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Transnational Chinese Sphere in Singapore: Dynamics, Transformations and Characteristics

LIU Hong

Abstract: Based upon an empirical analysis of Singaporean Chinese's intriguing and changing linkages with China over the past half century, this paper suggests that multi-layered interactions between the Chinese diaspora and the homeland have led to the formulation of an emerging transnational Chinese social sphere, which has three main characteristics: First, it is a space for communication by ethnic Chinese abroad with their hometown/ homeland through steady and extensive flows of people, ideas, goods and capital that transcend the nation-state borders, although states also play an important role in shaping the nature and characteristics of these flows. Second, this transnational social sphere constitutes a dynamic interface between economy, politics and culture, which has contributed to creating a collective diasporic identity as well as social and business networks. Third, the key institutional mechanism of the transnational social sphere is various types of Chinese organizations – ranging from hometown associations to professional organizations – which serve as integral components of Chinese social and business networks.

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Keywords: China, Singapore, transnational social sphere, network, Chinese new immigrants

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Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed the rapid emergence of new Chinese migrants (新移民, *xin yimin*), who number more than 8 million and are scattered all over different corners of the globe (Wang and Zhuang 2011). One important characteristic of the *xin yimin* community has been its high degree of transnational mobility, including diverse patterns of linkages with the homeland. Through a variety of mechanisms, new Chinese immigrants have established connections with the homeland, which in turn help shape the collective identity of the Chinese overseas. Historically, social organizations constituted a key institutional means of creating transnational linkages and Chinese business networks, and they continue to be relevant in the age of globalization.

As a reference point for the studies of Chinese overseas, Philip Kuhn (1997, see also 2006) argues that the “homeland” has to be understood “both as objective facts (the Chinese revolution and the modern Chinese state) [...] and as subjective visions in the minds of Chinese overseas”. By using Singapore as a geographical site of scholarly enquiry and by attempting an institutional approach, this paper¹ explores linkages and interactions between the “objective facts” and “subjective visions” and how the homeland has been imagined, interrogated, and reconstructed at the time of decolonization and globalization. There are two main reasons for selecting the city-state for a closer study: First, Singapore has long served as one of the most crucial nodes in Asian social and business networks, linking ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia with compatriots in (South) China and elsewhere. Second, the city-state has been a major Asian destination for new Chinese migrants over the last two decades. Numbering more than 350,000, new migrants constitute a significant segment in the local social and cultural scene, creating a visible impact upon the changing configurations of diasporic Chinese identity. While the range of their ties with the “hometown” – whether individual, family, or business – has been diverse, this paper is mainly concerned with institutional linkages, focusing on those organizations that have

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horizontally established and maintained institutionalized connections between Singapore and the homeland, and vertically with the (post)colonial states and the local community over the last half century.

As a central force of the world economy and social transformation over the past few decades, globalization has affected almost every aspect of social and political life, including the state–society relationship. For one thing, globalization poses a major challenge to the statist argument in explaining the dynamics of Asian political economy. Globalization is considered to have led to the perception that “state authority has leaked away, upwards, sideways, and downwards”. Characterizations such as “just evaporated” or “diminished”, “defective”, and “hollow” have become typical adjectives applied to the contemporary state (Evans 1997; Paul 2003; Weiss 2003). There are, however, differing views on the state’s role in the time of globalization. Some scholars argue that the state continues to be an important actor: “National security remains a core function of the nation-state” and “There are no rival political formations – local, regional, transnational, or global – that have the full multidimensional capacities of the state” (Paul 2003; Ikenberry 2003).

A focus on the role of the transnational social sphere and network takes us beyond the binarity of the state–society relationship during this time of globalization. Recent studies on Internet-based and ethnic media as well as gender among Chinese communities in mainland China and the diaspora, for example, have illuminated the significance of transnational public spheres (Yang 1999; Shi 2005). Yang Guobin contends that a transnational Chinese cultural sphere is “an open space for communication” in the Chinese-speaking world. “These spaces are based both inside and outside China,” he argues.

Yet technologically, and to a considerable extent socially, they are linked to global networks. These spaces are globally accessible, discourse in them flows globally, and publics are linked across national boundaries (Yang 2003: 484).

This paper focuses on the evolution of a transnational social sphere by highlighting the role of networks and institutions, representing a departure from the state- and society-centric approaches to socio-economic transformations in modern Asia. I argue that “objective facts” about the homeland have been linked to “subjective visions” through Chinese social organizations. In this paper, “subjective visions” are perceptions and images constructed by diasporic Chinese about their homeland or ancestral hometown (侨乡, *qiaoxiang*) through a variety of media, includ-

ing newspapers, magazines, online forums and artefacts. These visions are subjective in that they may not accurately reflect the “objective facts” that have shaped developments in China, but they reveal the changing identity of the Chinese diaspora with respect to the migrants’ sense of belonging (or lack thereof) within the host society.

