

Chapter 2

The Chinese Overseas: The End of Exceptionalism?

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The issue of exceptionalism and migration in China was raised in an earlier publication (Skeldon and Hugo 1999), but in an introductory chapter to a book on recent research on old and new migrations from China, the idea is worth pursuing as it retains its influence in the field. It needs to be emphasized, however, that the 'end of exceptionalism' remains a question rather than a statement as, from certain, mainly theoretical, points of view, exceptionalism may be over, but from other very practical points of view it can still be applied. Of course, with some justification, it can always be argued that simply because of its vast demographic size, at 1,324 million in mid-2006, China will always be 'exceptional': it is a world all to itself. Nevertheless, size alone does not necessarily dictate exceptionalism, and common patterns consequent upon the incorporation of China into a global economy appear to be emerging.

Every individual, every group, every society can be seen to be exceptional in one way or another. However, as social scientists, we have to simplify to make sense of what we see so we have clearly generalized to create categories such as 'the Chinese' or the 'Chinese Overseas'. Nevertheless, we can legitimately ask the question whether the Chinese form a very particular migrant group that is quite distinct from other migrant groups in both its patterns of movement and its types and forms of behaviour. A substantial literature argues clearly that, yes, indeed, the Chinese did and do form a distinct migrant group. The case is perhaps strongest for the historical patterns of migration from China. The vast majority of those who migrated were men, mostly

unskilled, and they migrated with the intention of returning to China: the sojourner. There was relatively little variation within the flows, dominated as they were by uneducated men who fell within certain age groups.

There is much of substance in the above argument, although we must be careful not to over-emphasize the exceptionalism of the Chinese migration in the nineteenth century. As students of migration from Britain at the same time discovered, much of the migration from Europe to North America during the so-called 'Great Migration' was of sojourners. Dudley Baines has gone so far as to suggest that it was possible that most emigrants expected ultimately to return (Baines 1991: 40). He estimated that perhaps one quarter of all emigrants from Europe to the Americas returned during the period 1815–1930. Between 1861 and 1913, just under 40 per cent of English and Welsh returned. Many were young men going overseas to seek their fortunes in ways reminiscent of most of the Chinese who migrated at the same time. Nevertheless, the movement of families, and in the later period the movement of young independent women, that were seen in European flows, were not seen in the Chinese flows.

Here, another of the themes of Chinese migration is worth highlighting. We talk of Chinese migration and migration from China, but, as we all know, it was nothing of the sort: it was migration from very particular and limited parts of that vast country. The migration was essentially from the three coastal provinces of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang, and from particular districts and even towns within these provinces. These areas were marginal to the Chinese state, marginal, too, in terms of resource base but, most importantly, those areas were the earliest and those most intensively affected by the seaborne expansion of European colonial powers. They were thus those areas that were early linked to a wider global system. Origin and destination flows were quite exceptional in terms of their sub-ethnicity and often occupation.

When we look at the migration from Europe to North America it, too, was characterized by very particular origin and destination flows. The characteristic of migration from Europe across the Atlantic was its diversity. A magisterial study of early British migration to the United States shows how the impact of four specific migration streams from Britain during the seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries is reflected in American life today: from the eastern counties of England to New England and primarily Massachusetts; from the southern counties of England to Virginia; from the northern Midlands of England to Delaware; and from highland Britain

towards the backcountry of the Americas (Fischer 1989). These migrations gave rise to four separate culture regions in the United States that are reflected in attitudes, mannerisms and dialects today.

Much more could be made of the various Chinese culture regions. However, perhaps the critical difference between European and Chinese migrations at that time was that Europeans were moving into areas that they controlled or came to dominate ethnically and politically; the Chinese were marginal geographically and politically in the Americas, so marginal that they could be 'excluded' altogether. So, although there are parallels between Chinese and European migrations in the nineteenth century, the differences between them were perhaps enough to sustain the idea that the migration of the Chinese was indeed exceptional at that time.

Chinese migrations between 1949, the year of the foundation of the People's Republic of China, and 1978 were also quite exceptional. These were very few, and the migrations that did take place were tightly controlled, reflecting in part the tight control of internal migration during much of this period. The great campaigns to move people to and from cities domestically represented some of the greatest examples of planned population movements ever seen. Migrations overseas were essentially temporary and were limited to other parts of the socialist world of which China saw itself a part: primarily to the former USSR, but also to outposts in Africa such as Tanzania.

