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Title:

Guest Editor's Introduction—Expansive Trajectories: Remapping Transnationalism in the Global China Era

Date:

2024-11

Citation:

Martin, F. (2024). Guest Editor's Introduction—Expansive Trajectories: Remapping Transnationalism in the Global China Era. *Positions*, 32 (4), pp.771-796. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-11306784>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/354712>

## **Expansive trajectories:**

### **Re-mapping transnationalism in the global China era**

**Fran Martin**

#### **Abstract:**

This introductory article reflects critically on the history of Chinese transnationalism studies in relation to intensifying cross-border engagements by PR Chinese state and non-state actors today. Revisiting 1990s scholarship on Chinese transnationalism(s), it argues that the global China concept helps us attend to the significant impacts of China's economic and geopolitical rise on earlier patterns of trans-border cultural flows, hence to the ways that new patterns can be interpreted. The article considers the continuities and tensions the seven articles in this issue elucidate between state-led transnationalism "from above" and the myriad forms of transnationalism "from below" instantiated in the lived experiences of ordinary people. From an ethnographic perspective, this issue considers a wide range of transnational movements affecting cultural life within and beyond the PRC, investigating how these intensified trans-border flows are reconfiguring social identities this century. Three core themes emerge: the often unpredictable responses to state initiatives by Chinese people living transnational lives; the transnationalization of class reproduction for both working-class and middle-class subjects as a consequence of new cross-border flows; and the revitalization of old forms of racism and the emergence of new ones as a result of evolving transnational mobilities of Chinese media, people, and capital today.

#### **Keywords:**

Chinese transnationalism, global China, Sinophone, transnationalism from below, Chinese diasporas

In our current "trans-imperial moment," as the world hangs suspended between US and Chinese hegemonies, expanding transnational engagements by Chinese state and non-state actors have led to growing interest in how China's rise is reshaping not only macro-level geopolitics but also the micro level of people's everyday experiences in multiple locations around the world (Ching et al 2023, 737; Katzenstein ed., 2012; Kuehn et al eds., 2014; Shambaugh 2013; Lee 2017; Ang 2020; Bailey and Mak 2021; Pieke and Iwabuchi 2021;

Rofel and Rojas eds 2022; Sun and Yu 2023). Notwithstanding the nation's faltering economy post-pandemic, in the era of President Xi's Chinese dream, top-down state initiatives by the People's Republic of China (PRC) continue to expand energetically into the global field with the goal of reviving China's historical status as a great world power, while ordinary Chinese migrants and businesses have become increasingly prominent avatars of bottom-up transnationalism in many countries (Pieke 2021). Ching Kwan Lee's *global China* concept, referenced in this issue's title, draws attention to these developments, highlighting those "outward flows of investment, loans, infrastructure, migrants, media, cultural programmes and international and civil society engagement" that have so markedly intensified since the beginning of this century (Lee 2022, 313). The extension of these transnational flows fundamentally transforms the conditions of culture in many places in the world today.

This issue aims to deepen our understanding of people's lived experiences of the global China era in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe. Contributing to global China studies with ethnographic perspectives on the micro level of everyday human experiences, it focuses on the cultural politics and experiential impacts of PRC state and non-state actors' intensified extension into transnational fields of activity since the beginning of this century, and especially during the past decade. Collectively, the authors ask: how do growing transnational flows out of and into the PRC affect social identity for first-generation PRC migrants abroad; for ordinary people in China whose lives are impacted by transnational discourses, capital, and state projects; and for overseas communities encountering the increased presence of mobile PRC capital, migrants, and media? How do these differently positioned groups' conceptualizations, practices and affective experiences of class, gender, "race," nationality and ethnicity shift and transform as elements of culture become increasingly mobile across the national borders of the PRC?

Focusing on global China marks a significant new direction in the study of Chinese transnationalisms. The first wave of Chinese transnationalism studies, which arose in the 1990s just as China was emerging from a long period of relative cultural and economic isolation, assigned to the PRC at most a peripheral role in transnational cultural economies, focusing instead on analysing the hybrid energies of Chinese diaspora cultures. Since then, a lot has changed. As Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu pithily observe, "a new reality is forcing us to re-introduce China and people from China into the research paradigm," since "China seems to insist on inserting itself into the sphere of Chinese transnationalism, whether the rest

of the world wants this or not" (Sun and Yu 2023, p. 1). This historical shift compels two key conceptual reorientations. First, regardless of how we view recent developments, it is no longer plausible to argue that China's position in the global circuits of Chinese transnationalism is merely peripheral. Second, the PRC state's intentional program of self-globalization complicates assumptions based on the prior regional economic and geopolitical order that transnationalism tends to be a "wild" force working in opposition to the desires of nation-states, and that Chinese transnationalisms tend to support diasporic-hybrid rather than monolithic-China-centric conceptualization of Chinese identit(ies).

Below, I offer a brief review of the first wave of Chinese transnationalism studies in order to delineate as clearly as possible how this issue's project both is inspired by and departs from that earlier body of work. Our project in this issue rests on the proposal that, although the earlier scholarship on Chinese transnationalisms, based in diaspora studies, and more recent studies of global China, based in China studies, have tended to operate as two fairly separate subfields, in fact, we must recognize that the phenomena each subfield addresses are historically linked. As the regional centres of transnational capitalism and migration have shifted and transformed, so too have the practices and human cultures of Chinese transnationalisms.

