

# Materialities and corridors: The Chinese diaspora and connected societies

Asian and Pacific Migration Journal  
2020, Vol. 29(2) 133–138  
© Scalabrini Migration Center 2020



Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/0117196820932839  
journals.sagepub.com/home/amj



**Cangbai Wang**  
University of Westminster

**Victor Zheng**  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

**Hao Gao**  
Tsinghua University

This special issue centers on the role of diasporic communities in the making of ‘connected societies’ in Asia and beyond through case studies of the Chinese diaspora. The idea of ‘connected societies’ was inspired by the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>1</sup> (BRI) proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Its core spirit is to enhance economic collaboration and cultural exchanges between Asia and Europe through resurrecting the legacies of the ancient Silk Road, both on land and across the sea, through which to create ‘a Community of Shared Future for Mankind’ (Xinhua, 2017). The BRI is by no means a universally accepted political and economic ideal. It has nevertheless opened up spaces for exploring a new global discourse of communication and development.

---

<sup>1</sup>‘One Belt and One Road’ refers to the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ and the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road.’ Xi Jinping announced the former in September 2013 during his visit to Kazakhstan. He declared the latter when visiting Indonesia a month later (Belt and Road official website, 2018).

**Corresponding author:**

Cangbai Wang, School of Humanities, University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street, London W1B 2HW, UK.

Email: c.wang6@westminster.ac.uk

The aim in this special issue is to contribute to this debate in two specific ways. The first is to highlight the cross-border activities of migrants beyond the constraint of national boundaries. Migration in Asia has been widely studied by scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including history, geography, sociology and anthropology, to name just a few. However, the existing literature on migration has been dominated so far by a 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Beck, 2007) wherein the activities of diaspora communities were studied from a framework taking the nation-state as the unit of analysis. Building upon the emergent global approach in Asian migration studies (see Tagliacozzo and Chang, 2011; Gabbacia and Hoerder, 2011), we move away from the issues of emigration, settlement and adaption that are often associated with the territorially bounded context of either the sending or receiving country of the migrants. Instead, we look into the dynamics of the transnational connectivities that migrants have constructed and maintained in the places and spaces between these two ends, as well as among multiple sites of movement.

The second aim is to bring to the fore the notion of 'diasporic heritage' as a core analytical concept of this collective project. We argue that Asian diasporic communities, notably the Chinese and Indian diasporas, have played a productive role in shaping the Asia of today. It is impossible to fully understand the formation of Asia without knowing the heritage of its diasporic communities and understanding how these communities have laid a material and non-material foundation for economic, social and political developments in Asia and beyond. One 'blind spot' in existing studies on migration, however, is an artificial divide between the movement of people and the movement of things. Most of the existing literature on migration has prioritized the movement of people over things, or simply ignored the existence of the material world through which migration takes place and the material consequences of transnational migration. To remedy this methodological pitfall, we follow a recent call to take a 'material turn' (Wang, 2016) in migration studies and look at Asian formations from the lens of 'diasporic heritage.' Here, diasporic heritage is defined broadly to refer to various forms of tangible and intangible legacies of diasporic activities, crystallized in materialities, ranging from architecture, food, medicine and letters home to language, music and even the Internet. The 'material turn' in migration studies reflects the overall shift in social scientific research that acknowledges that what is human is no longer separable from what is non-human, as both play a function in the production of social events (Latour, 1993). With this perspective in mind, we shift the focus away from migration per se to the intersection and interaction between people and things on the move in 'migrant worlds' (Basu and Coleman, 2008), referring to 'an often fragmented and fragile set of material and non-material assumptions and resources – [that] can itself be made mobile, seemingly

translated from one geographical location to another, even as it is transformed in the process' (313).

