Introduction: Framing Chinese Migration

Consider for a moment three texts, each aimed at an audience of Chinese travelers, all of whom were potential migrants. The first text, a book for merchants published in 1570, describes routes of transportation and commerce throughout the Ming empire (1368–1644). One of these routes extended beyond the empire, along a river from southern China into northern Vietnam. For this route, the author is careful to point out the threat posed by bandits at two places and dangerous rapids at another. A very different type of text is an almanac produced in 1886 by a publishing house in the southern Chinese port city of Guangzhou (Canton). Inside, one finds a section entitled "Five Important Tips for First Trips Overseas." The final tip begins, "Even if you are in straightened circumstances, if someone who is neither wealthy nor a trusted relative invites you to go abroad, you should not follow him abroad to seek a living." The author goes on to emphasize that trust and caution are of fundamental importance for those leaving home. The third text is the website, accessed in 2015, of CE Tour, a Chinese travel agency based in the United States. Included in the company's tips for travelers is this advice: "If you encounter a stranger who comes over and greets you, make every effort to get away."[1]

All three texts were innovative for their time. The 1570 text is the earliest extant Chinese route book for merchants, the 1886 edition of this publisher's annually produced almanac was the first to include advice for overseas travelers, and the website was a new means of catering to growing numbers of Chinese tourists who wished to travel without the constraints of a guided tour. Each of these texts warns its readers of the dangers of traveling away from home. At the same time, the authors of these texts assumed a significantly large audience of readers who were willing to travel great distances from home. Fundamentally, the fact that

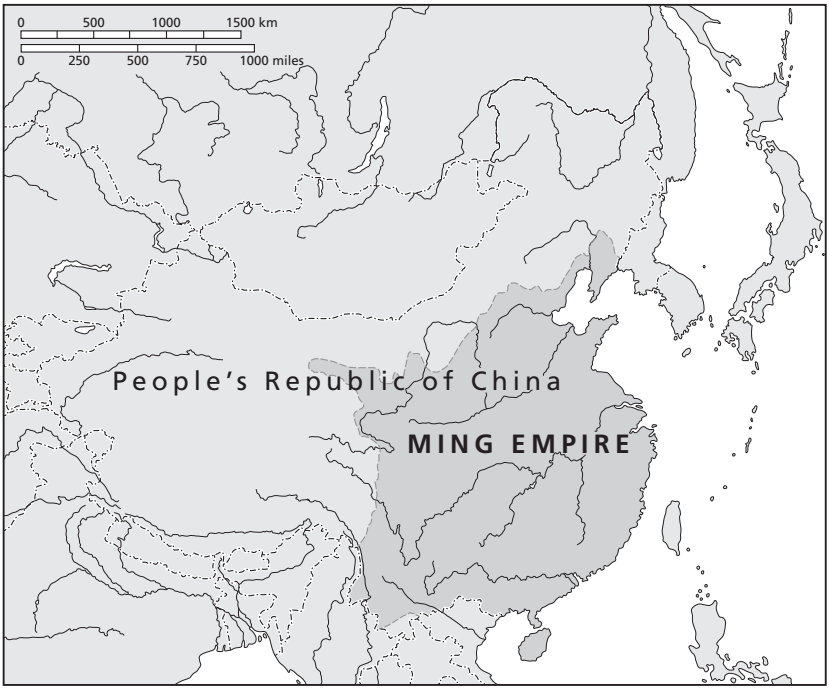
[1] Huang Bian, *Tianxia shuilu lucheng* (Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1992), 217–218; *Danguitang Suban dazi tongshu* (1886), held at Tōyō bunko, Tokyo; www.cetour.com/Services/2011/09/4461.html, accessed August 29, 2015.

the authors of these texts gambled on producing these texts to sell either the books themselves or their own travel services indicates that, from the sixteenth century up to the present century, the Chinese inhabited a world of increasing mobility.

To be sure, the context of travel was radically different in each of these years. By 1570, Chinese merchants, traveling in boats propelled by human strength and wind, in caravans of mules or camels, or on foot, created burgeoning "trade diasporas," or networks of merchants linking their home communities to places within the Chinese empire and beyond its borders in Inner Asia and maritime Southeast Asia. In 1886, Chinese merchants and laborers traveled as often by steamship as by sail to a far greater range of destinations, reaching as far as the Americas. In the early twenty-first century, newly wealthy, globe-trotting Chinese tourists jetted to destinations both old and new.