### **The first wave of Chinese transnationalism studies: Against China-centrism**

Notwithstanding a pervasive China exceptionalism that would cast China's rise as an unprecedented phenomenon driven by some internal logic unique to China (Franceschini and Loubere 2022), in fact, the nation's increased international prominence today clearly hinges on its strategic self-integration into a global capitalist system that predated its "rise"—albeit that the system itself is now being thoroughly re-shaped by China's engagement with it. Three decades ago, the regional configuration of transnational capitalism was animated by different and more diffuse energies: those of diasporic Chinese capital, which played a key role in the emergence of the Pacific Rim economy of the late twentieth century. It is this earlier stage in the regional history of global capitalism that gave rise to the first wave of studies on Chinese transnationalism, which has for many years provided the dominant paradigm for addressing the human and cultural aspects of modern Chinese border-crossing practices.

This first wave of Chinese transnationalism studies arose in the early 1990s and focused on the long-established Chinese diasporas of southeast Asia, emphasizing the

hybridity and plurality of their cultural practices and identities. Attention to Chinese transnationalism in multiple disciplines across the humanities and social sciences at that time reflected cross-disciplinary interest in transnational connections, processes and cultures in the wider context of accelerating globalization. Specifically, this first wave of Chinese transnationalism studies responded to the 1980s consolidation of the Pacific Rim economy with its "four tigers"—the high-growth, export-led economies of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea—and underlined the central role played by transnationally mobile diasporic Chinese elites in this then-booming regional economy and the cultural expressions that accompanied it. The key works in this body of scholarship may be characterized, in retrospect, by two central points of tension. These are, first, their conceptualization of Chinese cultural identity (as a coherent and unitary heritage versus dispersed, hybrid and multiple); and second, their orientation toward the nation-state and cultures of the People's Republic of China (as intrinsically separate from versus connected to the circuits of Chinese transnationalism).

The neo-Confucianist scholar Tu Wei-ming was one of the first to address transformations in contemporary Chinese cultures resulting from the rise of the regional economy. In his now-classic 1991 essay, "Cultural China: The Periphery as Centre," which later featured as the first chapter in his edited collection, *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (1994), Tu observed the emergence of a diasporic Chinese transnational merchant and financial class along with the rise of the tiger economies. With excitement, he interpreted the capitalist success of non-PRC Chinese societies that retained links to "traditional" culture as challenging common assumptions that modernisation equates with westernization. Tu held out hope that Chinese economic success in the region promised cultural revitalization, heralding "Chinese culture disintegrating at the centre and [...] being revived from the periphery" (Tu 1994, 12). "The amazing aspect of all these scenarios," wrote Tu, "is the glaring absence of mainland China," which he proposed had become "largely irrelevant" due to the three decades of being closed off to the wider world and capitalist development during the Mao years (Tu 1994, 12). Tu therefore prophesied that "the periphery will come to set the economic and cultural agenda for the centre," since "the center no longer has the ability, insight, or legitimate authority to dictate the agenda for cultural China" (Tu 1994, 12; 27-28).

Tu's argument thus clearly framed the Communist PRC as standing in a relation of intrinsic separateness from—indeed, opposition to—the capitalist economic and cultural

energies bursting forth from the revitalizing geographic peripheries of Chinese culture. His conceptualization of Chinese cultural identity, however, is a little less straightforward. In an article first published in 1998, Ien Ang developed an incisive critique of the paradoxical China-centrism of Tu's schema. She rightly noted that, "placed in the context of Chinese *cultural* history, the assertion of the (diasporic) periphery as the centre is a radical one"; and yet,

the very postulation of a "cultural China" as the name for a transnational intellectual community held together [...] by "a common ancestry and a shared cultural background" [...] is driven by a desire for, and motivated by, another kind of centrism, this time along notionally cultural lines. [...] The aim could seem to be to rescue Chineseness from China [...] [but] the rescue operation implies the projection of a new, alternative centre, a decentred centre whose name is *cultural* China, but China nevertheless. (Ang 2001, 42-43)

Countering Tu's Sinocentrism, metaphorized in the singular trunk and deep roots of his "living tree" of Chinese culture, Ang proposed hybridity, instead, as the key characteristic of plural and fragmented diasporic Chinese identit(ies) (Ang 2001). Drawing on examples of diasporic Chinese artists and intellectuals as well as the deeply syncretic, centuries-old *peranakan* cultures of the Malay Archipelago, Ang developed a robustly anti-foundationalist conceptualization of transnational Chineseness:

The diasporic paradigm has shattered the convenient certainty with which Chinese studies has been equated, quite simply, with the study of China. "China" can no longer be limited to the more or less fixed area of its official spatial and cultural boundaries, nor can it be held up as providing the authentic, authoritative, and uncontested standard for all things Chinese. (Ang 2001, 38)

Thus, for Ang, diasporic Chinese identities were characterized both by their separateness from the territory and cultures of the PRC, and by their hybridity and multiplicity. This was a decisively centrifugal model of transnational Chinese cultures, in distinction from Tu's paradoxically centripetal version: a model that located the most vital energies in the dynamic

and unpredictable *routes* rather than the deep civilizational *roots* of Chinese identities (Hau 2013; Martin 2014).