In order to integrate these two dimensions into one coherent analytical framework, we borrow the notion of 'corridor' coined by a historian of China, Philip Kuhn, in his 2008 publication, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*. In his study of the overseas Chinese across five centuries and on a global frame, Kuhn introduced the metaphorical language of 'corridor' to unveil the ways in which Chinese emigrants develop links based on native-place ties that stretch from hometowns to sojourner settlements and transgress imagined territorial boundaries. Overseas Chinese communities exist 'in a special zone that is neither fully part of the homeland nor fully part of the adopted land of the émigrés' (50). He further argued that overseas Chinese communities are 'social and economic organisms' (49) anchored in a time, space and niche that provide Chinese migrants with social organization and access to economic opportunities that are not available otherwise. The notion of 'corridor' was recently applied by archaeologist and heritage scholar Denis Byrne (2016) to the field of migration-related heritage studies. He used the concept of 'heritage corridor' when referring to a 'transnationally "stretched" or "distributed" built environment emerging from the cross-border flows of people, objects, ideas' (261) between China and Australia, with an emphasis on the role of remittance payments in the emergence of a transnational built environment of Chinese migration.

Building upon Kuhn (2008) and Byrne (2016), we propose the notion 'maritime corridors' as the framing device to examine the intersection of the movement of people and things that underpins the formation of 'connected societies' in Asia. By adding the word 'maritime', we want to make more explicit the significance of the sea in the making of diasporic heritages. In other words, our research is not so much about the study of harbors, islands and pirates as conducted by Bentley et al. (2007) and Gipouloux (2011), although these are relevant elements of our research; rather, we use the word 'maritime' in a metaphorical sense to stress the conceptual importance of the in-between, 'the excluded middle, the space we need to take back' (Byrne, 2016: 279). In other words, in our work, we endeavor to offer a conceptual re-visioning of Asia and a counter-balance to the prominence of existing land-focused analyses of diaspora. In short, the concept of 'maritime corridor' is proposed not as a hard-edged spatial entity. Rather, it is defined as a coalescence of multidirectional and multilayered flows of people, things, ideas and emotions embedded in time and space. By challenging the dichotomy between land and sea, our work highlights the role of diasporic communities in shaping both the history and future of Asia and the world.

Furthermore, we extend the definition of 'corridor' beyond economic terms. To us, 'maritime corridors' are a 'structure of feelings' (Williams, 1977: 132) and ways of living as much as they are ways of commercial

exchange. Unlike Kuhn, who focused on the economic activities of migrants, we use the plural form of corridor to signify the co-existing and intersecting dimensions of corridors involving different logics of operation and diverse testimonies, including economic (remittance, business opportunities and commercial networks), social (family ties, kinship associations and professional connections), emotional (memories, affect and aspirations), and spiritual (religious and cultural exchanges) ones. For analytical purposes and at the risk of oversimplification, we divide maritime corridors into the following categories: 'spiritual corridor,' 'emotional corridor,' 'social corridor' and 'economic corridor.' While each of the papers collected here focuses on the flow of people and things through one particular form of corridor, in their analysis each engages with the interaction of these different dimensions, although from different angles.

The editing of this special issue builds upon the success of an international conference, entitled 'Belt and Road Initiative: New Insights from the Perspective of Transnational Chinese Migration,' that was held at the University of Westminster in August 2018. Five of the papers collected here were originally presented at the London conference. We later invited two additional contributors to take part in the project. The special issue starts with an article by Christopher Cheng that focuses on the modern diaspora-funded schools that were established in the Pearl River Delta at various periods throughout the 20th century. His research brings to the fore the flows of investment, knowledge and emotions along the China-Australia 'heritage corridor' that made a significant yet undescribed contribution to the educational modernization of South China. Cangbai Wang and Jing Huang explore the 'return' of Indonesian Chinese women to 1950s Maoist China. They argue that it is necessary to go beyond the masculine/patriotic discourse on return that is dominant in China to conceptualize these Indonesian Chinese women as 'desiring subjects' whose decision-making was consciously related to their longing for an 'emancipated womanhood' in a transnational context. This gendered imagination was constructed and negotiated in an 'emotional corridor' between China and Indonesia that was sustained by the circulation of Chinese newspapers, magazines, films, operas, works of literature and correspondence. Kok Chung Ong traces the production of Lee Kum Kee's oyster sauce in Hong Kong and its expansion over three generations in Asia and worldwide. By examining different dynamics in the company's economic endeavor, particularly among overseas Chinese communities, Ong's work sheds new light on the formation of economic and social networks in Asia and beyond. Hong Liu and Huimei Zhang take Singapore as a case study to examine how the circulation of *qiaopi*, remittances-cum-letters sent home by Chinese immigrants over 150 years from the 1820s to the 1980s, was established and refined to serve as a key nexus of Chinese migration in the region. Their study suggests that the *qiaopi* system had both an institutional form and an emotional component, and that it covered two key dimensions of the lives

