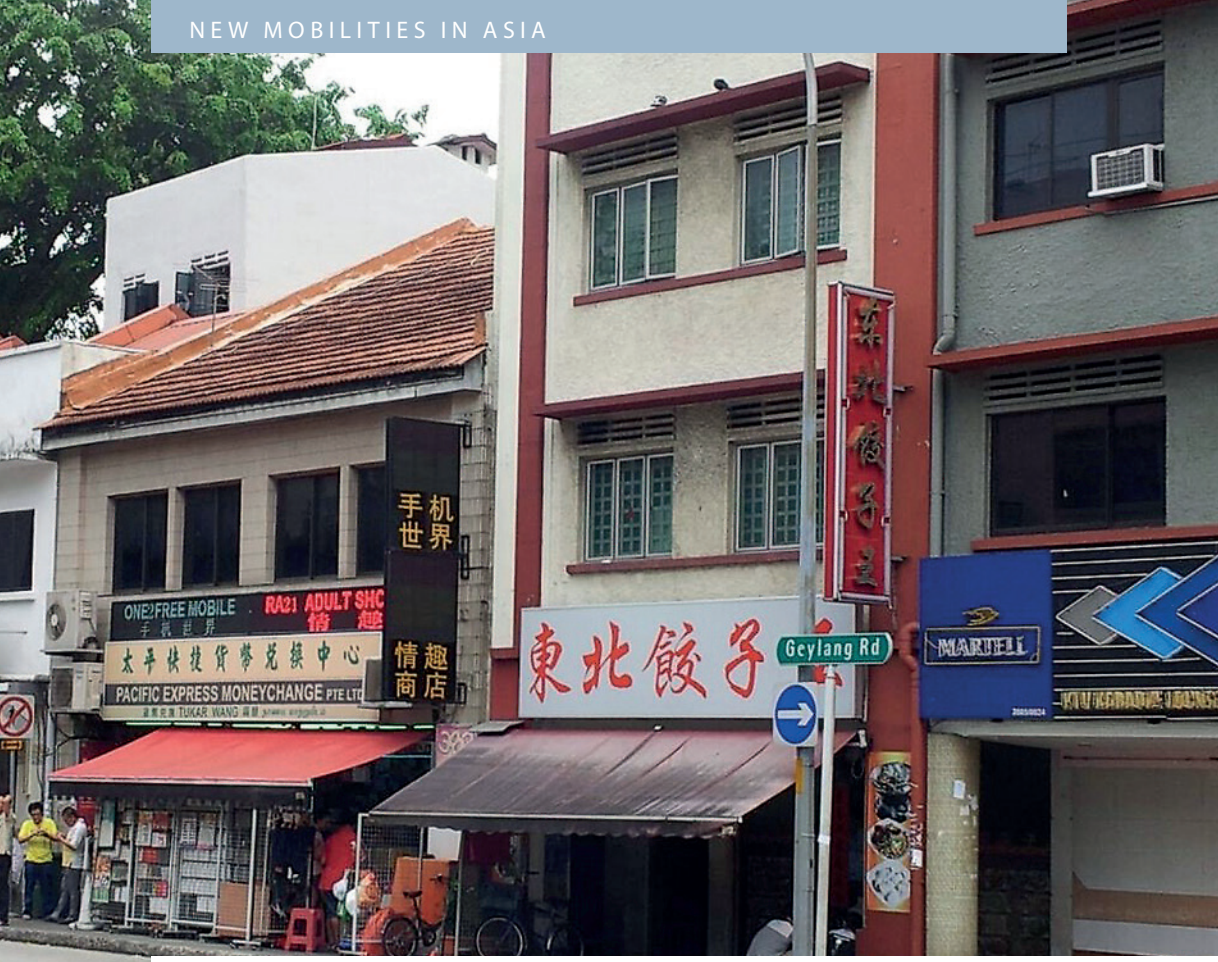

Sylvia Ang

Contesting Chineseness

Nationality, Class, Gender and New Chinese Migrants

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New Mobilities in Asia

In the 21st century, human mobility will increasingly have an Asian face. Migration from, to, and within Asia is not new, but it is undergoing profound transformations. Unskilled labour migration from the Philippines, China, India, Burma, Indonesia, and Central Asia to the West, the Gulf, Russia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand continues apace. Yet industrialization in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India, the opening of Burma, and urbanization in China is creating massive new flows of internal migration. China is fast becoming a magnet for international migration from Asia and beyond.