Nevertheless, all of the travelers who read these texts, or heard information from others who had read the texts, were potential migrants, the subject of the text that you are now reading. More than that, the readers of these three texts were participants in the movement of Han Chinese people within and beyond China proper, to the frontiers of an expanding empire and beyond the empire's borders. I use the term "China proper" to refer to an area that during the sixteenth century had a population primarily consisting of Han Chinese, the ethnic majority in today's People's Republic of China (PRC). This area roughly corresponds to the southeastern quadrant of the PRC, and largely overlapped with the borders of the Ming empire, aside from the empire's southwestern frontier, where Han Chinese did not constitute a majority of the population in 1570 (Map I.1). During the period from the sixteenth century to the present century, with some exceptions, leaving home become increasingly common; at the very least, traces of this practice become easier to find in such sources as the route book and almanac. The outward movement of Han Chinese people from China proper beginning in the sixteenth century was closely related to the territorial expansion of China-based regimes and to the emergence of significant Chinese communities beyond the borders of China, initially primarily in Southeast Asia but today having a global reach. In other words, the increasing global circulation of Chinese people was one of the most important developments of the past five centuries.

This book is a global history of Chinese diasporas, that is, sustained trajectories of temporary and permanent migration from specific emigrant communities within China to specific destinations both within and outside of China at specific historical moments that led to the emergence of Chinese diasporic communities in those destinations. As we shall see, during the five centuries from the sixteenth century, when the route



Map I.1 Ming empire and PRC

book was produced, through the period of mass migration, when the almanac was published, to the new millennium, when digital media became prevalent, sustained trajectories resulted more from decisions of individual migrants and their families than from state initiatives.

Conceptualizing Chinese Migration

The phenomenon that is the subject of this book has received increased attention in recent decades, in part because, at first glance, the subject intuitively seems to be a coherent unit of study and a self-evidently important one. Scholars in disciplines ranging from sociology to literary studies, and those interested in places both within China and around the world, have developed courses on this topic. I am one example of a scholar whose initial focus was firmly set on China, but, through studying migration within China, has developed an interest in Chinese communities abroad. Likewise, academic presses, such as Cambridge University

Press, have commissioned general histories of this topic. Despite the growing interest in it, however, this topic has remained frustratingly difficult to characterize precisely. Even naming the topic can be contentious. Scholars with different disciplinary training and from different regional, intellectual, and personal perspectives have conceptualized their endeavors as the study of, among other alternatives, diaspora, overseas Chinese, ethnic communities, transnational networks, the Sinophone world, or simply migration, whether temporary sojourning or permanent settlement. Each of these frameworks offers particular insights but also has its limitations. Whichever one you ultimately decide is the most appropriate, it is important to have an understanding of the various ways in which scholars have approached the subject, and of how these approaches are related to names by which scholars have delineated their fields of study. One of the main arguments of this book will be that an appropriate framework must include both internal and external migration, that is, the movement of Chinese people both within and beyond the borders of the Chinese state.

The Chinese Diaspora

One concept commonly used to describe the set of people including both Chinese who have moved beyond the borders of the Chinese state and their descendants is "diaspora." In English-language scholarship, this term initially referred to the Jewish diaspora, but its use has gradually expanded as a handy term to conceive of the African diaspora, various "trade diasporas," such as the Armenians in the overland Eurasian trade, and various "labor diasporas," such as Italians in North and South America. As we shall see, Chinese traders in Southeast Asia in the early modern era, roughly 1500 to 1740, seemed to fit nicely the concept of a trade diaspora. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the Chinese built railroads in the Americas and worked in mines in Southeast Asia, they seemed to fit the model of a labor diaspora. Other scholars have applied the term "diaspora" more broadly, conceiving of all Chinese migrants abroad and their descendants as members of a single Chinese diaspora. Although far removed from its previous meaning of a people forced from their homeland and unable to return, the concept of "diaspora" has proved a conveniently concise term for referring to Chinese beyond the borders of the Chinese state.[2]

[2] Philip D. Curtain, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), chapter 9; Cohen, "Diasporas, the Nation-State, and Globalisation," 129.