In developing such a model, Ang contributed to a wider intellectual movement of the 1990s that championed anti-essentialist approaches to modern Chinese cultures and identities, and included the works of prominent scholars such as Leo Ou-fan Lee (1994), Lydia Liu (1995), Xiaomei Chen (1995), Allen Chun (1996) and Rey Chow (1998), among others. Central to this movement were the works of Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini, whose 1997 edited collection, *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, formally inaugurated Chinese transnationalism studies. Nonini and Ong theorized Chinese transnationalism as a form of alternative modernity in which the border-crossing energies of late capitalism, embodied in the transnational social field of Chinese diasporic elites, were everywhere complexly entangled with the territorializing desires of nation-states (Nonini and Ong 1997; see also Ong 1999). Again, the contexts that produced this form of Chinese transnationalism were those of the post-1970 Asia-Pacific, conditioned by the region's longer Chinese diasporic histories. The hallmarks of Chinese transnationalism as Nonini and Ong theorized it were its intensifying cross-border mobilities (of both low- and high-skilled workers, capital, and media), and its ability to evade disciplining by nation-states. Their analysis was based on an anti-essentialist understanding of "Chineseness" as produced through material practices in the present, albeit conditioned by longer diasporic histories (explicitly contra Tu's centripetal vision of primordial Chinese culture and identity). Chinese transnationalism was, for Nonini and Ong, a "third culture": "an emergent global form that [...] provides alternative visions in late capitalism to Western modernity and generates new and distinctive social arrangements, cultural discourses, practices, and subjectivities." (1997, 11) Based on this, their core claim was that "capitalism in the Asia Pacific and its accompanying institutions and practices—flexibility, travel, consumption, multiculturalism, and mass media—are reworking Chinese identities and subjectivities" in ways that tended to subvert national regimes of truth (Nonini and Ong 1997, 16, 26; Ong and Nonini 1997; Ong 1997). Their approach intentionally de-centered territorial China: they refused to "accord China a privileged ontological or epistemological position," but rather saw it as "one among many sites within and across which Chinese transnational practices are played out" (Nonini and Ong 1997, 12). In her sole-authored chapter in the same volume, Ong interpreted the then-current capitalist discourse of "Greater China"—a transnational economic zone linking China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, running on mobile diasporic capital—

—as inherently anti-national, in opposition to the modernist imaginary of the nation state with its privileging of essentialized identity and territorial fixity (Ong 1997).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the authors were principally interested in the capacity of Chinese transnationalism, as a “wild” form of mobile capitalism, to challenge and subvert the power of nation-states. And the PRC itself— included in their purview largely due to its role as importer of Chinese diaspora capital— remained peripheral to their vision of Chinese transnationalism (Ong 1997, 174).<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Shu-mei Shih introduced her theorisation of the Sinophone, which has become one of the most influential frameworks for scholars working on transnational Sinitic cultures outside China today (Shih 2007; 2011; 2012; 2013). In Shih’s 2007 book, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific*, in which she first developed the Sinophone concept based on analyses of screen media, photography, and visual arts, Shih defined it as “a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries” (Shih 2007: 4). Like Ang, Ong and others discussed above, Shih foregrounded the dispersal, fragmentation and heterogeneity of “Chineseness,” while placing particular emphasis on the deep historical roots of “minor” transnational Sinitic cultures and languages. Also like those scholars, Shih was committed to a critique of China-centrism and specifically Han-centrism—but she did not a priori exclude consideration of cultural phenomena inside China’s territorial borders (borders that, she underlined, were established and maintained through colonizing practices on the part of both the Qing dynasty and the PRC: Shih 2013). Shih’s Sinophone encompassed “minoritised and colonised voices within China, be they Tibetan, Mongolian or Uyghur” (Shih 2012: 5). Indeed, for Shih, the conceptual relationship between the Sinophone and China as a nation was complex. The Sinophone could “be a site of both a longing for and a rejection of various constructions of Chineseness; [...] a site of both nationalism of the long-distance kind, anti-China politics, or even nonrelation with China, whether real or imaginary” (2007, 30). And yet while “the Sinophone may articulate a China-centrism [...] the Sinophone is [also] often the site where powerful articulations against China-centrism can be heard” (Shih 2007, 30). Thus, although the *lived cultures* of some Sinophone sites might be China-centric, for Shih, as an *intellectual framework*, the Sinophone—in this regard similarly to Ong’s conceptualization of Chinese transnationalism and Ang’s theorization of diaspora—tended to reject China-centrism.