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Introduction: Contesting Chineseness

Abstract
This chapter introduces the paradox of politics among ethnic Chinese. It provides a detailed exploration of global anxieties to China's ascent and the outflow of Chinese immigrants. The case study of Singapore is introduced as a mirror of the anxieties faced by cities with new flows of Chinese immigration. Both Singaporean-Chinese and new Chinese migrants' stories are detailed to draw the audience into the cultural politics of being Chinese. The chapter explains the book's framework through critically engaging scholarship across various fields including migration and ethnic studies. A methodology section justifies the book's focus on Chinese subjects' everyday lives which are shaped, though not necessarily determined, by global and state discourses. An overview of the chapters follows.

Keywords: social imaginaries, Chineseness, co-ethnicity, China's rise, anxieties, digital ethnography

In 2015, I was at Melbourne (Australia) Airport to board a flight bound for Singapore. As I was queuing to clear customs, a group of three Chinese tourists who were ahead of me tried to ask an Asian woman in Mandarin[1] for help in tackling the customs declaration form. The Asian woman seemed to understand Mandarin but impatiently responded to them in English which baffled the Chinese tourists who could not understand her. What resulted was what is termed in Mandarin as "chicken and duck talk" (*jitong yajiang*). Neither seemed to understand the other. I decided to intervene and responded to the Chinese tourists' questions in Mandarin. They were delighted to finally have their questions answered and heaped praise on me. They asked me where I was from (Singapore) and seemed surprised,

1 I use Mandarin throughout to denote the standard Chinese language used both in Singapore and China. It is also referred to as p*utonghua* in China.

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"Your *putonghua* [Mandarin] is so fluent!"[2] while shooting the other Asian woman dirty looks. I sensed their disbelief that an ethnic Chinese overseas such as myself could speak good Mandarin and felt rather flustered. Amidst the praise, I became defensive and told them in a manner that implied of course I can speak Mandarin, "my grandfather was from China". A pang of regret hit me as soon as I uttered the words. Did the Asian/English-speaking woman hear me? My remark may have unwittingly increased her "crime" (of not speaking Mandarin) since her grandparents could be from China as well. When the Chinese tourists eventually moved ahead in the queue, the Asian woman, who I noted had a Malaysian passport, mumbled in frustration to me, "How can they travel overseas without knowing a word of English?"

As an ethnic Chinese overseas who spoke good Mandarin, I was "too Chinese".[3] On the other hand, the Asian woman who did not speak Mandarin was considered a mismatch with her embodiment – she was not Chinese enough. We were both inadvertently judged by the benchmark of the mainland Chinese tourists. The Chinese tourists were being judged too, however, by the Asian woman. In an era of globalization where English is deemed by many as the lingua franca of development, of first-world status, and as necessary to "travel overseas", the Chinese tourists' inability to speak English was denounced. The Asian woman seemed to suggest their lack of English ability should act as a kind of limit to disallow travel outside of their country. In other words, by not speaking English, the Chinese tourists were perceived as inward, and backward. This scenario, however, must be contrasted against our backdrop, Melbourne Airport, which in recent years has adopted Mandarin signage and advertisements such as the massive banner just outside the airport boldly promoting luxurious Italian furniture in Mandarin. While many are still stuck in a post-colonial hangover where English is seen as *the* necessary language, others have pushed ahead to embrace Chinese capitalism.