Using the empirical case of Singaporean Chinese’s changing linkages with China over the past half century, this paper suggests that multi-layered interactions between the Chinese diaspora and the homeland have led to the emergence of a transnational Chinese social sphere, which has three main characteristics: First, it is a space for communication between ethnic Chinese abroad and their hometown/ homeland through regular and extensive flows of population, ideas, goods and capital that transcend the nation-state borders, although states (both China and countries with Chinese diaspora populations) also play an important role in shaping the nature of these flows. Second, this transnational social sphere was, and still is, a dynamic interface between economy, politics and culture, which has contributed to the creation a collective diasporic identity (by way of constructing “subjective visions” of the homeland) as well as social and business networks (by way of co-ethnic activities). Third, the key institutional mechanism of the transnational social sphere has been various types of Chinese organizations, ranging from locality associations to professional organizations, and they have constituted an integral component of global Chinese social and business networks.

The conceptualization of a transnational social sphere is in tandem with recent scholarship in international migration, which views transnational migration as taking place within fluid social spaces that are constantly reconstructed through migrants’ simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). In the meantime, studies on networks have made considerable inroads into the social sciences. The share of papers published in two top sociology journals (*American Sociological Review* and *American Journal of Sociology*) that listed “networks” as a keyword have increased dramatically over the past three decades: 1.2 per cent in 1980 to 2.2 per cent 1990, to 7.8 per cent in 2000, to 11.6 per cent in 2005 (Rivera, Soderstrom, and Uzzi 2010). “The literature on networks is rapidly growing,” writes economist Mathew Jackson (2009).

It is an exciting area because of its multidisciplinary nature, and it is difficult to think of other areas of research that so naturally draw from, and apply to, as many disciplines (see also Liu 2012).

Institutionalized networks in the transnational arena, in short, constitute a major instrument through which homeland linkages are constructed and sustained. The following pages are devoted to an empirical study of the making and transformation of transnational linkages between the Chinese in Singapore and their imagined and real homeland. There are three distinct phases in the evolution of these linkages. In the first period (1950–1965), which witnessed the dual processes of decolonization and nation-building, Singapore Chinese associations’ previously intimate linkage with the *qiaoxiang* was disrupted while their ties with counterparts in neighbouring countries (intra-regional ties) were significantly bolstered. As a nation-state, China was transformed from being the actual site of socio-economic interactions to a major arena of homeland imagery. The second period (1965–1990) is the era of the nation-state, in which institutionalized linkages with the hometown (at both the local and national levels) were suspended, while intra-diaspora networks were further strengthened. China ceased to be the “motherland” of the majority of Chinese in Singapore. The third period (1990–present) is a time of globalization in which the partial revival of *qiaoxiang* ties has been coupled with the massive influx of new migrants who have formulated a new mode of transnational social sphere that is embedded simultaneously in Singapore and China. This paper concludes that a historically grounded institutional approach to the homeland ties facilitates a better understanding of Southeast Asia–China interactions and that a focus on the transnational social spheres takes us beyond the conventional nation-state framework, thus contributing to a better understanding of modern Asia.

Changing Patterns of the Hometown Linkages, 1950–1990

Singapore’s role in the regional social and business networks of Asia – hence the homeland linkages – has been shaped by two key factors: 1) its geographical location at the crossroads of, globally, East and West as well as, regionally, East, South, and Southeast Asia, and 2) the predominant position of *entrepôt* trade in its economy. Strategically situated on the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, it has extensive sea routes and land

passages (through the Johor–Singapore Causeway) to various territories in the region, including Indonesia, mainland Southeast Asia, and China. Singapore’s vital geographic position and network capacity have not gone unnoticed by outside observers. In an official Chinese report submitted to the national government, Singapore was described as being

situated in the centre of the Nanyang archipelago [maritime Southeast Asia] and on the pathway between Europe and Asia. Its business vitality is second to no other city in the region (cited in Liu 2004).

The British colonial rule and the Cold War environment also shaped Singapore’s destiny as a global city-state (Kratoska 2006). Prior to the taking-off of the industrialization in the late 1960s, the Singaporean economy had been centred on the *entrepôt* trade,

involving a machinery of sorting, grading, treating, and processing tropical products according to the requirements of overseas markets, and a breaking down of bulk imports of Western products into assorted parcels suited to the needs of the small Asiatic dealer.