### **Global China: Transnationalism from above?**

Despite disagreements on the nature and form of cultural identit(ies), then, Anglophone scholarly opinion had by the first decade of the twenty-first century largely converged on a diaspora-focussed understanding of Chinese transnationalisms in which the PRC played a mainly peripheral role, if any.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this understanding of the transnational social field arose from a particular, late twentieth-century configuration of economic and cultural conditions. By the 1980s, the aftermath of China's three decades of high socialism had left the country economically under-developed and culturally isolated from the capitalist world. Meanwhile, with the support of post-WWII American anti-Communist developmentalism, its immediate neighbours in the tiger economies embraced industrial capitalism and began to thrive economically and culturally just when the PRC was beginning its post-Mao program of reform-and-opening-up (Glassman 2018). As a result, late-century transnational circuits of capital, culture and migration were activated several decades earlier across the Chinese societies of East Asia and the global diaspora than they were in the PRC itself. Already in 1997, however, Ong foreshadowed the question of what might happen next:

A synergy of political, economic, and ideological processes is producing a geopolitical center in East Asia. Will the momentary glow of fraternity forged in alternative Chinese modernities, and in renegotiating American global domination, become the Asia-Pacific hegemony of the new century? (Ong 1997, p. 196)

Ong hinted presciently at a negative answer: "this 'momentary glow of fraternity' [...] may not outlast China's emergence as a superpower." (ibid) A decade later, Wanning Sun and John Sinclair put the question even more bluntly: "given recent developments that clearly point to China's intention to re-center itself, to what extent can the current transnationalist framework accommodate the rise of China?" (2016, p. 9)

It is precisely this question that we confront in revisiting the Chinese transnationalisms framework today. Whereas in the final decades of last century, the PRC was culturally relatively isolated, today its state and people actively insert themselves into transnational circuits of culture, capital, and human mobility across the world, from Asia and Oceania to Europe, the Americas, and Africa. This is the historical conjuncture addressed by the global China concept, whose prehistory arguably lies in early-twenty-first-century migration studies. In their book *Transnational Chinese*, based on a multi-sited ethnographic study of migration

flows between China's Fujian province and Europe conducted in 1999–2001, Frank N. Pieke, Pál Nyíri, Mette Thunø and Antonella Ceccagano defined what they termed "Chinese globalization" as "multiple, transnational social spaces straddling and embedded in smaller regional or national systems on the one hand and, on the other hand, as a part of a unifying global system" (2004, 11). The related concept of global China subsequently emerged from the altered economic and geopolitical contexts of more than a decade later, with the 2017 publication Ching Kwan Lee's book, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor and Foreign Investment in Africa*; and has been further developed in a special issue of *The China Quarterly* that Lee edited in 2022. While the earlier studies of Chinese transnationalisms surveyed above have their disciplinary home in diaspora studies, Lee's approach—like that of Pieke et al (2004)—originates in China studies, and is motivated by the imperative to take seriously the self-extension of the PRC state and its people into a global scope of activities. Lee frames China's "ferocious" outward push over the past two decades as fed by both state and non-state energies (2017 p. xi). On one hand, in its global initiatives (discussed below), the PRC state seeks to tackle the twin economic and political problems of excess production capacity and regime legitimation (Lee 2022 p. 315–315). On the other hand, the global China phenomenon is also fuelled by the private interests of ordinary people and businesses (Lee 2022 p. 316). In synergy with a contemporaneous wave of transdisciplinary scholarship on "global Asias" that insists "we cannot restrict the study of Asia to any fixed geographic region" (Chen and Hayot 2015, p. xi), Lee observes that the notion of global China:

push[es] the empirical boundary of China studies beyond China's territorial borders. China casts an outsize shadow on many different arenas of world development, challenging the field of China studies to abandon its methodological nationalism so as to catch up with China's transformation into a global force. Global China is taking myriad forms, ranging from foreign direct investment, labor export, and multilateral financial institutions for building cross-regional infrastructure to the globalization of Chinese civil society organizations, creation of global media networks, and global joint ventures in higher education, to name just a few examples. [...] Studying global China means reimagining China beyond China. (Lee 2017, p. xiv)

While it is historically and conceptually informed by the earlier studies of Chinese transnationalisms, our project in this issue addresses the particularities of the global China era, and in doing so also takes inspiration from Lee's framework. From the Chinese transnationalisms scholarship, we draw an abiding mistrust of monolithic and essentialist understandings of Chineseness, and an attention to transnational mobility's capacities to (re)make social identities through everyday practices. From the global China scholarship, we draw a heightened attention to the consequences of the PRC's newly central position in the present world order—the ways in which China's global engagements generate complex and unpredictable "new world orderings" (Rofel and Rojas eds 2022)—and an appreciation of the roles of both state and non-state actors in shaping the transnational manifestations of Chinese cultures and identities today. For, as Lee underlines, surveying the current configuration of outward flows from China, we find a broad and ambitious suite of state initiatives operating across the spheres of economy, geopolitics, infrastructure, aid and culture, alongside ever-shifting patterns of trans-border movements by ordinary individuals, businesses, and private capital. As Frank N. Pieke observes:

the Chinese state's strategy of global expansion cannot simply enlist the bottom-up globalization of Chinese enterprises, migrants, institutions, and culture, but neither are the two completely separate. Bottom-up globalization provides both the tools for and sets the limits of state-led strategies and plans; conversely, China's global actors increasingly have to accommodate the plans of the party and the state, both in China itself and abroad. (Pieke 2021, p. 246)

Thus, top-down state-led transnational engagements and bottom-up private varieties relate to each other in multiple, complex and sometimes unpredictable ways.