Many, if not most, scholars who study Chinese migrants and their descendants have expressed dissatisfaction with the concept of the Chinese diaspora. They identify at least three problems. First, because it has most commonly been applied to the Jewish experience, the term "diaspora" conveys an image of its members as victims expelled from, and unable to return to, their homeland. To be sure, many scholars point to socioeconomic conditions that forced Chinese to migrate, but few scholars would suggest that all Chinese who have migrated since the sixteenth century were expelled from their homeland. Second, loose application of the term "Chinese diaspora" risks slipping into conceiving of the unit of study as a monolithic entity. The term does not adequately convey the great diversity of experiences of people who are clumped together under this label. More specifically, it obscures the fact that the spread of Chinese people throughout many parts of the world resulted from specific trajectories of migration from specific places in China to specific destinations during specific periods in history. Third, the use of "Chinese diaspora" tends to essentialize the Chineseness of the people studied, people who may just as likely have identified themselves primarily as Thai, Australian, or Cuban, for example. The term may be easily taken as implying essential, unwavering roots in a Chinese homeland. Successive Chinese governments since the late nineteenth century have embraced the notion of essential ties between the Chinese nation and people of Chinese descent residing elsewhere, a perspective that often finds its way into Chinese-language scholarship. Conversely, from the perspective of societies where Chinese migrants and their descendants reside outside China, "diaspora" signals a lack of belonging in these societies, a perpetual foreignness. Such images in turn often feed into chauvinist politics in these societies that question the loyalty of ethnic Chinese in their societies, suspicions that ethnic Chinese are ultimately loyal to China, and not, for instance, to Thailand, Australia, or Cuba. At the very least, such an approach risks missing the ways in which subjects studied were part of Thai, Australian, and Cuban histories, as well as of Chinese history.[3]

[3] Ronald Skeldon, "The Chinese Diaspora or the Migration of Chinese Peoples?" in Laurence J. C. Ma and Carolyn Cartier, eds., *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 5, 52, 59, 631; Shih, "Against Diaspora," 26, 30; Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong, "Introduction: Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternative Modernity," in Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (Routledge, 1997), 12; Donald M. Nonini, *"Getting By": Class and State Formation among Chinese in Malaysia* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 5–6; Wang Gungwu, "A Single Chinese Diaspora?"; McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks*, 12; Chan, "Case for Diaspora," 108; Heather Sutherland, "A Sino-Indonesian Commodity Chain: The Trade in Tortoiseshell in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in Eric

Overseas Chinese/Chinese Overseas

Among several alternative concepts to "Chinese diaspora," the one used most often is "overseas Chinese." One drawback of this concept is that it implicitly emphasizes, some would say overemphasizes, the centrality of China in discussing people, especially the descendants of migrants, who may identify more closely with the society in which they settled or even were born and bred. Related to this, the term could imply ethnic affiliation with or national loyalty to the Chinese nation. During the Cold War (1945–1991), when affinity with the PRC could be politically dangerous in nations outside the Communist Bloc, some scholars opted for the term "Chinese overseas," hoping that by reversing the order of the two words and thereby avoiding association with the Chinese term *huaqiao* (conventionally translated as "overseas Chinese"), this new term could maintain a focus on people of Chinese ethnicity while emphasizing their placement, and belonging, overseas, beyond the Chinese nation. In fact, the preeminent English-language journal in the field today is entitled the *Journal of Chinese Overseas*.[4]

Either term, whether overseas Chinese or Chinese overseas, aims to cover Chinese migrants and their descendants who live beyond the borders of the Chinese state. By emphasizing overseas migration, this concept focuses attention on Chinese migrants who literally traveled overseas, the classic subjects of study: migrants mainly from the two southeastern coastal provinces of China – Fujian and Guangdong – who traveled by ship to destinations primarily in Southeast Asia, Australasia, and the Americas. This emphasis on maritime migration from Fujian and Guangdong leaves one with the mistaken impression that residents of other Chinese provinces rarely left home. It also elides overland trajectories of emigration from China, for example, a centuries-long trajectory from southwestern China into mainland Southeast Asia: modern-day Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. Moreover, in the past century, overland migration from China, often from northern Chinese provinces, into Russia and beyond to Central and Western Europe has become increasingly important.

The notion of Chinese overseas, like the concept of a monolithic "Chinese diaspora," poses particular problems for the present study in that, by focusing attention on Chinese migrants and their descendants dwelling beyond the borders of the Chinese state, it implies a

Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang, eds., *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia* (Duke, 2011), 173.

