Counting all persons of Chinese background, there were more than 20,000,000 "Overseas Chinese," or "Chinese" people living outside of China, in 1984. This figure excludes Chinese in Hong Kong and Macao, who have a different relationship to China. More than half reside in Southeast Asia; the remainder are found in the United States, Canada, Latin America (chiefly Peru and Brazil), Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Africa, and Western Europe (especially England, France, and the Netherlands). Singapore and Malaysia are exceptional: 75 percent and 35 percent of their respective populations are Chinese. Elsewhere, ethnic Chinese make up no more than 10 percent of the population of any other Southeast Asian country; outside of Southeast Asia, they are usually less than 1 percent of any country's population. For example, at most 1.5 percent of the Canadian population is of Chinese origin; perhaps .5 percent of the American population; and perhaps one of every five thousand persons in the Japanese population.

**Periods of Migration**

*Overseas Chinese* is an appropriate term in the sense that most of this migration has been over bodies of water, although there has always been some overland migration to mainland Southeast Asia from the Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan. Continuous overseas migration and settlement in significant numbers began in the sixteenth century. The important periods are: (1) 1550-1850; (2) 1850-1900; (3) 1900-1950; and (4) since 1950. In the first period, migration was closely associated with maritime trade, and hence went to Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaya-Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The earliest Chinese migrants were speakers of the Hokkien dialect from the counties around the Fujian trading ports of Quanzhou and Zhangzhou. Some were big merchants engaged in long-distance trade; others were laborers or clerks. Changes in trade patterns and in the relative importance of local merchant groups in China encouraged changes in migration. Teochiu-speakers from the Chaozhou region of Guangdong and Cantonese from a dozen counties near Canton also began to settle in Southeast Asia. Although the earlier arrivals, the Hokkiens, maintained their monopoly over major forms of Chinese long-distance commerce in many parts of Southeast Asia, the Teochius, in particular, were able to achieve similar positions in places like Cholon (in southern Vietnam) and Bangkok, where they dominated the rice trade. Like the Hokkiens and Teochius, the Cantonese engaged in a
wide variety of commercial and light industrial occupations. By the eighteenth century Hakkas from Guangdong had joined the others, farming in West Borneo and mining in various parts of Southeast Asia. In Japan, the Nagasaki trade attracted merchant settlers from the lower Yangtze region as well as Fujian and Guangdong. Meanwhile, small numbers of Chinese found their way to Mexico and Peru via the Manila Galleon.

The second Chinese diaspora (1850-1900) included new forms of migration, new destinations, and an additional set of migrants. Rapid steamship service developed, encouraging the use of "credit ticket" systems of financing and "chain migration." The volume of migration expanded greatly and the "chain migration" of fathers, sons, and nephews produced portions of families overseas. The infamous "coolie trade" transported Chinese laborers under horrible conditions to where they were in demand--principally Cuba, Peru, and parts of Southeast Asia. Gold discoveries and railroad building led to migration--especially by Cantonese and Hakkas--to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, and Peru. The opening of new international trading ports in Japan brought more Chinese settlers there. Hainanese, the last major Overseas Chinese subethnic group, now joined the others in Southeast Asia. Like the Hakkas, they found a place in occupations left open by the earlier arrivals.

In the third period (1900-1950) most Western Hemisphere countries and Australia and New Zealand cut off or restricted Chinese immigration. Migration now increased to those Southeast Asian countries still open and extended to South Africa and Europe. Taiwanese from Japan's new colony became the major component of Japan's Chinese population. The fourth period (since 1950) has been marked particularly by new types of migrants. Besides merchants and laborers, there are now also highly educated, cosmopolitan professionals with language skills and wealth. There is also much more movement from one overseas site to another and hence many more "second country" Overseas Chinese. Family migration also characterizes this period--a further development of the practice of wives joining husbands overseas that began in the 1900 to 1950 era.

**Motivations**

Historically, the motives for migration have been both those of "pull" and "push." Economic opportunity abroad has been the major "pull"; since 1900 educational opportunity has also been important. "Push" factors have included population pressure on resources in China, which has consistently been important, and political refuge, which has occasionally been of great importance. Especially before 1950, Chinese were often sojourners abroad, partially supporting family in China with remittances and intending to return there in retirement. Often, however, they were pioneers, intending to have their families with them when possible. Given the opportunity, they would commit themselves completely to their country of overseas residence.