As a result of state initiatives, the direction, volume and character of trans-border flows of Chinese capital and infrastructure have transformed very significantly over the past two decades. In 2000, a year prior to China's admission to the WTO, China's government announced the first iteration of its Going Global Strategy (translated alternatively as Going Out: 走出去战略), supporting the transnational expansion of businesses as a key strategic initiative. This fed a massive increase in outbound direct investment, dominated by state-owned enterprises, such that in 2014 the PRC became, for the first time, a net capital exporter (Wang et al 2015; Wang and Lu 2016). The Going Global Strategy was subsequently

reoriented under Xi Jinping's presidency toward sci-tech innovation (China Policy 2017). Noteworthy examples of projects launched under this strategy include the Made in China 2025 industry plan (issued by the State Council in 2015), targeted at developing the nation's high-tech export capacity; and the flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, announced by President Xi in 2013 and incorporated into the Party's Constitution in 2017), which aims to build maritime and overland infrastructure, trade, investment and human linkages to China's south and west, across central Asia to Europe and Africa and through Southeast Asia, with a focus on energy, telecommunications, logistics, law, IT, and transportation sectors (China Policy 2017; Winter 2016). Under the auspices of this initiative, China's government has become a significant player in delivering foreign direct investment and aid to the Global South, including to countries in Africa, the Pacific, Latin America, and beyond (Zhang 2021; Carter 2017). These globalizing initiatives by the PRC state have spawned fast-growing sub-fields of academic enquiry into their economic, cultural, geographic and security implications; indeed, the field of global China studies itself arose initially from sociological studies of China's development activities in the Global South (Lee 2017, 2022; Sidaway et al 2020; Rofel and Rojas eds 2022; Pavličević and Talmacs eds 2022).

Meanwhile, in the realm of culture, a soft power-based public diplomacy push by the Chinese government has seen the worldwide expansion of Confucius Institutes and various other arts, cultural, and educational programs (Shambaugh 2015; Breslin 2020; Ptáčková et al. 2021). PRC media has gone transnational, too, including state organs Xinhua, *People's Daily* (which now hosts multiple foreign-language editions online), China Radio International (broadcasting in Mandarin and English, with a multilingual online news platform), and China Global Television Network (a 2016 rebranding of China Central Television's international channels, which broadcasts in multiple languages around the world) (Breslin 2020). This is in addition to innumerable commercial Mandarin-language media channels and platforms run by and for post-1978 PRC diaspora communities. The complex social, political and industrial implications of this transnational media expansion have been studied in various contexts, including Australia (e.g. Yu and Sun 2019; Sun and Yu 2023), African nations (e.g. Jedlowski and Rösenthaler 2017), East Asia (e.g. Ching et al 2023), and worldwide (e.g. Thussu et al ed. 2018; Nyíri 2021). Although China's censorship regime, socio-cultural specificity, and reputational problems abroad mean it has thus far struggled to exercise international soft power very effectively in many countries through direct media exports (Shambaugh 2013; Peng and Keane 2019; Breslin 2021), the production of China-friendly

media outside China is supported by practices of self-censorship in coproduction (Ching et al 2023). And recent major state investment in the development of eSports means it is conceivable that China's historical status as net pop-cultural importer may be reversed in years to come (Chua 2012; Zhao and Lin 2020; Ismangil and Fung 2021). At the same time, in China's own cities, everyday life has been thoroughly transformed from its character a generation ago as a result of inbound transnational media flows from Korea, Japan, Taiwan, western Europe and north America.

Supported by state policies and initiatives, the movements of ordinary people and private capital, too, have intensified and increasingly expanded to a transnational scale, with significant growth in transnational labour mobilities, emigration and overseas investment by the middle and elite classes, and outbound travel by tourists and students (Oakes and Schein 2006; Xiang 2016; Martin 2022). Annual international departures soared from 3 million in 1990 to 155 million in 2019 (Xinhua She 2020). Pál Nyíri (2010) has made an extended study of how increased human mobility is both a goal and a challenge for the reforms-era Chinese state. Charting the massive increases in domestic and transnational travel in and from the PRC since the 1990s, Nyíri analyses the rise of a powerful and state-supported association between human mobility and "the image of the borderless 'globally modern Chinese'" (Nyíri 2010, 6). He frames "new migrants"—those students, workers, undocumented migrants, merchants, entrepreneurs and others who left the country after 1978—as China's new wave of transnationalists: "Increasingly, the social, economic, and political practices of these migrants are characterized by transnationalism, that is, sustained structural embedding and accumulation and expenditure of various forms of capital both in China and in one or more countries overseas." (2010, p. 59) However, while the state facilitates and rewards citizens' market-mediated mobilities as contributions to China's capitalist modernization, it is simultaneously compelled to find ways of managing the subversive potentials inherent in their increased movement. It thus attempts to channel and discipline human mobilities into a carefully governed system: what we might call a *mobility regime*, rather than a welter of untrammelled flows (Shamir 2005).<sup>4</sup>

In particular, Nyíri examines how the state seeks to harness migrant energies as a resource for nation-building, based on the presumption of a unitary Chinese identity that "extends the Chinese nation beyond the state's territorial confines" (2010, p. 49). Chinese migrant communities worldwide have been called on to bolster the nation-building project—no longer principally through capital investment as in the 1980s and 1990s, but by promoting