There was a high degree of correlation between trade partnership and social/ business networking. According to a report by the Singapore Legislative Assembly in 1956 (cited in Liu 2004), the main factor behind the success of the *entrepôt* trade of Singapore was “the trade connections of its merchants”. As the middlemen between the Western trading companies and consumers/ producers, Chinese merchants and dealers in wholesale and retail businesses were indispensable for collecting local products for exports and marketing imported manufactured goods.

As a result, a strong transnational and cross-regional flavour – together with various networking connections based upon linkages such as native-place and dialect collegiality – has long been a characteristic of Chinese business activities. Chinese in Singapore were keen to form such ties, which constituted not only symbolic capital and ethnic resources, but also, and more importantly, the lifeline of the local economy.

From Hometown Ties to a Regionalization Drive (1950–1965)

Prior to the late 1940s, China constituted the most important point of external connections of voluntary associations in Singapore. As has been documented elsewhere, in building bridges across the sea, these associations simultaneously served as “a political player, social protector, guard-

ian of business trust, and cultural actor” in constructing the Sino-Southeast Asian contact zone. With the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, however, these linkages underwent fundamental transformations in their substance and format. While a significant segment of young Chinese were inspired by China’s rise as a potential power, many Chinese who were affiliated with associations, which as a norm were headed by businesspeople, began drifting away from the China orientation. More importantly, with the establishment of the new nation-states in Southeast Asia and their subsequent assimilative and/ or discriminatory policies toward the Chinese, the sojourning mentality that had characterized the Chinese communities was gradually replaced by a locally oriented identity (Wang 2001). In contrast to the pre-1949 period, when associations frequently attempted to influence social, economic and political agendas in the hometown, there were only isolated examples of such efforts in the 1950s, and these were confined to specific issues. In the cultural arena, *qiaoxiang* ties were similarly disrupted. Before 1941, the great majority of associations were concerned with promoting their own Chinese (sub)ethnic cultures, which had originated from the hometown. The early 1950s saw a gradual shift in focus, and the Singaporean Chinese associations began to realize that they ought to pay equal attention to local (Southeast Asian) culture (Liu 1999).

In short, the early 1950s witnessed a gradual detachment of Singaporean Chinese social organizations/ networks from China (both as a nation-state and the hometown), driven largely by the rapidly changing external environments. The need to survive in the new and much harsher framework of new (indigenous) nation-states forced Chinese associations in Singapore and elsewhere abroad to be more adaptive and localized in their political and cultural orientations. However, because the disruption was mainly precipitated by a hostile external environment, the internal structures of the Chinese associations and their old connections with the *qiaoxiang* were mostly preserved. Thus, Chinese abroad were able to lay an institutional basis for the regional and global revival of hometown ties in the closing decades of the twentieth century (Liu 1998).

The weakening of hometown connection in the early 1950s was partly compensated by the formation of regional networks centred in Singapore. The regionalization of Chinese associations constituted a means to consolidate both financial resources and membership strength. Because primordial ties such as locality and dialect connections remained

fundamental for the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, the consolidation of voluntary associations served this agenda well.

Take the example of the Taishan (台山) Association, formed out of the linkages with the eponymous county located along the Pearl River Delta and Siyi region in Guangdong Province. Taishan had a population of nearly 1 million, including approximately 200,000 overseas compatriots at the end of the 1940s (about half of whom lived in British Malaya and Singapore). The Pan-Malayan Taishan Federation was established to forge co-ethnic solidarity. With the support of eight other Taishan Associations, the inaugural meeting was held in Singapore in 1947. The federation aimed to “[handle] all the issues concerning [‘fellow countymen’s] education, culture, economy, mutual aids, and welfare”. One of the key agendas was to promote economic cooperation among compatriots in Southeast Asia. The federation started by pooling the capital of fellow Taishanese to form economic enterprises, which would further “cooperate with the compatriots in the whole Nanyang [Southeast Asian] region as well as those in North America” (cited in Liu 2004).

Accompanying the process of regionalization, Chinese associations became increasingly interested in affairs relating to Singapore and Southeast Asia, especially Malaya and Indonesia. The changing agendas and activities undertaken by the Singapore Teochew (潮州, Chaozhou) Association clearly reflected such a re-orientation (Table 1).

Table 1: Major Agendas of the Teochew Association, 1929–1965

	1929–1949	1950–1965
Hometown-related	26	2
Singapore-related	11	23
Malaya- and Indonesia-related	14	34

Source: Adapted from Teochew Association 1980: 298-305.

The interactions between “objective facts” and “subjective visions” were constantly shifting in the post-war era. The concept of homeland re-emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the localization process gradually led to ethnic Chinese in Singapore self-identifying with their co-ethnics in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, China interacted with its former subjects overseas primarily as a nation-state rather than through the *qiaoxiang*. The effort of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Com-

merce (SCCC) to reconnect with China is a case in point, as will be discussed below.