[4] Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland*, 5; Teoh, *Schooling Diaspora*, 5; Wang Gungwu, "A Single Chinese Diaspora?", 17.

fundamental distinction between internal and external migration, that is, migration within the borders of the Chinese state and migration abroad. Whereas this distinction may at one time have been taken for granted, scholarship produced in the last two decades has questioned the stark analytical divide between internal and external Chinese migration. Early twenty-first-century studies pointed both to parallels and to institutional and regional connections between internal and external migration. The historians Philip Kuhn and Adam McKeown asserted that external Chinese migration should be conceived of as a subset, or one "stream," of a much broader phenomenon of Chinese migration that included the formation of trade diasporas within China, the movement of agricultural settlers within China, migration to cities, or urbanization, and migration across China's expanding frontiers. Moreover, they pointed to structural similarities, such as the practice of exporting male labor to sustain families back home, or the role of kinship, native-place, and voluntary organizations in shaping migrant trajectories. Migration was also linked in different ways in particular locales. Thus the political scientist Frank Pieke noted that, in the 1990s, migrants from the Wenzhou area of Zhejiang province targeted particular destinations in Europe, such as Prato, in Italy, and particular destinations in China, such as "Zhejiang Village," in Beijing. Likewise, the anthropologist Julie Chu observed during her fieldwork in 2001 that some suburban communities outside Fuzhou, Fujian, both received a large number of migrants, mostly from Sichuan, and exported a large number of migrants, mostly to the United States.[5]

Despite parallels and connections between internal and external migration, a firm analytical divide between the two may still seem intuitively valid. After all, we might expect that a migrant within China would reside in a familiar society under the protection of a familiar, or at least not hostile, state. In contrast, outside China, Chinese migrants often found themselves subjected to restrictions, expulsion, and violence in destinations. Nevertheless, it is not accurate to suppose that Han Chinese migrants within China were always welcome in a way that they were not welcomed outside China. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), when Manchu emperors sat on the throne in Beijing, the state often restricted Han Chinese migration to destinations along the northern frontiers, seeking to protect indigenous populations from what Manchu emperors perceived to be the corrosive effects of Chinese culture and commerce. Under the PRC (1949–present), in an effort to limit urban populations,

[5] Kuhn, *Chinese among Others*, 4, 16–17; McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks*, 65; Frank N. Pieke, "Introduction: Chinese and European Perspectives on Migration," in Frank N. Pieke and Hein Mallee, eds., *Internal and International Migration: Chinese Perspectives*. (Curzon, 1999), 2–3.

the state enacted prohibitive measures designed to discourage rural Chinese migrants from living and working in cities indefinitely. In Beijing, for example, local authorities on occasion forcibly expelled migrants from their makeshift urban communities.

In a study spanning five centuries leading up to the present day, a stark analytical contrast between internal and external migration is also difficult to maintain because the borders of the Chinese state changed dramatically over this period. At least two important migrant trajectories of what we might classify as internal migration were literally overseas, from the province of Shandong to Manchuria (Northeast China), and from the southeastern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong to Taiwan. As the latter case exemplifies, Han Chinese migration often spurred, facilitated, or consolidated the territorial expansion of Beijing-based states since the sixteenth century. Thus, rather than simply a history of Chinese migration overseas, this book is a study of Han Chinese migration beyond China proper. This process became evident, in traces that it has left in such texts as the route book, the almanac, and the travel agency website, from the sixteenth century.

Other Alternatives

One alternative concept that encapsulates much of what will be covered in this book is simply, "Chinese migration." This usefully broad category includes any conceivable migrant trajectory, whether internal or external, overseas or overland. If interpreted broadly, the term "migration" can encapsulate both sojourners, migrants who intended to return home even after seeking a livelihood away from home for years, and settlers, migrants who intended to take up permanent residence in new destinations. This term is less useful, however, in describing descendants of migrants. It makes little sense to describe the life of a person of Chinese descent who has spent her entire life in Malaysia, for example, primarily in terms of "migration." Such an approach, like "diaspora" and "overseas Chinese," highlights links to China and downplays connections to the society in which such people were born and raised, societies to which they fully belong, or at least rightfully belong.