China's soft power through telling positive stories abroad. As Yan Tan argues, this illustrates a diaspora engagement policy that "extends to transnational political, social, diplomatic and cultural domains": a kind of "transnationalism from above" (Tan 2021, pp. 1- 2). In this way, transnational human mobilities, entangled as they are with market mechanisms, are also fundamentally entwined with transnational geopolitics (Nyíri 2010 p. 60, p. 164). Thus, in the case of the contemporary PRC, we confront the seeming paradox of a transnational cluster of activities connected at every point with a national project. Here, the unruly energies of transnationalism from below—the multitude of private and non-state interests, desires and tactics enacted by ordinary people on the move—meet the re-territorializing desires of the state's transnationalism from above, as it attempts to marshal these energies into a support for its vision of global China (Pieke et al 2004, p. 12). We might recall, here, Nonini and Ong's (1997) observation of a dialectic of mobility and containment in the diasporic Chinese transnationalisms of the 1990s, where the wildness of cross-border business networks and capital flows challenged the power of nation states to contain them. In the global China era, a related dynamic may be observed in the case of the PRC itself and the transnational human and capital mobilities that it simultaneously fosters and attempts to discipline.

However, notwithstanding popular perceptions in many countries, ordinary migrants are not simply government puppets, and the reason that the state feels the need to manage their mobilities so closely is precisely because of mobility's potential for disruptive outcomes (Song and Liu, this volume; Martin 2022). It is far from a foregone conclusion that the PRC state's aspirations to exert global influence through its emigrant communities are realized in practice. As Caroline S. Hau forcefully observes, close attention to the complexities of diasporic experience inevitably complicates "the idea of 'Sinicization' as a mainland state-centered and driven process of remaking the world (and the ethnic Chinese outside its borders) in its own image" (2013, p. 176):

the evidence for this mainland-driven form of becoming-Chinese—such as the proliferation of simplified Chinese newspapers among overseas Chinese communities, the popularity of mainland Chinese popular culture [...] among non-mainland Chinese migrant communities, de-Anglicization in Hong Kong—exists to some extent; but its capacity to supplant other forms of becoming-Chinese remains debatable (Hau 2013, p. 200).

The situation we now confront, then, is one in which (at least) two types of "Chinese transnationalism" co-exist. First, there is the type that was highlighted in the wave of scholarship reviewed above and remains current today: a set of transnational economic flows and social fields activated by Chinese diasporas, which tend to decenter both the nation-state in general and the PRC specifically while foregrounding dispersed and plural iterations of Chinese identities. Second, there is now also a newer type—the one on which this issue principally focuses—which emanates from the PRC itself and is put into motion by the state's self-globalizing policies and initiatives, played out in the actions of non-state actors like migrants, investors, students, and others, and more likely than the earlier form to support Sinocentric understandings of cultural identity (though certainly not predetermined to do so).

The emergence of global China thus underlines two key ways in which the historical specificities of the current era necessitate a reorientation of our understanding of Chinese transnationalisms. First, as we have argued, the PRC can no longer plausibly be viewed as merely peripheral to the transnational (re)production of Chinese cultures and identities. Second, Chinese transnationalisms can no longer be conceptualized as inherently or definitively anti-national(ist) or anti-Sinocentric. Rather, they must be seen as a diverse group of processes without any singular or predictable consequence vis-à-vis centering or decentering China—they may do either, neither or both, in different instances and circumstances.

We hope it is clear by now that our attention to PRC-related mobilities does not entail that we wish to (re)install a China-centric understanding of Chinese identity, fall into methodological nationalism, or ignore the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Chineseness today and the continuing vibrant existence of Sinophone cultural worlds. More simply, our project responds to the radically altered historical conditions of the present, which see novel cross-border movements into and out of the People's Republic materially transforming cultural life at a range of scales across territorial China, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world. As Hau keenly observes,

"Transnational" approaches that purport to move beyond the strictures of nation- and state-centered analysis [...and] invoke "China" as a self-explanatory straw figure against which transnational or diasporic difference is *then* asserted [thereby] overlook the broader implications of critical disjunctions and historical hybridization (2013, p. 198).

Her point is well-taken. In the global China era, there is surely less justification than ever for *a priori* excluding PRC-related examples from consideration of the multifarious and unpredictable cultural consequences of transnational mobilities.

### **Transnational lives in the global China era**

This issue, many of whose articles were first presented at the *Re-Worlding Chinese Transnationalisms* symposium at the University of Melbourne in August 2021, includes studies of transnational phenomena that are unfolding both within and beyond the PRC, addressing the central question of how intensified transnational flows out of and into China this century reconfigure social identities. Geographically, the papers address the Asia-Pacific region—charting trajectories among mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Australia—as well as Europe. Many of the articles focus on the PRC's "new migrants" (those who emigrated from China after 1978). In addressing the central question of transforming identities, contributors draw our attention to three core themes: the sometimes unpredictable responses to state policies and initiatives (including but not only those of the PRC state) by people living transnationally mobile lives; the transnationalization of class reproduction for both working-class and middle-class subjects as a consequence of new cross-border flows of people, capital, goods and ideas to and from China; and the revitalization of old forms of racism and the emergence of new ones as a result of evolving transnational mobilities of Chinese media, people, and capital today. The disciplinary backgrounds of the authors range across the humanities from cultural studies and anthropology to media and communications studies and social work. Their methodologies center on ethnographic and interviews-based research about the experiences of various groups of people who are subject to and subjects of Chinese transnational mobilities, but also encompass critical analysis of current events and movements, and policy analysis.