My dilemma of being an ethnic Chinese overseas did not stop at Melbourne Airport. On returning to Singapore, I was reminded of the growing resentment amongst Singaporean-Chinese against new migrants from China. Since the 1990s, the Singaporean state has adopted liberal immigration regulations to meet skills shortages and improve low birth-rates. As a result, Singapore's permanent resident and non-resident immigrant population nearly doubled between 2000 and 2010.[4] A record number of 79,167 perma-

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

3 Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London: Routledge, 2005).

4 Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, *Citizens in Motion: Emigration, Immigration, and Re-Migration across China's Borders* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

nent residency applications were approved in 2008. From 2008 to 2013, the permanent resident immigrant population in Singapore increased by more than a quarter-million. China was a key source country for both higher-wage and high net-worth immigrants who are encouraged to settle permanently in Singapore as well as low-wage temporary labour migrants.[5] In the light of falling Singaporean-Chinese birth-rates, the state's liberal policies toward Chinese migrants settling is also a move to maintain the status-quo of a dominant seventy-five per cent ethnic Chinese population in Singapore.[6]

Contrary to our early education in Singapore that the ethnic Chinese is a cultivated race and that we should be proud of China as our "motherland" (see Chapter One), Singaporean-Chinese respondents informed me that they "dislike PRCs"[7] because "they are dirty" and "in my space". Others preached "Chinese values" and reminisced proudly about their hardworking ancestors from China before delving into gossip about "PRC" women who prey on elderly Singaporean-Chinese men for their money. In a tightly controlled state with little to no freedom of speech, the distaste for Chinese migrants also grew and manifested a large presence online. In 2012, for instance, a video showing a Ferrari car crash by a Chinese driver that killed a local taxi-driver went viral. The circumstances of the Ferrari driver's speeding and running a red light ignited anti-Chinese sentiment on Singaporean social media. One user commented, "Foreign talent? They are here to kill our dear Singaporean? Hope that PRC burn in hell."[8] The backlash against Chinese nationals in Singapore was so rife and so prominent online that various news outlets specifically noted the extent of online furore including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, the latter headlined "In Singapore, Vitriol Against Chinese Newcomers".[9]

At the same time, my mainland Chinese respondents told me that they had imagined sharing cultural affinities with Singaporean-Chinese, at least before arriving in Singapore. Almost every Chinese migrant I spoke to said that they assumed there would be few integration issues as "we

5 Ibid.

6 Beng Huat Chua, "Being Chinese under Official Multiculturalism in Singapore." *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 3(2009): 239-50. https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360903189609

7 "PRC" is used colloquially in Singapore to denote Chinese nationals, often derogatorily.

8 All user comments and social media posts are quoted *sic.* RaiderZX00 (2012) "Fatal Accident: Ferrari crashed into Comfort Taxi at Bugis" [Youtube post]. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GywH2zccXDE (Accessed 3 Aug 2014)

9 "In Singapore, Vitriol against Newcomers from Mainland China," Andrew Jacobs, *New York Times*, July 26, 2012, accessed on May 5, 2020 from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/27/world/asia/in-singapore-vitriol-against-newcomers-from-mainland-china.html.

are all Chinese". These assumptions have been rudely interrupted. Some Chinese respondents told me that Singaporean-Chinese have lived alongside Singaporeans of other ethnicities for so long that they have become "different from us, the real Chinese". Others were appalled at the weak Mandarin proficiency of Singaporean-Chinese and criticized their overt individualism.

A paradox has emerged: why are there tensions between ethnic Chinese settlers and new Chinese arrivals despite similarities in phenotype, ancestry, and customs? I began to cultivate an empirical puzzle. To my knowledge, studies on migration and ethnicity at that time did little to look at the identity politics between different flows of ethnic Chinese. I wanted to learn more about how the new flows of Chinese migrants from an increasingly powerful China are interacting with ethnic Chinese settlers. Rather than focusing only on how migrants integrate, as much migration literature does, I also wanted to find out more about how ethnic Chinese settlers are being transformed with new Chinese immigration. Most of all, I wanted to learn how and why anti-Chinese-national sentiments are so prevalent in a predominantly ethnic Chinese Singapore.