In fact, a demand for belonging, to ensure the rights of ethnic Chinese born and raised in countries other than China, gave rise, from the 1960s and 1970s, to ethnic studies in various places, such as Chinese- or Asian American studies in the United States, and to studies of "Chinese overseas" in Southeast Asia. In these places, scholars, many of them of Chinese descent, sought to write Chinese migrants and their descendants into national histories of host societies. Thus, the field of study that is to a

large extent the subject of this book emerged in the 1960s and flourished in subsequent decades. Born out of demands for ethnic and racial equality in these countries, in a context in which ethnic Chinese were excluded, forcefully assimilated, denied citizenship, or violently attacked in societies from Southeast Asia, to Australasia, to the Americas, to Europe, most of the focus of resulting scholarship was firmly centered on the host societies. Such studies often highlighted adaptation, citizenship, and identity politics, usually countering earlier, nativist assertions of Chinese unwillingness or inability to assimilate to host societies. In such studies, the focus on life in the host society has drawn attention to the vast range of experiences of Chinese migrants and their descendants, and to phenomena such as intermarriage, political engagement, and cultural hybridity, phenomena often elided in studies that assume social, cultural, political, and economic homogeneity within "the Chinese diaspora" or among "the overseas Chinese."[6]

From the late 1990s, inspired by a transnational turn in historical scholarship, many new studies of Chinese migrants and their descendants have embraced transnational approaches to their subjects. Combining research employing both Chinese-language sources and sources in the national or colonial language commonly used in the destination abroad, and conducting research both in emigrant communities in China and in immigrant communities abroad, such studies have drawn attention to connections between emigrant communities in China and host societies abroad. This approach has given new life to the concept of "diaspora," as a useful tool for conceptualizing the subject of transnational networks and linkages. The framing of this book is closer to a global history of Chinese migration than it is to an ethnic history of the Chinese in communities outside China. As a historian of Qing China who has written about internal Chinese migration, and as a scholar inspired by studies of Chinese communities in Japan, Southeast Asia, Australasia, Europe, and the Americas, I tend to find parallels and connections between internal and external migration, even while noting the variety of institutions, practices, and experiences. Thus, this book is designed to complement studies of places of settlement that address these issues. Nevertheless, one must be wary of the ways in which a transnational approach homogenizes

[6] Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland*, 4; Adam McKeown, "Introduction: The Continuing Reformulation of Chinese Australians," in Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald, and Paul Macgregor, eds., *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation, and Chinese Communities in Australia, 1860–1940* (Otherland Literary Journal No. 9, 2004), 7; Ling-chi Wang, "Toward a Paradigm for the Study of the Chinese Diaspora in the United States," in Shih, Tsai, and Bernards, *Sinophone Studies*, 171.

Chinese migrants, obscuring divisions based on gender, class, dialect, and regional differences.[7]

Another alternative concept, Sinophone studies, has more valence in the fields of literary and cultural studies than in anthropological, historical, or sociological scholarship. This concept usefully captures much of what is meant by "Chinese diaspora" without the ready association with victimhood and expulsion from a homeland and without easy assumptions about a homogenized people. Such an approach potentially overlaps with a diasporic approach, utilizing primary historical sources produced in the Chinese language, whether within China or outside China. As articulated by Shu-mei Shih, however, "Sinophone studies takes as its objects of study the Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside China as well as ethnic minority communities and cultures within China where Mandarin is adopted or imposed." By excluding "Sinophone cultures" inside "the geopolitical China proper," this approach elides the homelands, or emigrant communities, of Han Chinese migrants. Likewise, by adopting this perspective one must conclude the existence of a fundamental difference between, say, Wenzhou migrants in Beijing (not a subject of Sinophone studies) and Wenzhou migrants in Prato (potentially a subject of Sinophone studies). Accordingly, this concept does not capture the very parallels and connections between internal and external migration that I hope to show. Moreover, even the old category of "the Chinese diaspora" includes many ethnic Chinese who speak no Chinese (Sinitic) language.[8]

Diaspora(s) Reconsidered

As indicated by the title of this book, I follow some recent scholars who have sought to apply the notion of "diaspora" or "diasporic" to the study of Chinese migrants and their descendants in a more cautious, limited manner. In his influential 2001 book on Chinese migrant networks in Peru, Hawaii, and Chicago, the historian Adam McKeown explains that the concept of "diaspora" can be useful "as a way to conceptualize cultural bonds, ties to a homeland, transnational organizations and

[7] Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Introduction: Asian American Formations in the Age of Globalization," in Hu-DeHart, *Across the Pacific*, 4–5, 11; Lok C. D. Siu, *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (Stanford University Press, 2006); Chan, "Case for Diaspora"; Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain, 1800-Present: Economy, Transnationalism, Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4.

[8] Shu-mei Shih, "Introduction: What Is Sinophone Studies?" in Shih, Tsai, and Bernards, *Sinophone Studies*, 11; Shih, "Against Diaspora," 25.