**Occupations**
Although Overseas Chinese have engaged in mining, farming, artisanry, domestic service, and various kinds of labor, they have gravitated toward commerce when able to do so. They have thus tended to concentrate in the cities, in anything from small shops to large commercial operations and, eventually, in manufacturing and industrial enterprises and professional work. But a characteristic "frontier" form of Chinese enterprise overseas has been the small-town general store, whether in Southeast Asia or in parts of North America, supplying commercial, banking, and other services to a local clientele, while frequently buying up and forwarding local products as well.

Reception Overseas

Hostility toward Overseas Chinese has appeared in many countries. The reasons have been economic, cultural, and political. Resentment of Chinese success and fear of Chinese competition are two economic reasons. Cultural remoteness, and sometimes cultural aversion, have complicated the issue. Politicians have found a politically weak and culturally unpopular Chinese minority useful as a scapegoat. Like other vulnerable minorities, Overseas Chinese are most in peril during times of economic depression, when economic competition, cultural aversion, and political opportunism interact most strongly against them. This has been most pronounced in Southeast Asia, where Chinese have been preeminent in certain economic fields. Anti-Chinese episodes have ranged from the massacres in the Spanish Philippines and Dutch Indonesia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to isolated anti-Chinese incidents. Between these extremes there has been systematic exclusion of Chinese immigration and expulsion of large numbers of already resident Chinese. Long-term forms of discrimination have been a feature of many host societies. Nor are such measures all in the distant past. Major anti-Chinese policies have been a characteristic of several Southeast Asian societies since 1950. Expulsions and bloody incidents marked Indonesian Chinese history in the 1960s and Vietnamese Chinese history in the late 1970s. In Malaysia, ethnic confrontations involving the Chinese reached a peak in 1969.

Adaptation

Chinese adaptation to their host societies has varied with the situation there and the claims of China in each case. At one extreme were the Chinese mestizos of the Philippines and the Chinese Thai of pre-twentieth-century Thailand. Descendants of early Chinese immigrant fathers and indigenous mothers, individuals in this group were readily assimilated into Philippine and Thai societies. A second group of similar parentage, the peranaks of Java and the babas of Malaya, created unique forms of Sino-Malay culture that lasted for several generations. At the other extreme were Chinese who arrived abroad after large Chinese communities had been built up. Particularly after 1900, Chinese nationalism claimed their attention at the same time as local nationalisms and nativisms were rejecting Chinese efforts to be part of local societies. Since 1950 it has become difficult for Overseas Chinese to be deeply involved in China's affairs and more families have been reunited overseas; in fact, the majority of Overseas Chinese in recent years have been born outside of China.
Since 1950 Overseas Chinese and others have debated the appropriateness of assimilation (in which Chinese attributes would disappear), or integration (in which some kind of "Chineseness" would remain) as possibilities of adaptation to host environments. The larger cultural questions raised by such debates are made more complex than before by changing and contradictory definitions of Chinese culture emanating from the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and the Overseas Chinese societies themselves. From the perspective of host society governments, the issues of Overseas Chinese assimilation and integration have centered on economic and cultural nationalization and citizenship policies. Since the 1950s Indonesia, the Philippines, and various Vietnamese governments have tried to remove the Chinese from retail trade. In many host countries Chinese schools have been forced either to accept nationalizing-content restrictions or to close. Overseas Chinese citizenship, as a problem, goes back to 1909, when China's citizenship law claimed all persons born of Chinese fathers overseas as Chinese, whatever other citizenship they might claim. Since 1950 the PRC has signed treaties of citizenship clarification with some Southeast Asian states and since 1957 has stated its intention that Overseas Chinese unambiguously become, when free to do so and if they so desire, citizens of their host countries. Subsequent ambiguities in policies emanating from Beijing and Taiwan's continued adherence to the principles of 1909 have maintained the complexity of the problem.

**Organizations**

Chinese communities abroad have sustained themselves in large part through organizations that have drawn consistently on models in China and have been adapted to local situations. The following are the most important types of Overseas Chinese organizations.