By the mid-1950s the relationship between the Singapore Chinese community and China had substantially cooled and was further complicated by the trade embargo on essential strategic materials such as rubber and tin imposed by the British authorities after 1951. This embargo hit the Chinese business community especially hard, as many merchants' livelihoods were dependent upon the rubber trade (import, storage, grading, packaging, re-export, etc.). As a result, the business community, represented by its flagship organization, the SCCC, attempt to reconnect with the huge China market.

The initiative of Chinese institutions in Singapore was partly precipitated by changing policies of the Chinese state. By the mid-1950s China had adjusted its policies toward Southeast Asia and its ethnic Chinese population, and it was ready to practise a foreign policy of peaceful coexistence. With the beginning of industrialization, China needed raw materials such as rubber and tin, of which Malaya was the primary supplier in the world market. Between August and October of 1956, at the invitation of the Chinese foreign trade minister, the SCCC delegation visited 14 provinces and a dozen major cities. The delegation was warmly received by political leaders in China, including Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and Vice Prime Minister Chen Yi. The economic payoff was significant, the delegation won numerous contracts totalling more than 20 million USD, including one allowing for the exportation of 7,000 tons of rubber from Singapore. As indicated in the extended report by the SCCC's president, Ko Teck Kin (高德根), after the delegation's return, all members, including those pro-KMT elements within the SCCC leadership, were impressed by China's overall economic development and social progress.

In brief, the social networks built by locality-based associations went through significant changes from 1950 to 1965, when Singapore became independent. The tendency to move away from linking with China (at both the *qiaoxiang* and national levels) was coupled with the regionalization of various locality associations to re-orient themselves with counterparts in Southeast Asia. Hometown, represented by *qiaoxiang* in specific geographical locales, was gradually replaced by a symbolic homeland represented by China as a nation-state, which was politically distanced from Singapore but nevertheless economically relevant to the island state's survival.

Resurgence of Transnational Connections (1965–1990)

During the two decades following the end of the World War II, institutionalized linkages between Chinese in Singapore and China were, on the Singaporean side, mainly initiated by societal forces, with little or no state intervention; in the PRC, the same took place mostly through state actors. After Singapore's independence in 1965, fundamental changes occurred with respect to the state's role in engaging with transnational agencies: Not only were the latter under the state's increasingly close monitoring, but the state was also deeply involved in the transnational processes, helping to shape the nature and characteristics of the hometown linkages. With a majority of the Chinese in Singapore born locally after 1965, they increasingly called Singapore their homeland. In 1970, more than 97 per cent of the total population was made up of Singaporean citizens and permanent residents, 93.1 per cent of whom were Singaporean citizens (Sun 2012: 13). By the end of the 1980s, the trend of globalization had also been intertwined with the revival of hometown linkages, thus providing a new element in the subjective imagination of China by Singaporean Chinese.

The effort led by the SCCC to break the Western monopoly on shipping in the region exemplifies how Chinese institutions skilfully mobilized the support of businesses and governments in East Asia to promote economic development. Shipping had long been a central aspect of the economy of Singapore, and prior to the country's independence, shipping had been monopolized by the Far Eastern Freight Conference (FEFC) and other shipping conferences that were under the tight control of Western powers. As a result of this long-standing monopoly, freight rates were arbitrarily high, 20 to 50 per cent above those of non-conference shipping, thus imposing a cumbersome burden on both Singapore and Malaysia.

Backed by the newly independent government in Singapore, a well-organized campaign was launched to end the "FEFC's oppressive monopolistic practices and its unreasonable freight rates". The SCCC formulated two major strategies: The first was to forge joint efforts with other Chinese trade associations in Malaysia. The second was to enlist the support of the state. Tan Eng Joo (陈永裕), chairman of the Rubber Trade Association of Singapore, urged the SCCC in 1967 to mobilize merchants and consult with the government to formulate plans for concerted action. Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee (吴庆瑞) expressed the government's "100 per cent" support. In 1971, an SCCC delegation to

China succeeded in securing its commitment to shipping goods with freight rates one fourth lower than those of the FEFC. In the early 1970s China dispatched a total of 38 ships to Singapore and Malaysia. The SCCC also took steps to cooperate with Chinese shippers in Hong Kong and the Philippines, further strengthening the Chinese connections. These skilfully coordinated efforts to break the FEFC's monopoly considerably strengthened Singapore's bargaining power vis-à-vis Western shipping conferences (Liu 2004).