Global anxieties at China's ascent and the outflow of Chinese immigrants

In 2019, emigrants from China were the third largest foreign-born population in the world, with nearly eleven million Chinese migrants living outside China.[10] While the West was traditionally more popular as a migration destination, Chinese migrants are increasingly heading to other areas, including areas with older waves of ethnic Chinese. Yet scholarship on tensions between host societies and Chinese subjects is highly concentrated in the "West", including in the United States,[11] Australia,[12] Canada,[13] New

10 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), International Migrant Stock 2019. UN DESA Population Division, New York. Accessed on April 12, 2020 from www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp.

11 Rosalind S Chou and Joe R Feagin, *Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (London: Routledge, 2015); Wei Li, "Beyond Chinatown, Beyond Enclave: Reconceptualizing Contemporary Chinese Settlements in the United States." *GeoJournal* 64, no. 1 (2005): 31-40.; Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

12 Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*; Shuang Liu, "Searching for a Sense of Place: Identity Negotiation of Chinese Immigrants," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 46 (2015): 26-35.

13 Shibao Guo, "Economic Integration of Recent Chinese Immigrants in Canada's Second-Tier Cities: The Triple Glass Effect and Immigrants' Downward Social Mobility," *Canadian Ethnic*

Zealand,[14] and Italy.[15] While such scholarship advanced understanding of Chinese subjects in the face of the "West" and by the "West", its relevance is limited in non-Western fields. The juxtaposition of the West against the Chinese is no longer adequate in an era where new waves of Chinese migration are reaching many different parts of the world, including into non-Western territories, such as Asia and Africa. Importantly, studies set in the West tend to rely on a presumed dichotomy between whites and others. This has caused first, an ignorance of Chinese heterogeneity while ignoring the politics of difference *among* the Chinese; and second, a lack of studies on issues of discrimination in non-white settings. How are contemporary Chinese migrants received in settings outside of the "West"? How are new Chinese migrants received by earlier waves of ethnic Chinese populations? And finally, how are new Chinese migrants reshaping host countries? These are questions which countries with new and old flows of Chinese migrants are interested in and which this study addresses.

Global anxieties towards China's ascent have emerged dramatically all over the world. In 2019, a Pew Research Centre survey in America showed that unfavourable opinions of China have reached a 14-year high: 60% of Americans have an unfavourable opinion of China, up from 47% in 2018 and at the highest level since the Pew Research Centre began asking the question in 2005.[16] In Australia, a poll suggested that Australians' trust in China as a responsible global actor has hit its lowest point in the survey's 15-year history. Only 32% of the sample say they trust China to act responsibly.[17] Anxiety levels are similar, if not higher in Asia. A 2017 poll found that both South Koreans and Vietnamese rated China's power and influence as the

Studies 45, no. 3 (2013): 95-115; Timothy J Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy: School Segregation, Anti-Racism, and the Making of Chinese Canadians* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011).

14 Liangni Sally Liu, "A Search for a Place to Call Home: Negotiation of Home, Identity and Senses of Belonging among New Migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to New Zealand," *Emotion, Space and Society* 10 (2014): 18-26; Bingyu Wang, *New Chinese Migrants in New Zealand: Becoming Cosmopolitan? Roots, Emotions, and Everyday Diversity* (London; New York: Routledge, 2018).

15 Antonella Ceccagno, *City Making and Global Labor Regimes: Chinese Immigrants and Italy's Fast Fashion Industry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Elizabeth L Krause, *Tight Knit: Global Families and the Social Life of Fast Fashion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

16 "U.S. Views of China Amid Trade War Turn Sharply Negative," Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, *Pew Research Center*, August 13, 2019, accessed on April 12, 2020 from https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/08/13/u-s-views-of-china-turn-sharply-negative-amid-trade-tensions/

