China.

Ethnic Chinese in Britain have numerous business connections with China, although this is often due to economic, linguistic and cultural pragmatism rather than patriotism. However the Chinese embassy is closely involved with Chinese associational life, and liaises directly with associations and umbrella organisations such as the London Chinatown Chinese Association. There are around 100,000 Chinese students now studying in the United Kingdom and many British universities have Chinese associations, coordinated nationally by the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA-UK), which, while claiming to be "non-political", operates under the guidance of the Education Section at the Chinese Embassy. The CSSA-UK claims to have over 90 subsidiary associations and more than 100,000 registered members (suggesting that all Chinese students are automatically given membership), with 30,000 new students arriving in the

UK annually.

‘A daughter married into a bad family has to be helped’ – Chinese interventions on behalf of overseas Chinese

Although protection for China’s citizens abroad is enshrined in the Constitution, China was reluctant to get involved on behalf of its citizens and other ethnic Chinese during the violence in Indonesia in 1998 and Malaysia in 1969, in contrast to Taiwan which threatened economic sanctions against Indonesia. In the 1950s, Beijing encouraged its migrants to take up local citizenship, partly as a means of reducing suspicion and discrimination in the host countries and avoiding Beijing having responsibility towards them. With more and more Chinese nationals now working in potential danger zones in Africa and the Middle East (a 2013 report by Beijing-based think tank *Center for China and Globalization* claims that there are 9.3 million Chinese citizens working and studying abroad, but the true figure of unregistered workers is much higher), and with a rise in domestic nationalism, there is a greater demand to intervene to protect ethnic Chinese – citizens and non-citizens – abroad.

In June 2000 China evacuated 116 overseas Chinese citizens from the Solomon Islands (which then, as now, had diplomatic relations with Taiwan) amid a coup d’état, and in April 2006 sent chartered aircraft to evacuate 159 Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese citizens of other countries following anti-Chinese riots. Beijing also chartered commercial aircraft to evacuate citizens from Fiji during the military coup of 2006, from Thailand and Equatorial Guinea during civil unrest in 2008, and from Thailand and Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Most recently the PLA Navy frigate *Xuzhou* was dispatched to assist the evacuation of over 35000 Chinese citizens from Libya, although in the event the vast majority left on merchant vessels, chartered aircraft, buses and military aircraft. However, the deployment of the *Xuzhou* marked the first time China has sent military assets to another part of the world to protect its people.

Despite keeping a relatively low profile in the US-led war on terror, Chinese citizens have found themselves caught up in apparently targeted attacks, notably in Pakistan. In June 2013, two Chinese tourists were among a group of 10 foreigners killed by Taliban-linked gunmen in Gilgit-Baltistan. A year earlier, a Chinese woman was shot dead in Peshawar. A Taliban spokesman claimed the woman’s killing was retribution for the deaths of Muslims in China’s restive Xinjiang, which borders Pakistan.

In December 2009, China’s *Global Times* carried an extensive discussion on the possibility of using Chinese police forces to protect Chinese copper mining assets in Afghanistan but so far Beijing has resisted sending military or People’s Armed Police personnel overseas to protect Chinese workers. While the PLA Navy has maintained an armed counter-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden and has escorted thousands of vessels since December 2008, it has been reticent in using force. When the Qingdao-based *Dexinhai* was taken by pirates off Somalia in October 2009, the Chinese Defence Ministry said it would take “whatever measures are necessary” to free the vessel, however it was ultimately released in late December 2009 after the payment of a US\$4 million ransom.

Conclusion

As China strives to promote economic growth and development through its business engagement throughout the world, it will continue to capitalise on historical, cultural and

linguistic links to its vast Diaspora. Similarly it will seek to bolster its political support around the world through the fostering of networks of established ethnic Chinese communities, new migrants and vast ranks of overseas students. Furthermore, as more and more Chinese nationals go overseas to work in high-risk, resource-rich regions, and China's domestic and foreign policies impact beyond its borders, Beijing will be forced to respond to global Chinese nationalism by intervening more and more on behalf of its people and economic interests.