It is clear that by the 1970s Singaporeans envisaged China as a site of ethnic connections and business linkages, and this imagery of the homeland was reinforced in the closing decade of the twentieth century, with economic activities becoming increasingly intertwined with Chinese culture and ethnicity. Chinese associations from all over the world, particularly in Asia, have been actively engaged in international gatherings, which form an institutionalized orbit of global Chinese social and business networks. Singapore has been a key site for this global revival of Chinese associations' cross-border networking; a significant segment of this activity has been geared toward the hometown (rather than toward China as a nation-state as in the 1950s/ 1960s). Although the state of Singapore continued to play an important role in pushing local associations' transnational connections with the ancestral hometown, the associations themselves became more proactive in forming global linkages within which the (real and fictive) hometown was an indispensable element.

There are a number of factors behind the state's push for associations' transnational linkages. First, by the 1980s the Singaporean economy had become increasingly reliant upon the international, particularly the Asian, market. The government pursued a policy of establishing a "regional wing" for the local economy. For this agenda, the government tried to revitalize ethnic Chinese associations' institutional linkages with China and elsewhere. As the then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared at Hong Kong's second World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention in 1993, "We would be foolish not to use the ethnic Chinese network to increase our reach and our grasp of these opportunities" (cited in Liu 1998). Second, while the government had established various grass-roots institutions such as community centres, their reach was quite limited and could not be extended to meet the transnational networking agendas. From the perspective of the association leaders, participating in the international gatherings of hometown associations and maintaining

institutional connections were effective means to counterbalancing the declining trend that many associations had experienced in an urbanizing society. As Trade and Industry Minister George Yeo (杨荣文) remarked,

Singapore's most profound links to China, India and Southeast Asia were not just economic, but also cultural. If Singapore was able to nourish its cultural core, its economic trunk would be strong and its branches would spread wide (*Straits Times* 2004).

The revival of the hometown linkage, therefore, was driven both by the Singaporean state (for the purpose of promoting business networks and economic growth at a time of globalization) and by Chinese associations whose main agenda in participating in the internationalization was to legitimate their existence in an increasingly cosmopolitan Singapore, where primordial ties such as locality and clanship had become less relevant. The construction of the “subjective visions” was, in other words, generated by a mixture of economic pragmatism and cultural strategy.

The “objective facts”, on the other hand, had also been shifting, and these contributed to the creation of new “subjective visions”. The changing policy of the PRC government provided another impetus for the institutional revival of transnational hometown linkages. This policy change can be seen from both the central and local dimensions (Thuno 2001; Liu 2011a). With the improvement of the Sino-Southeast Asian relationship and the opening up of China's coastal areas after the late 1970s, the Chinese diaspora was transformed from a liability to an asset. As the principal beneficiary of overseas Chinese globalizing activities, local governments in South China worked hard at “seizing the opportunities and playing [the] ‘overseas Chinese card’ (侨牌, *qiaopai*)”.

China's drive to reconnect with its diaspora coincided with the revival of the latter's hometown linkages. Thanks to the Singaporean government's strong support, the first World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention was held in 1991 in Singapore, and it was based upon the notion of “the commonality of our Chinese ethnicity”, as the convention's organizing committee chairman, Tan Eng Joo, put it. In this and subsequent conventions up to the most recent – eleventh – convention held in Singapore (October 2011), there has been a consistent emphasis on the important role of culture in overseas Chinese business success, and “Chineseness” has been formulated as a starting point for international business networking. This belief in the role of Chinese ethnicity has been linked with an emerging China as a global power: “With the rise of China through accelerated economic development,” says Singapore Chinese

Chamber of Commerce and Industries (SCCCI) President Teo Siong Seng (张松声), “and with the economic centre of gravity shifting to Asia, the dominance of ethnic Chinese in the business arena has been elevated worldwide” (Teo 2011).

The Singapore Futsing (福清, Fuqing) Association can be taken as representative of locality associations’ involvement in establishing new hometown and intra-diaspora connections. Following the 1988 Fuqing World Convention, the International Federation of Futsing Clan was formed, with its headquarters in Singapore. The federation aims to provide “planning, organization, and leadership” for its members. It also publishes *Rong Qing* (融情), a quarterly newsletter containing detailed information on the social and economic activities of Fuqingese worldwide. With a circulation of 4,000 copies per issue, it has been widely distributed and read (there is now also an online version).

In sum, as a combined result of the changing policies of both the Singaporean and Chinese states, voluntary associations in Singapore renewed their institutionalized linkages with the hometowns, which in turn created a tangible economic outcome in the form of increased trade and investment, as well as the intangible consequence of heightened diasporic sentiments among the Chinese overseas. Indeed, it has been established empirically that business and social networks have “a considerable quantitative impact” on international trade. James Rauch and Victor Trindade conclude in an exhaustive statistical analysis that

for differentiated products, trade between countries with ethnic Chinese population shares at the levels prevailing in Southeast Asia, the smallest of our estimates (for the conservative aggregation in 1990) is that ethnic Chinese networks increase bilateral trade by nearly 60 per cent (Rauch and Trindade 2002; see also Tung and Chung 2010).