17 "Australians' Trust in China at Lowest Point in Survey's History," Katharine Murphy, *The Guardian*, Jun 25, 2019, accessed on April 12, 2020 from https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jun/25/australians-trust-in-china-at-lowest-point-in-surveys-history

top threat facing their nations.[18] Anti-Chinese sentiments have also risen in Malaysia where former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has pushed back against China's presence in the country, claiming that "lots of people don't like Chinese investments."[19]

China's international image is intimately tied to how ethnic Chinese are viewed throughout the world. In the U.S. for instance, unfavourable opinion towards China has led to questions on the loyalty of Chinese Americans. State mistrust has resulted in discrimination against Chinese Americans with ties to China. A Bloomberg news analysis found that when it comes to security clearances to work for government contractors, more than three-fifths of applicants who have family or other ties to China are rejected while two-thirds of applicants with ties to other countries are approved.[20] In Singapore, the loyalty of China-born immigrants has been increasingly questioned both by the state and by Singaporeans. In 2017, a China-born US citizen, Professor Huang Jing who worked at a prestigious research institute in Singapore, was accused of "deliberately and covertly advancing the agenda of a foreign country at Singapore's expense." The official statement did not name the country, but many assumed this was the country of his birth, China. Professor Jing was subsequently stripped of his Permanent Resident status and expelled from Singapore.[21] Chinese propaganda has since been a hot topic and some have speculated that Singapore's recently established regulations against "fake news" were, other than the ruling party's consolidation of power, an attempt to counter Chinese propaganda.[22] While questions on China-born immigrants' loyalties have always been present amongst Singaporeans, this recent saga has translated to increased talk about Chinese spies. Discourses on whether

18 "How People in Asia-Pacific View China," Laura Silver, *Pew Research Cent*er, October 16, 2017, accessed on May 5, 2020 from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/16/how-people-in-asia-pacific-view-china/

19 "Anti-China Sentiments Will Do No Good: The Star Columnist," Chun Wai Wong, *The Straits Times,* April 23, 2018, accessed on May 5, 2020 from https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/anti-china-sentiments-will-do-no-good-the-star-columnist

20 "Mistrust and the Hunt for Spies Among Chinese Americans," Peter Waldman, *Bloomberg*, December 10, 2019, accessed on April 12, 2020 from https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-12-10/the-u-s-government-s-mistrust-of-chinese-americans

21 "LKY School Professor Huang Jing Banned, has PR Cancelled, for Being Agent of Influence for Foreign Country," Royston Sim, *The Straits Times*, August 7, 2017, accessed on May 1, 2020 from https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/lky-school-professor-huang-jing-banned-has-pr-cancelled-for-being-agent-of-influence-for

22 "US Think Tank Highlights Channels for China's 'Influence Operations' in Singapore," Wong Pei Ting, *Today Online,* July 17, 2019, accessed on May 1, 2020 from https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/us-think-tank-highlights-channels-chinas-influence-operations-singapore

new Chinese citizens should be trusted to do mandatory military service (in case state secrets are leaked) dominate mainstream Singaporean society and have been iterated to me by my Singaporean-Chinese respondents. Online forum threads titled "What is being done to purge Singapore of PRC spies?"[23] and "Pro-Chinese Government Propaganda [in Singaporean online forums]" have emerged to considerable popularity.[24] The latter thread, for instance, consisted of four hundred posts. As this book highlights, the rise of China and accordingly, outflows of new Chinese migrants have produced new tensions as the fortunes of ethnic Chinese and the countries they live in must now negotiate new constellations of power beyond western dominance.

The invisibilities of co-ethnic politics

In Singapore, "race" is an official category and mandated in all formal documents. Race, however, as many scholars have long established, is a social construct, although it persists in shaping people's lived experiences. Race is a mode of categorization that is utilized, intentionally as well as unintentionally, to ascribe certain behavioural and cultural characteristics to individuals based primarily on their biological and physical appearance (perceived and real).[25] While race commonly denotes immutability, ethnicity indicates the learned aspects of groups that share a common identity-based ancestry, language, or culture. It is frequently based on customs, beliefs and religion as well as memories of migration or colonization.[26] This book uses "ethnicity" instead of "race" to avoid attaching fixed characteristics to groups and highlight instead the fluid, learned aspects of groups. Consequently, "Co-ethnics" is used to refer to a group of people who may be perceived as of the same phenotype e.g. Chinese but have different culture and/or beliefs such as Singaporean-Chinese and Chinese nationals.