of diasporic Chinese during a critical period of socio-political transition in both China and Southeast Asia. This, in turn, contributed to the making of Singapore as a key migration corridor among the Chinese diaspora. The paper by Shibao Guo and Ling Lei brings our attention to a contemporary phenomenon in the context of academic mobility between China and other countries. It discusses how internationally educated Chinese academics have maintained active academic and social connections with their former colleagues and institutes in the host countries of their doctoral studies after they have returned to China. The experiences of the Chinese academics suggest the emergence of 'a virtual diaspora' with a transnational way of living and sense of belonging that transcends the physical boundaries of the nation-state. Victor Zheng and Hao Gao unpack the rise of Aw Boon Haw's family businesses in late 19th and early 20th century Asia. They pay particular attention to the production and circulation across borders of Chinese medicine brands, one of Aw's pillar business activities. Through this case study, they argue that family control and network capital played significant roles in facilitating the expansion and modernization of Chinese businesses in Asia. The special issue concludes with a thought-provoking commentary by Siu-lun Wong that discusses and compares the ways in which the Chinese and Indian diasporas handled members of their community who died overseas. It offers a fascinating examination of the cultural practice among the Chinese diaspora of sending the physical remains of deceased individuals back to their home village and unveils the crucial role that this emotionally-charged exercise played in maintaining material and spiritual linkages between China and the Chinese overseas.

All in all, the papers presented in this special issue examine, from different angles, the formation of Asian 'maritime corridors' experienced by members of the Chinese diaspora in the period from the late 19th century to the present day. The case studies presented here have been carefully selected to represent diverse temporal-spatial contexts. What brings them together is a shared interest in analyzing and conceptualizing social, cultural and economic dynamics of Asian transformations through the media of materialities, namely, school architecture (Cheng), newspapers, magazines, films and operas (Wang and Huang), cooking sauce (Ong), *qiaopi* (Liu and Zhang), Chinese medicine (Zheng and Gao), the Internet (Guo and Lei), and bodies/bones (Wong). Together, this special issue makes an original contribution to the study of diasporic heritages as precipitates of 'connected societies' in Asia and beyond.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this paper.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## References

- Basu P and Coleman S (2008) Introduction: Migrant worlds, material cultures. *Mobilities* 3(3): 313–330.
- Beck U (2007) The cosmopolitan condition: Why methodological nationalism fails. *Theory, Culture and Society* 24(7–8): 286–290.
- Belt and Road official website (2018) The “Belt and Road” initiative proposes the fifth anniversary of the multi-national ambassador to China to look forward to opportunities for cooperation. 22 January. Available at: [http://ydyf.china.com.cn/2018-01/22/content\\_50267855.htm](http://ydyf.china.com.cn/2018-01/22/content_50267855.htm)
- Bentley JH, Bridenthal R and Wigen K (2007) *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Byrne D (2016) The need for a transnational approach to the material heritage of migration: The China-Australia corridor. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 16(3): 261–285.
- Gabbacia D and Hoerder D (2011) *Connected Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gipouloux F (2011) *The Asian Mediterranean: Port Cities and Trading Networks in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, 13th-21st Century*. Translated by J Hall and D Martin. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Kuhn P (2008) *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Latour B (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tagliacozzo E and Chang W-C (2011) *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wang C (2016) Introduction: The “material turn” in migration studies. *Modern Languages Open*, pp. 1–11. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.88>
- Williams R (1977) *Marxism and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wimmer A and Glick Schiller N (2002) Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nationstate building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Networks* 2(4): 301–334.
- Xinhua (2017) Full text: Speech by Xi Jinping at the United Nations office at Geneva. 25 January. Available at: [http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2017-01/25/content\\_40175608.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2017-01/25/content_40175608.htm)