New Immigrants and Renewed Linkages with China, 1990–2012

The preceding pages have examined the transnational linkages between Singaporean Chinese associations and the “hometown”. The leadership and membership of these associations were first- or second-generation Chinese immigrants who had settled in Singapore prior to the 1970s and considered it their permanent “home”. The past two decades have witnessed the rapid emergence of a different type of Chinese immigrant, the so-called *xin yimin*, who were born in the mainland and starting emigrat-

ing from China in the early 1980s. While their preferred destinations are North America, Europe, and Australia, Japan and Singapore are their main choices within Asia. The remainder of this paper considers the characteristics of new immigrants in Singapore and their institutional linkages with China. As will be demonstrated, the state continues to play an important role in shaping the images of and connections to the homeland.

Xin Yimin in Singapore

The formation of a sizeable new Chinese migrant community was facilitated by Singapore's conducive migration policy, which was in turn driven by a demographic decline in the country. The past two decades have witnessed a steady decline in demographic trend, registering one of the lowest total fertility rates in the world: from 4.93 (1960–1965) to 2.62 (1970–1975) to 1.57 (1995–2000) to 1.2 in 2009, far below the population replacement level of 2.1 (Sun 2012: 20–29). A liberal immigration policy thus constituted an important component of the government's population policy. Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong announced in 1999 that “without talents, we cannot become a first-world economy and a world-class home; we must import talents from overseas to supplement local talents” (Goh 1999). Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew believed Singapore's diminishing population would slow down the economy and considered the task of increasing the country's population its “biggest challenge”. Pointing to the stagnation of the Japanese economy as a result of their hostility to immigrants, he put it bluntly: “Like it or not, unless we have more babies, we need to accept immigrants” (Chang 2012b). In 1992, the government started offering full scholarship to high school students from China to enroll in the local junior colleges and universities. One of the main attachments to the scholarships is that they must work in Singapore for at least six years upon graduation. On the economic front, the state provided financial assistance for new immigrant entrepreneurs, totalling 13 million SGD of start-up funding (Liu 2008). This strategy was associated with the encouragement of mainland Chinese firms to list on the Singapore Exchange Mainboard. By January 2011, 157 Chinese companies were listed in Singapore, with a total market capitalization of approximately 49.5 billion SGD (38.7 billion USD), while secondary-listed ones were valued at 4.5 billion SGD (3.5 billion USD) (*Global Times* 2011).

Table 2: Population and Population Growth in Singapore (1990–2010)

Year	Total Population	Singapore Residents			Non-Residents
		Total	Citizens	Permanent Residents	
Number (in thousands) as of June 2010					
1990 (census)	3,047.1	2,735.9	2,623.7	112.1	311.3
2000 (census)	4,027.9	3,273.4	2,985.9	287.5	754.5
2004	4,166.7	3,413.3	3,057.1	356.2	753.4
2005	4,265.8	3,467.8	3,081.0	386.8	797.9
2006	4,401.4	3,525.9	3,107.9	418.0	875.5
2007	4,588.6	3,583.1	3,133.8	449.2	1,005.5
2008	4,839.4	3,642.7	3,164.4	478.2	1,196.7
2009	4,987.6	3,733.9	3,200.7	533.2	1,253.7
2010 (census)	5,076.7	3,771.7	3,230.7	541.0	1,305.0
Average annual growth (in %)					
1990 (census)	2.3	1.7	1.7	2.3	9.0
2000 (census)	2.8	1.8	1.3	9.9	9.3
2004	1.3	1.4	0.8	6.5	0.7
2005	2.4	1.6	0.8	8.6	5.9
2006	3.2	1.7	0.9	8.1	9.7
2007	4.3	1.6	0.8	7.5	14.9
2008	5.5	1.7	1.0	6.5	19.0
2009	3.1	2.5	1.1	11.5	4.8

Source: Department of Statistics Singapore 2010.

As a result of the government’s proactive initiatives in recruiting and encouraging “foreign talents” and a liberal immigration policy regime, the past decade has seen a rapid growth in the foreign permanent resident population, who represent the fastest-growing segment of the population in Singapore (see Table 2). Singapore’s total population was 5.08 million as of June 2010. There were 3.77 million Singapore residents, comprising 3.23 million Singapore citizens and 541,000 permanent residents, and 1.31 million “non-resident” foreigners who were on various work permits or long-term visas. A significant portion of the new permanent residents are those from the mainland China, who as a norm

are well educated and/ or have relevant professional experience, as the government sets stringent criteria in terms of applicants' educational credentials and salary levels when granting permanent residency.