However, it is to the migrations after 1978 that we must turn to see if the incorporation of China into the global community has seen the end of exceptionalism as far as its form and types of migration are concerned. The end of 1978 and the beginning of the economic reforms that have transformed China form a convenient dividing line between the 'old' and the 'new' migrations. The old migrations were much less varied in their composition than the new that are associated with China's increasing economic wealth and are an integral part of the increasing prosperity of large segments of its population. Just as the rapid economic growth of Europe in the nineteenth century became associated with a period of emigration across the Atlantic, so, too, is China's current development associated with its 'new' migration. While Chinese migration to North America, Australasia and even Europe is certainly not 'new', what is new is its increasing volume after many decades of little international movement. Also, unlike the nineteenth-century migrations that came from a politically and economically moribund state, today the movement is associated with a country that has the potential to rival, or even surpass, the economically developed parts of the world. At the

risk of oversimplifying, the principal reasons for the increasing migration from China today are associated with that state's growing participation in the global economy. The migration is essentially a function of globalization and it has come to be viewed with some concern by destination countries. In the following discussion, both immigration and emigration will be considered.

By 2000, China had become one of the world's leading trading nations in terms of imports and exports of both manufacturing goods and services (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2). Yet, in terms of its immigration, it was still clearly different from the leading North American or European states.

Table 2.1. Manufacturing trade and the relative importance of immigration, 2000

	Export		Import		Migrant stock (% of total population)
	%	rank	%	rank	
United States	12.3	1	18.9	1	12.4
Germany	8.7	2	7.5	2	9.0
Japan	7.7	3	5.7	3	1.3
France	4.7	4	4.6	5	10.6
United Kingdom	4.5	5	5.1	4	6.8
Canada	4.3	6	3.7	6	18.9
China	3.9	7	3.4	8	0.0
Italy	3.7	8	3.5	7	2.8
Netherlands	3.3	9	3.0	10	9.9
Hong Kong SAR	3.2	10	3.4	9	39.4
Belgium	2.9	11	2.7	12	8.6
Republic of Korea	2.7	12	2.4	13	1.3
Mexico	2.6	13	2.7	11	0.5
Taiwan Province of China	2.3	14	2.1	15	--
Singapore	2.2	15	--	--	33.6

Sources: Dicken (2003): 40; United Nations (2002): wall chart.

China could not be seen as a country of immigration and its pattern is much closer to those of Japan and South Korea in this respect. It is worth noting that the rapidly growing economies of Singapore and Hong Kong did exhibit high levels of immigration, although the figure for migrant stock for Hong Kong has to be treated with some care as the majority of those migrants are China-born.

Table 2.2. Relative importance of trade in services, 2000

	Export		Import	
	%	rank	%	rank
United States	12.3	1	13.8	1
United Kingdom	7.0	2	5.7	4
France	5.7	3	4.3	5
Germany	5.6	4	9.2	2
Japan	4.8	5	8.1	3
Italy	4.0	6	3.9	6
Spain	3.7	7	2.1	12
Netherlands	3.6	8	3.6	7
Hong Kong SAR	2.9	9	1.8	15
Belgium and Luxembourg	2.9	10	2.7	9
Canada	2.6	11	2.9	8
China	2.1	12	2.5	10
Austria	2.1	13	2.0	13
Republic of Korea	2.0	14	2.3	11
Singapore	1.9	15	--	--

Source: Dicken (2003): 44.