- The joint-stock mining or farming community. These groups, called *gongsi*, were most often found in certain parts of Malaysia.
- The single community headman, or *kapitan*. Found in Japan, the Philippines, Java, and Malaya from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, the headman was often the leader of a group of officers, chosen by the Chinese themselves, by officials of the host society, or by both. He frequently enjoyed certain monopoly tax and local economic development rights as well.
- Secret societies. Offshoots of the Hong Men in southeast China, these societies were often organized by subethnic group (Hokkiens, Teochius, Hakkas, etc.) and usually competed for control of economic resources. They were most prominent in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia and in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- District associations. The district associations united Chinese of the same county or other small district in China into *huiguan*, which provided mutual benefits and sought control over economic resources. These were found almost everywhere.
- Clan associations. Linking persons of a common surname, the clan association's functions were comparable to those of the district associations and were especially prevalent in Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and North America.
- "Umbrella organizations." Of federative type, these groups, such as Chinese benevolent associations and chambers of commerce, attempted to speak for the
community as a whole while mediating its internal disputes. They were found almost everywhere.

- Fraternal-political organizations. The political groups possessed a widely recruited membership, and were not only concerned with politics in China until 1950, but also served as focal points of local Chinatown politics. Prime examples are the political parties derived from the Guomindang (Kuomintang) and Hong Men, such as the Zhigongtang.

There have also been organizations of local reference, ranging from the peranakan political parties of 1950s Indonesia to various trade and athletic associations and Chinese versions of such North American organizations as the Lions Club.

**Relations with China**

Private economic relations between Overseas Chinese and China have been continuous since the sixteenth century. Political relationships, on the other hand, have gone from almost nonexistence (before 1850), to growing affiliation (1850-1900), to intense interaction (1900-1950), to a distant and ambiguous contact (post-1950). Before 1850 Chinese central governments had little to do with Overseas Chinese. They did not protect their lives or properties, regarded them as politically suspect for leaving China, and sometimes prohibited overseas trade and migration. Policy changed after 1850. Overseas Chinese remittances to relatives in Guangdong and Fujian came to be seen as valuable to the economies of those provinces, and Overseas Chinese investments of money and skills as helpful to the modest modernization program China was then attempting. Chinese embassies and consulates were established overseas, in part to protect Overseas Chinese lives and properties, and Chinese diplomacy negotiated the end of the shocking coolie trade.

In the 1900 to 1950 period China's politics came to the Chinatowns of the world. Chinese abroad were caught up in China's new nationalism and radical attempts at modernization. Reformers, revolutionaries, and conservatives wooed the Overseas Chinese with offers of titles and government positions, and China claimed them as its citizens. Chambers of commerce were formed in overseas cities, as in China, in part to link the government in China with Overseas Chinese leadership. Overseas Chinese supplied Sun Yat-sen and others with much of the funding that made the 1911 Revolution possible. Not all Overseas Chinese supported that movement, however, and China's politics continued to divide Chinatowns around the world. The very term "Overseas Chinese," with its strong implication of ties to China, came into being in this period as a verbal claim of Chinese governments to the loyalty and support of persons of Chinese descent outside of China. Their support, when given, was not necessarily political. Many contributed primarily in support of modernization in their home districts (funds for railroads or modern schools) or invested in the development of overseas "home base" area cities like Amoy (Xiamen), Swatow (Shantou), and Canton (Guangzhou). Japanese encroachments on China's sovereignty and, ultimately, the Pacific War of 1937 to 1945 brought strong financial support from overseas for China's resistance. Southeast Asian Chinese support was outstanding until Japanese conquests after 1941 made it almost impossible to continue. Thereafter, North American Chinese carried the greatest burden.
1950 marks a cutoff date in the political and other relations of Overseas Chinese with China. The land reform in the PRC affected many Overseas Chinese families and clearly changed expectations for all. Subsequent special programs for Overseas Chinese and, especially, their dependents in China were suspended during the Cultural Revolution and only restored in 1978. Meanwhile, Taiwan, although it had its economic and political supporters, was not an easy substitute as a home district. The reopening of investment, technical aid, and other opportunities for Overseas Chinese in the PRC after 1978 raised both new opportunities and old problems.

-- Edgar Wickberg

FURTHER READINGS