As there are no official statistics on the number of new Chinese migrants, which is treated as a sensitive issue in multi-ethnic Singapore, it has been estimated that the total number of such migrants in Singapore (including transients such as short-term contract workers) is somewhere between 350,000 and 400,000 (Zhuang and Liu 2009: 406). New Chinese immigrants in Singapore share some demographic characteristics with their counterparts elsewhere, who originated from all over China rather than from the traditional qiaoxiang in South China. Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, acknowledges that today's Chinese immigrants "come from the north, or north of the Yangtze, as well. They are better educated and they offer us a greater pool of talent" (Leong and Teo 2011). Those new immigrants with "portable skills" are generally much better educated than the local population, and they are overrepresented in some research and higher education sectors. Take the example of the National University of Singapore: Among its 1,671 full-time teaching faculty members in 2000, 887 (53 per cent) were Singaporean citizens and the remaining 784 (46.9 per cent) were foreigners, of whom 110 (14 per cent) were PRC citizens. Among the 842 full-time researchers, only 221 (26 per cent) were Singaporean citizens; 621 (74 per cent) were foreigners, 329 of those (39 per cent) were from the PRC (National University of Singapore Annual Report 2001, cited in Liu 2008).

Social Organizations of New Immigrants: Beyond Locality and Kinship

In view of the new demography in Singapore, how are new Chinese immigrants organized socially? Are there any differences from their predecessors, whose organizations are based upon locality and kinship ties? What are the characteristics of their linkages with China? We have found that, for the newcomers, the age-old concept of the "hometown" has been transformed from representing a specific locality to being a cultural/ ethnic symbol representing the Chinese from the mainland collectively and China as a nation-state or civilization.

In comparison to traditional Chinese organizations, new associations tend to be more inclusive, recruiting members from diverse geographical and social backgrounds. As such, their constituency is not

bound by primordial ties such as locality and kinship. For instance, new Chinese associations in the United States tend to be bicultural and take the form of a “unique hybrid” with a membership that is “resourceful, educated and literate in both Chinese and American cultures, and fluent in both languages”. They are composed of mostly professional and alumni associations organized by new immigrants from mainland China (Zhou and Kim 2001: 230). In a similar vein, new immigrant organizations in Japan have emerged out of common interests in academic, technological and other economic matters instead of primordial ties (Zhu 2003). With respect to political identity, research has found that homeland socialization of those Chinese Americans born on the mainland plays an important part in shaping their political attitudes (Lien 2008).

A similar trend of overarching representations and cultural symbolism is taking place among new Chinese immigrants in Singapore. The Singapore Huayuan Association (later renamed the Hua Yuan General Association of New Immigrants from China) was established in 2001 by mainland-born Chinese professionals, recruiting members from the new emigrants who have become Singaporean citizens or permanent residents. It also recruits “para-members” among those PRC citizens who are on long-term student visas or employment permits. According to its constitution, the association has six main missions:

- to assist members in better integrating into the multi-ethnic society of Singapore;
- to promote information exchange and communication;
- to foster the spirit of mutual assistance;
- to promote exchanges and communications with other associations;
- to uplift its members’ social lives by organizing various activities; and
- to promote commercial and trade relationships between Singapore and China.

As the largest association representing new migrants from China, the Hua Yan Association claims a membership of more than 5,000 (Cheam 2012), who came from nearly every province in China and more than 80 per cent of whom have at least a college degree.

De-territorialization is also characteristic of another new Chinese association established by and for the new migrants. Just as the case of the Huayuan Association, the Singapore Tianfu Hometown Association, founded in 1999, represents the hometown in a more symbolic manner.

Although Tianfu is an alias of Sichuan Province, the association's membership is not confined to the traditional organizing principles of locality (namely, those born in Sichuan and who speak the local dialect), but also includes those who have studied or worked in the province or have business/ cultural contacts with Sichuan. The word "Hometown" was dropped from the name of the association in 2006 and the Tianfu Chamber of Commerce was established as an affiliated entity. Its members were born in every part of China and reportedly number some 2,000 (Pan 2006).