The focus of this chapter, however, will be on the migrations from, rather than to, China. After three decades of very little outmigration (excluding sporadic waves of movement to Hong Kong), China again became a major player in global patterns of migration after 1978. This migration consists not just of workers going overseas on short-term contracts but also of settlers and students. Looking first at workers, which in some way is a continuity with earlier circular migrations of male contract labourers from China, Chinese sources estimate that, since opening the economy from 1979, more than 2.45 million workers have been employed overseas. The vast majority of these were employed either on engineering and construction projects or on government-to-government projects of international labour co-operation. In November 2003, some 520,000 Chinese workers were estimated to be overseas, up from 485,000 a year previously. During the first 11 months of 2003, 180,000 workers had been sent overseas (Ma 2004). The volume of remittances returned to China from the Chinese Overseas

was perhaps around US\$1 billion per annum throughout the 1990s, which was small compared with other countries such as India. This amount was tiny compared with the around US\$40 billion per annum that flowed into China as foreign direct investment, about half of which came from the Chinese Overseas (figures cited in Newland 2004). Such figures do need to be taken with some degree of caution as significant proportions would have been from groups not normally associated with the Chinese Overseas such as those in Hong Kong or Taiwan. Also, difficulties arise with capital exiting China to cities such as Hong Kong and re-entering China as foreign direct investment.

China is not quite in the same league as the Philippines, which had 868,000 workers sent overseas during 2003, from a population of 81.4 million and an annual remittance income of US\$7.6 billion. Nevertheless, China by the twenty-first century was emerging as a major supplier of labour. Like the Philippines, substantial numbers of Chinese workers are entering the merchant marine of several countries where currently some 20,000 are employed. Chinese labour contracts extend to 180 countries and territories around the world.

Table 2.3. Fertility decline, China and selected other areas, 1965–2000

	1965–70	1970–75	1975–80	1980–85	1985–90	1990–95	1995–2000
China	6.06	4.86	3.32	2.55	2.46	1.92	1.80
Hong Kong	4.02	2.89	2.32	1.80	1.31	1.22	1.10
Singapore	3.46	2.62	1.87	1.69	1.71	1.76	1.57
Japan	2.0	2.07	1.81	1.76	1.66	1.49	1.39
Korea	4.71	4.28	2.92	2.23	1.60	1.70	1.51
United States	2.55	2.02	1.79	1.83	1.92	2.05	2.05
Australia	2.87	2.54	2.09	1.93	1.87	1.87	1.77
Canada	2.51	1.97	1.74	1.63	1.62	1.70	1.56
Denmark	2.25	1.97	1.68	1.43	1.54	1.75	1.75
United Kingdom	2.52	2.07	1.72	1.80	1.81	1.78	1.70

Source: United Nations (2003).

Will this labour migration continue to increase? Over the short term it is likely to increase, but it need not necessarily increase indefinitely and dominate global labour markets. The experience of a near neighbour, South Korea, is instructive, with its sharp rise from 1974 to 1982 and then sharp decline to the mid-1990s. However, China need not necessarily follow the

experience of South Korea, although common and significant regional and global demographic trends underlie the patterns of migration (see Table 2.3).

The sharp declines in childbearing across the region are notable with, in the case of China, a decline from over six children per woman in the second half of the 1960s to less than two by the end of the 1990s. China today has a level of fertility reached by women in Japan from the mid-1970s. Certainly, Japan's fertility decline was much longer and more gradual than that of China, but there may be lessons to be drawn as far as migration is concerned and it is worth briefly considering the Japanese case.

Japan is presently facing a rapidly ageing society. Its labour force is projected to decline continuously from 87.2 million in 1995 to 57.1 million in 2050 (United Nations 2001: 53), and pressures for immigration have increased. This discussion should not imply that immigration can in any way replace the cohorts 'lost' to fertility decline; the numbers of immigrants required would be just too large to be socially or politically possible, but migrants can fill critical shortages in particular sectors of the economy. In Brazil and Peru, Japan has turned to the *nikkeijin*, people of Japanese descent – effectively, the Japanese overseas – as a source of immigrant labour. The experience of the *nikkeijin* has been an interesting one for the Japanese. In 1999, some 224,299 Japanese of Brazilian descent were living in Japan, with increasing signs that many of them did not intend to return to Brazil (de Carvalho 2003). They look Japanese, but culturally they are Brazilian. Important differences also exist between Peruvian and Brazilian Japanese. Their presence is causing the Japanese to question what is 'Japaneseness' and even their own identity, just as the *nikkeijin*, too, question their own identity as overseas ethnic Japanese.

While there is no law of economic development to say that China will follow the same path as that of Japan, the trend in fertility in China will generate not too dissimilar age pyramids from Japan over the next decades (see Figure 2.1).

