

Diasporic Chinese and a Rising China: Paradoxes of Paradigm Shift at the time of Globalization

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As a field of scholarly inquiries, overseas Chinese studies emerged at the turn of the 20th century when China—as a civilization and a nation—was in a state of decline resultant from tremendous challenges from both within and without of the country. A number of dominant discourses subsequently constituted the core of established paradigms in studies about the Chinese overseas. These interconnected narratives include: 1) the existence of a poverty-stricken homeland and corruptive regime serving as a fundamental push factor for emigration; 2) the suffering life of migrants overseas who were victimized by institutionalized discriminations; 3) overseas Chinese's remarkable endeavours in helping the motherland in economic modernization and in actively engaging China-oriented nationalism; and 4) the increasingly important yet continuously ambiguous role played by various host governments such as aggressive recruitments of labourers from China and assimilationist policies toward the Chinese population at home.

Fast forward to the beginning of the 21st century, diasporic Chinese have been studied in a fundamentally different and increasingly globalizing environment. For one thing, the majority of the Chinese overseas has become citizens/residents of their respective nations; while still facing some racial intolerance, they have enjoyed a much greater degree of freedom and legal protection in multi-cultural and multi-racial societies. More importantly, the dynamic rise of China over the past two decades has led to profound changes not only in terms of push factor for emigration but in the complex relationships between diasporic Chinese and China.

The changing landscape has prompted critical rethinking and reworking of received wisdoms that have dominated much of diasporic Chinese studies over the past century. Various frameworks ranging from identity/gender politics to transnationalism have been proposed to unveil the dynamics and characteristics of diasporic Chinese communities. What are the new levels/units of analyses in the emerging research on Chinese overseas and their linkages with the homeland? How should we reconceptualize the changing equations between diasporic Chinese and a rising China? What is the role of the state and governance in the making of a transnational China? Will the increasingly close connections with the ancestral homeland diminish autonomy of diasporic Chinese? With a keen awareness of the embedded paradoxes of paradigm shift and the need for new explanatory tools, this paper attempts to offer some preliminary answers to these questions.