Hau reminds us that, although hybrid identities emerge especially strongly from diaspora, "Chinese" culture and identity should nevertheless not be presumed to be monolithic or unchanging *within* the PRC itself, since ways of life inevitably hybridize and transform with inflows of media, migration, capital, and discourse (2013, p. 199). In line with this important observation, the first two articles in this issue consider the reproduction of Chinese working-class subjects and identities through transnational processes shaped by state initiatives. Anita Koo and Ngai Pun analyse the subjectification of Chinese working-class

vocational college students training up for China's new high-tech export economy under the Made in China 2025 industry plan: a core initiative of the Going Global Strategy under Xi. The article thus underlines the human-level effects of capital and commodity mobilities, enacted discursively through training. It explores how the transnationalization of Chinese class (re)production is closely tied to the Chinese state's linking of various sectors of the national economy into the circuits of transnational capitalism. This research sheds light not only on the mechanisms through which working-class identity is reproduced, but also how this is entangled with the reproduction of hegemonic gender, and, importantly, how women students variously acquiesce to and resist their production as female workers according to the state-sanctioned normative template.

Continuing the exploration of transnational processes' contributions to the reproduction of Chinese working-class women's identities, Shuheng Jin and Haijing Dai examine the new reach of the globally extensive discourse of intensive mothering into the migrant-worker population of southern China. Their fascinating ethnographic study shows that, seemingly against the odds, the imported ideology of intensive motherhood transforms Chinese rural migrant women's understandings and practices of mothering—despite the stark contrast between their own straitened material circumstances and the white, Euro-American, middle-class origin of this ideal. Furthermore, this occurs largely thanks to the active promotion of intensive mothering ideology by local state agencies. The article thus illustrates an intriguing and unexpected alliance between Chinese state power and a transnationally mobile north American discourse in reshaping Chinese working-class women's gendered practices and subjectivities.

Qian Gong and Huan Wu likewise focus on the role of transnational processes in the (re)making of Chinese working-class lives, but their case study concerns workers who themselves become transnationally mobile, and whose mobility transfigures their class identity and social and cultural capitals. Their case study is a cohort of skilled tradespeople who moved to the state of Western Australia in response to a skills shortage designated by the Australian government during Western Australia's mining boom. The authors trace the stories of these migrants as they moved, first, from their rural village hometowns to larger Chinese cities, where their social status fell as a result of their lack of urban *hukou* (household registration); and from there to Western Australia, where their income and social status rose significantly, but their cultural capital fell as a result of lack of linguistic and other local knowledge. They compensated for this, in part, by developing both formal and informal

associations within their own community, which created localized forms of social capital on which they could draw in daily life in Perth. Gong and Wu thus illustrate how the trade workers engaged in ongoing processes of identity (re)making through their long, segmented domestic and transnational journeys, underlining the need to reconceptualize links between internal and transnational mobilities. Attention to the varied scope of the routes traced by China's increasingly mobile non-metropolitan subjects prompts us to question the normative division of human mobilities into domestic versus international categories, since the new migrants' multi-legged, multi-scalar trajectories frequently involve both rural-to-urban and China-to-overseas routes as part of longer, sometimes lifelong mobility projects (Xiang 2022, Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018).

Lin Song and Shih-Diing Liu, meanwhile, turn their attention to the complex affective and identificatory experiences of mainland students in Hong Kong amid Beijing's assertion of control over the territory's political and social life during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests of 2019–2020. Proposing that Hong Kong during the student protests could be seen as a minor transnational space of grassroots exchange, in Lionnet and Shih's terms (2005), the authors map out the intricate politics of the protests on the ground. They document a "wild" form of affective mobility in the failure of the PRC state to contain the mobile mainland students' political and affective alliances. However, mainland students who supported the movement nonetheless felt excluded from it by virtue of the anti-mainlander attitudes of many of those involved. The authors document the essentializing effects of some forms of Hong Kong localism, which paradoxically meant that the PRC's state nationalism effectively remained dominant in mediating individuals' senses of belonging and alienation in the context of the movement—even when mainland students were originally sympathetic to their Hong Kong classmates' cause. In response, the authors propose the need for a serious and ongoing critical engagement with the concepts of both the national and the local in order to elaborate a minor transnationalist position capable of navigating the complex dynamics of cultural-national (dis)identification in Hong Kong's explosively tense present moment.

The theme of the transnationalization of class reproduction re-emerges in the next article. In addition to the working-class identities studied in the three articles discussed above, this also relates to the intensified transnational mobility of a large population of middle-class migrants sometimes called "the new Chinese" (Li 2017), whose experiences and social impacts in Europe and Australia are the subject of two articles. Nyíri and Beck focus

on the new wave of middle-class emigrants from China to Europe, specifically, "golden visa" investment migrants in Hungary. They document these migrants' construction of Hungary as a land of purity and authenticity and a haven from the mental and spiritual exhaustion of high-pressure middle-class life in urban China. Interestingly, in significant part, what these middle-class migrants are fleeing is precisely the unsustainable pressure of upholding the intensive parenting model whose spread is traced among working-class mothers in Jin and Dai's article (discussed above). Significantly, the middle-class migrants' idealized construction of Hungary includes a racial element, as the new Chinese migrants cast non-white, non-middle-class migrants—especially Africans, Muslims, and refugees—as endangering the pure land and lifestyle they hope to enjoy in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Nyíri and Beck's article thus charts the reconfiguration of racial, ethnic and class identities and hierarchies along with evolving patterns of middle-class migration from China.