If China is to continue its double-digit economic growth into the near future and emerge as the world's second largest economy, as some predict, what will be the impact for regional and global labour markets? It is interesting to speculate whether the current concern with emigration from China will be but a temporary issue and the long-term issue will be one of immigration. The massive rural-to-urban migration in China and the rapid capital accumulation that we see in the present economy of China

may give rise to a phase of much lower capital accumulation as more and more domestic workers enter higher-wage, higher-productivity sectors.

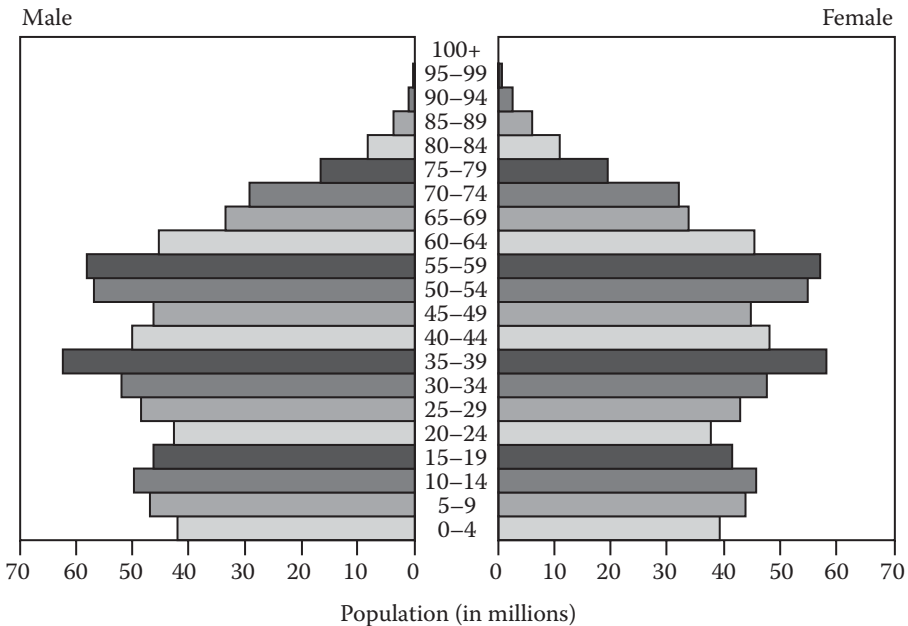


Figure 2.1. Population Pyramid Summary for China, 2025

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base

Of course, there is no means of knowing whether China in the future will follow such a path but it may be that we should think the unthinkable and foresee a time when China will need to import labour. Even now, China is importing labour in certain high-skill sectors from overseas. At present, perhaps some 250,000 ‘foreign experts’, most in managerial positions, are in China, but how many of these are ethnic Chinese is not known. However, already up to two million job vacancies were reported in the south-east coastal region in 2004 (*Economist*, 9–15 October 2004) and labour shortages spread north into the Yangtze River and the north coastal region in 2005 (Wang and Gao 2005). Although these shortages must reflect bottlenecks in the domestic labour market for certain types of less-skilled labour, recent evidence does suggest that these shortages may be structural rather than cyclical. As prosperity has spread inland, migrants who might have travelled to the coast go only as far as local or regional towns to look for work. The era of cheap labour in China may be drawing to a close (*International Herald Tribune*, 3 March 2006). To which

sources of supply will China turn for labour? Will China recruit workers mainly from among the Chinese communities overseas? However, if ethnic Chinese are recruited for work in China, like the Japanese experience with the ethnic Japanese, they will not be Chinese in the sense of Chinese from China – they will be ethnic Chinese but Americans, Canadians, Australians or other nationalities and cultures.