There are some commonalities between these associations and their homeland linkages. First, the associations were endorsed by the governments of both Singapore and China. Apart from attending functions organized by the Huayuan Association, Lee Hsien Loong in his 2010 National Day Speech praised the formation of new Chinese immigrant associations as "a good phenomenon" (Lee 2010). The advisors of the Tianfu Hometown Association include Singaporean parliament members and the vice governor of Sichuan Province. The state patronage, it must be mentioned, has been undertaken with different agendas: First, while the Singaporean government aims to assimilate new immigrants through institutional mechanisms such as the Huayuan Association, the Chinese central and local governments are more interested in establishing transnational social and business networks through new immigrants. Second, these associations interact with China as a nation-state, instead of focusing on traditional hometowns. Their activities do not have a specific local focus and are generally geared toward liaising with China as a nation-state, as evidenced by their activities such as cultural shows, a celebration of China's successful bid for the 2008 Olympics Games, and the launching of the space shuttle. These associations, perpetuating a historical legacy, also serve as an important institutional mechanism for the new generation of immigrant entrepreneurs in their social and business activities, working with a wide range of transnational counterparts in China and elsewhere (Liu 2005, 2008). In that sense, associations constitute a transnational social space linking China and Singapore. Third, these new immigrant associations have some limited connections with traditional associations. The connections are mainly manifested in the cultural arena, in such activities as joint ceremonies. The different organizing principles (the older associations tend to be based upon "hometown" or locality ties whereas newer ones are set up under the principle of "homeland" or national linkages) mean that they serve very different clienteles

and agendas, which might not overlap. With a view to responding to the government's call to better integrate newcomers into the social fabric of Singapore, the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, a consortium of more than 300 locality/ kinship associations, decided in January 2012 to set up a new Chinese cultural centre "to integrate newcomers to Singapore and showcase the local Chinese identity" (Chang 2012a). It is too early to speculate whether or not this integrative effort will pay off.

Concluding Remarks

The preceding discussions have led to some concluding observations about the changing patterns and characteristics of interactions between the Chinese in Singapore and the homeland.

First, the past half century has witnessed the transformation of homeland ties and the formation of a transnational social sphere linking the Chinese diaspora with compatriots in other countries (including China). The (temporary) weakening of the hometown connections in the 1950s was compensated for by the emergence of China as a collective homeland of the (older generation) Chinese in Singapore. Globalization and Singapore's economic regionalization drive, however, helped revive informal and institutional linkages with the *qiaoxiang* in the 1980s. This revival was strengthened by the massive inflow of new Chinese immigrants, whose sense of China as a nation-state and a re-emerging civilization is stronger than their hometown sentiment. The "objective facts" (social, economic and political transformations in China per se) and "subjective visions" (changing images constructed by the diaspora and their associations) shaped the characteristics of the linkages to the homeland. Furthermore, both the Singaporean and Chinese states have deliberately participated in the construction of the homeland imagery. While the Singaporean state encouraged the reconstruction of hometown linkages as an integral strategy to enhance its global business reaches and assimilationist agenda, the Chinese state engaged with new immigrants to Singapore and their associations as an important way of creating a nationalist revival in the transnational arena and strengthening Chinese social and business networks (Liu 2005, 2011a).

Second, this paper has demonstrated that fluid social spheres have been constantly constructed and reconstructed through immigrants' simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society. Institutional link-

ages serve as a key medium in the transnational social sphere connecting the Chinese in Singapore and China; these institutions are based upon various ties such as locality, language/ dialects, sub-ethnicity, and China as a site of collective imagination. They have provided a space of communications among co-ethnics, and economic and socio-political interactions with the state and market. As a transnational entity, they also serve as main venues through which ideas about the hometown/ -land and nation-state are created and disseminated, by way of newsletters, websites, and various cultural and ceremonial activities. As demonstrated in the introduction of this paper, by looking only at the rigid dichotomy between state and society, one is incapable of effectively analysing the emerging patterns of transnational forces such as new Chinese immigrants. We argue that a focus on the making and evolution of the transnational social sphere – and its evolving relationship with the state and market – provides an alternative tool beyond the dichotomy between state and society.

Third, on a broader level, this case study of the transnational social sphere also highlights the importance of revisiting the dominant knowledge structure of Asian Studies. Formulated and refined during an age of nation-building in Asia and the global Cold War confrontation, this structure prevents us from giving adequate attention to trans-state forces and cross-(sub)regional actors such as the institutional linkages described earlier. Operating on the periphery of state–society intersections and at the margins of regional alignments, transnational actors can play an important role in shaping domestic and regional transformations. Some recent studies have already demonstrated the crucial relevance of transnational elements in the shaping of modern Asian history and polity (Evans 2002; Hamashita 2008; Liu 2011b). We need to develop a variety of nuanced conceptual tools to confront these forces that defy conventional categorization. In this alternative conceptualization, the authority of the vertically constructed state apparatus and its capacity-building have to be placed within the broader orbit of horizontal transnational networks that operate on the intersecting spaces between the public sphere and private arenas.

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