Christina Ho, Dallas Rogers and Jacqueline Nelson take up the thread of resurgent racisms in a transformed world. In the context of a growing, transnationally mobile mainland Chinese middle class, they observe that in Australia, Chinese migrants are selected by an immigration regime that actively seeks the wealthy and well educated, courting mobile PRC human and financial capitals. These privileged migrants are in turn highly successful in navigating the marketized fields of housing and education in Australia. Historically entrenched forms of racism have racialized this success, effectively scapegoating "the Chinese" for the effects of the Australian state's neoliberal reforms to secondary education and property investment settings. Forcefully, the authors argue that critical attention must be redirected away from criticizing the Chinese migrants as a racialized group back toward the policy structures that have set up the nation's housing and education markets to favour outcomes that reproduce class privilege.

Among the seven articles, Ting-Fai Yu's contribution on Sinophone media consumption in Malaysia is the one most aligned with the first wave of Chinese transnationalism studies, and also the one that illustrates most clearly the potentials for resistance to global China in diasporic communities. In the broad context of PRC Mandarin media expansion in recent years, his article unpacks the complexities of transnational reception communities that are differentiated both temporally and geographically, and thus trouble interpretive frameworks based on the presumed primacy and homogeneity of nation-states. Yu maps distinct historical waves of Sinophone media popularity in Malaysia, where Cantonese media from Hong Kong dominated during the 1990s, Taiwanese Mandarin media

took over after 2000, and PRC Mandarin media have risen to prominence from 2010. Alongside this temporal analysis, Yu explores a geographic dimension through a case study of Sinophone media reception in Johor, which is adjacent to Singapore and where Singaporean Mandarin media has historically dominated and continues to dominate the popular mediascape, thanks to its ready accessibility via tall aerials. Yu highlights how Malaysians' continuing desires for these various non-PRC Chinese-language media resist PRC soft power and challenge the presumptively homogenizing, Sinicizing effects of PRC media expansion (Hau 2013). The affective attachment to Hong Kong media also has direct political implications, as seen when a generation of Malaysian-Chinese audiences habituated to Hong Kong popular music and screen media supported Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019–2020.

The articles presented in this issue represent one step in what promises to be a far larger and more long-term project of re-thinking the significance of plural and dynamic Chinese transnationalisms in the global China era. This a world in which the status of both the terms *Chinese* and *national* have never been less obvious or more contested. It is therefore also a world in which our critical responses have never been more urgent.

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### **Acknowledgment:**

I am grateful to the Australian Research Council for providing funding that supported the production of this article and special issue (ARC FT140100222; ARC DP230100442).

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of further discussions of the conceptual relation between the nation-state and transnationalism, see Willis, Yeoh and Fakhri 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Other contributors to this first wave of scholarship focused on specific cultural sites, texts and practices in and between territorial China and its diasporas, and took a variety of positions on both the question of cultural identity and the status of the PRC in transnational circuits. For example, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (1997) focused on cinema histories across mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities, illustrating tensions between Chinese national(ist) and Chinese transnational (ie anti-national) forces, insofar as he viewed the endeavour to construct of a Chinese national cinema as constitutively haunted by Chinese cinema's unavoidably hybrid origins and its promiscuously transnational routes in the present. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (2003) was principally interested in the possibility of a transnational public sphere materializing through Chinese women's collective cultural practices, and approached "transnational China" somewhat descriptively as a geo-cultural zone encompassing China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and diasporic communities. Her characterization of this "transnational China" drew on both roots and routes models: she described it as a "loosely organized" product of "inherited cultural *heritage*" as well as "the ongoing maintenance, renewal, and *reinvention* of cultural connections and a Chinese identity through cultural and material flows across political borders" (M. Yang 2003, 7, emphases added). Also interested in the possibility of a transnational public sphere, Guobin Yang (2003) addressed then-emerging practices of Chinese-language discussion and debate online, including the Global Huaren website that was established in response to the anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia in May 1998. Yang drew on Tu's concept of a globally dispersed "cultural China" that shared a "common cultural repertoire" (G. Yang 2003, 486), and speculated that "the very confusion about the meaning of being Chinese in this age of globalization" may have precipitated an online Chinese cultural sphere "as a realm for self-

clarification" (G. Yang 2003, 486). He drew back, however, from deeper exploration of identity formation to focus instead on the socio-political potentials of online communication.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, both Ong and Shih expressed misgivings about the concept of diaspora, arguing for the preferability of the concepts of transnationality and Sinophone respectively (Ong 2003, 87-88; Shih 2007, 26-30). Nonetheless, the broad point stands that their principal focus was on mobile ethnically Chinese people and organizations outside the territorial borders of the Chinese mainland. A partial exception to the "peripheral China" argument in scholarship of that time is found in Pieke et al, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> At a domestic level, this was illustrated particularly starkly during the harsh metropolitan lockdowns in response to the spread of Covid-19 in 2021-22, when millions were forcibly immobilized to the point where civil unrest finally erupted at a scale not seen since 1989.

<sup>5</sup> For analysis of a related phenomenon among Chinese students in Australia, see Martin 2022, 97-127.