It is also necessary to look at other types of migrants from China, and particularly settlers and students. The numbers of China-born in the United States, Canada and Australia have increased dramatically since the 1970s. Between 1980 and 2000, the 1China-born (not the number of ethnic Chinese as US-born Chinese are excluded) increased from 286,120 to 1,518,652 and the rate of increase accelerated from one decade to the other (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4. Increase in China-born in selected destinations, various years

	Foreign-born (total)	China-born	Taiwan-born	Hong Kong- born
<i>United States</i>				
2000	31,107,889	1,518,652	326,215	203,580
1990	19,767,316	529,837	244,102	147,131
1980	14,079,906	286,120	75,353	80,380
1970	9,619,302	172,132		
<i>Canada</i>				
2001	5,647,125	345,520	70,615	240,045
1996	5,137,785	238,485	52,480	249,175
1991	4,566,300	168,355	19,725	163,400
<i>Australia</i>				
2001	4,105,688	142,781	22,418	67,124
1996	3,908,173	111,009	19,547	68,430
1991	3,754,841	78,835	13,025	58,955

Sources: US Census Bureau, Washington DC; Statistics Canada, Ottawa; Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

The China-born in the United States between 1990 and 2000 increased by 186.6 per cent compared with an overall increase among the foreign-born of 57.4 per cent and just 13.2 per cent for the population as a whole. These are stock figures. Data on the flows of recent migrants into the main settler countries reveal that China has emerged as a major source area for permanent immigrants. In fact, China is the major source of immigrants

to Canada and is the third most important source of immigrants to the United States, a long way after Mexico and quite a bit behind India. China is also the third most important source of immigrants to Australia, after New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Chinese, too, have been moving to Europe in increasing numbers.

The reasons for the increasing flows of Chinese to the countries of the developed world lie mainly in the global shifts in the international migration system. The declining fertility of the traditional source areas of migration to North America in Europe that caused the latter areas themselves to shift from net-emigration to net-immigration; the continuing demand for migrants in North America; the increasing development of East Asia that gave greater numbers of Asians the prosperity and education to allow them to migrate; and the dismantling of discriminatory immigration policies in the main settler societies as more liberal regimes came to the fore after 1945, have all contributed to the transformation of the global migration system in which the Chinese have played, and are playing, a major role.

These flows of settlers are entering the developed countries as potential citizens. Today, unlike the old Chinese migrants of the nineteenth century, they are not excluded as marginal groups but are part of multicultural societies. To look at them as Chinese Overseas in a way seems strange as the various European migrant groups to these countries today are not considered as British overseas, or Danes overseas. These latter may be expatriates but they are all immigrants to Canada, Australia or the United States. Some will return, as they always did, but others will stay and integrate in one way or another. Some will marry someone they met overseas; others will have children at school and not wish to take them out and it is surely the children who will be of critical importance in any future decision to return or to integrate. The children grow up speaking English, without a strong command of the Chinese written language, playing baseball, cricket or ice hockey. Are they Chinese, or are they Americans, Australians or Canadians, to say nothing of the various European countries to which increasing numbers of Chinese are migrating? The simple answer is that they are both but, critically, increasing numbers will chose to remain in their adoptive societies. They are not sojourners.

Estimates of the number of Chinese in Europe around the year 2000 vary enormously, owing to the importance of irregular migration, from a low of 200,000 to 1 million or more, but all appear to agree on the recency and the rapidity of the migration. For example, numbers of Chinese residents more

than doubled in Italy and increased more than sixfold in Spain over the last decade of the twentieth century. At the end of 2002, the 62,314 Chinese in Italy represented the fifth most important foreign national group in that country (ISMU 2004: 212). This migration appears to be less skilled than the movements to Australasia and North America, with large numbers going into low-order services and trading and manufacturing. Large numbers of Chinese are also moving into Japan, the Russian Far East and in smaller numbers to other destinations as widely dispersed as the islands of the Pacific and countries in Latin America, but all influenced by the global distribution of the Chinese as established by previous migrations.

Settlers are only one part of the legal flow to settler societies; there are also skilled migrants: to take just one example, those who gain access to the United States through the H1-B visa category for skilled migrants. Most of these go into the IT sector. In 2001, for example, some 384,191 were admitted into the United States under this category, 17,192 from China, or some 5 per cent of the total, but this figure is small compared with the number from India, which accounted for fully 27 per cent. In 2001–2002, there were some 63,211 Chinese students in American degree-granting institutions. Increasingly, Australia, Canada and the United States are using non-settler or non-immigrant channels as pathways towards later immigration as students, and other categories of skilled migrants, are offered the opportunity for permanent settlement after being trained or having obtained experience in destination economies.

The point is that the Chinese Overseas conceived of as a diaspora is deceptive (see also Skeldon 2003). It is a highly heterogeneous phenomenon and essentializing it into a transnational community of Chinese Overseas is not doing justice to the real situation. Rather than conceptualizing the migration from China as a unique diaspora, it can be understood more clearly with reference to other migrant groups. This statement certainly does not mean to imply that all migrant groups are the same – far from it – but that differences within the Chinese flows can be as great as any between Chinese and non-Chinese migrant groups. The cultural ‘Chineseness’ has perhaps been overemphasized at the expense of migrant situation.

One of the Chinese characteristics of the migration out of Hong Kong and Taiwan that has been identified is the trans-Pacific circulation of heads of family, sometimes including spouse as well, that created the ‘astronaut’ and ‘parachute kids’ syndromes (Skeldon 1994). This circulation saw the emergence of bi-local, transnational families with women and children

in North America and Australasia and the male breadwinner back in Asia. However, by the early twenty first century, the Hong Kong-born populations of both Canada and Australia appeared to have declined between 1996 and 2001 (see Table 2.4, p. 43). Many of those who left Hong Kong for those countries before the 1997 handover may have returned. The case for a transnational community based upon continuous systems of human circulation was perhaps overstated. A more measured interpretation suggests that, after an initial period of flux, with intense circulation between origins and destinations, the system stabilizes, with some migrants returning but others making a longer-term commitment to destination societies. More integration and assimilation have been going on than was perhaps first assumed.

The critical point of this discussion is the heterogeneity of the flows of migration from China: a heterogeneity in type and in geographical origin within China. There are unskilled workers, skilled workers, settlers, circulators and students. The migrants to the mid-1990s came from the three traditional coastal provinces of origin, but also from the largest urban areas of Beijing and Shanghai and other large cities in the north, as well as from southern coastal cities. Recent data suggest, however, that migration from Beijing and Shanghai may have slowed in the last five years of the twentieth century (Liang and Morooka 2004). This shift is due perhaps to the booming urban economies, suggesting a 'migration turnaround' from these provinces in a telescoped variant of what has been seen at the national levels for South Korea and other boom economies in East and South-east Asia (Abella 1994). However, the difficulty of finding adequate data on the origins of migrants from China must be emphasized. Most countries simply classify migrants as 'from China' irrespective of their origins in that vast country. Apart from these differences in types and origins of migrants from China there are of course the irregular flows, still primarily from Fujian, but also from Zhejiang, the provinces of the North East, and other parts of China and increasingly using the land route to Europe as well as various air routes. This heterogeneity is typical of migrant flows in general, not just of the Chinese.

China is presently going through one of the most dramatic phases of economic development in its history and one that is associated with a rapid transition to low fertility. A vibrant economy now exists to which migrants and students can return. The diaspora is playing a significant role in this development, with millions of dollars being invested through Overseas

Chinese business networks every year. Some 190,000 of the estimated 440,000 'foreign experts' in China in 2001 were from Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan, and many of the others are likely to have come from Singapore, and North American and Australasian Chinese communities. Nevertheless, the idea of a homogeneous Chinese diaspora oriented to the homeland is too much of a simplification. The Chinese diaspora is a highly segmented entity whose various members are as likely to do business with non-Chinese as they are to be linked with China. In terms of migration, however, we can expect increasing numbers of Chinese to return to China or to circulate within transnational networks of the highly skilled and of business in a variant of past sojourner strategies. It may be significant that the migration from Hong Kong has reversed and that from Taiwan stabilized. China, too, or at least parts of that vast country, may progress through a migration transition from emigration to immigration. As China develops economically and its population ages, perhaps the greatest consequence for migration and the West will be its contribution to increasing competition for labour within the global system as it, too, needs to seek out workers for its economy. Whatever the outcome, China is now clearly a major participant in the global migration system and has moved away from its exceptional and marginal phase of international migration. Its patterns of migration are perfectly understandable within a global framework and with reference to other regional and global flows. While some aspects of the migrations in, from and to China will obviously remain unique to that vast country, they are now only to be understood with reference to the wider context. The driving forces, the resultant patterns and the consequences of the migrations are today primarily a function of broader and global processes. China's phase of exceptionalism in its patterns of migration, assuming that it ever existed, is over.

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