23 "What is Being Done to Purge SG of PRC spies?" Laksaboy, *The Sammyboy Times*, January 10, 2020, accessed on April 12, 2020 from https://www.sammyboy.com/threads/what-is-being-done-to-purge-sg-of-prc-spies.276780/

24 "[Discussion] Pro-Chinese Government Propaganda," Hierophant Jirachi and RedEyesFan. (n.d.)., accessed on April 12, 2020 from https://forums.hardwarezone.com.sg/eat-drink-man-woman-16/%5Bdiscussion%5D-pro-chinese-government-propaganda-6153525.html

25 Sin Yee Koh & I Lin Sin, "Academic and Teacher Expatriates in Malaysia: Racial Privilege and Disadvantage in Transnational Education Mobilities," Forthcoming.

26 Stephen E. Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and race: Making identities in a changing world* (USA: Sage Publications, 2006).

Studies that focus on co-ethnic tensions and migration have mostly looked at return migration[27] and in terms of Chinese co-ethnicity, ethnic Chinese resettlement in China.[28] Such work has advanced our understanding of co-ethnic Othering, bringing our attention to how the return migration of diasporic descendants are driven by roots, identity and belonging.[29] Rather than look at how return migrants are treated as minorities in their ancestral country, however, the minority-majority dichotomy is destabilized in this book. I join the conversation started by scholars of return migration by complicating the idea of "return". Since Singaporean-Chinese have been socialized to look to China as the "motherland", do the new flows of migrants from mainland China conjure a sense of return or reuniting with fellow co-ethnics? How do new flows of Chinese migration complicate previous ideas of the "motherland"? Chinese migrants may be considered the "majority" Chinese in terms of originating from the "motherland" and accordingly more "authentic", yet they are marginalized as a *minority* in Singapore.

This book shows how Chineseness can be both an object of similarity *and* difference between Chinese migrants and Singaporean-Chinese which makes for an intriguing investigation on how difference is produced, right down to details of dress and taste (see Chapter Two). Investigating how difference is produced between co-ethnics is important as migrants' ethnic similarity to the host state often veils otherwise more visible forms of marginalization. Skin colour is not the only signifier of exclusion/inclusion and may obstruct deeper insights into issues of discrimination, allowing a kind of "cultural invisibility" to the victims.[30] The book's focus on ethnic politics beyond colour is part of a movement to move beyond the white/Other binary that dominates

27 Takeyuki Tsuda, *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Return Migration in Transnational Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Takeyuki Tsuda, *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Dennis Conway and Robert B Potter. *Return Migration of the Next Generations: 21st Century Transnational Mobility* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Russell King and Anastasia Christou, "Of Counter-Diaspora and Reverse Transnationalism: Return Mobilities to and from the Ancestral Homeland," *Mobilities* 6, no. 4 (2011): 451-66.

28 Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, "'Refugee' or 'Returnee'? The Ethnic Geopolitics of Diasporic Resettlement in China and Intergenerational Change," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 4 (2013): 599-611; Michael R. Godley, "The Sojourners: Returned Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China," *Pacific Affairs* 62 (1989): 330-52.

29 Ho, "'Refugee' or 'Returnee'?" 600.

30 Macan Ghaill, "The Irish in Britain: The Invisibility of Ethnicity and Anti-Irish Racism." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 137-47.

American sociological theories of assimilation. "Ethnicity" is traditionally used as a unit of analysis by classical assimilation theorists to measure assimilation.[31] While this has resulted in important studies that predict that migrants would eventually assimilate, the limits of these studies have been pointed out by segmented assimilation theorists who suggest that nationality and class backgrounds have to be taken into account in studies of assimilation. This book hopes to contribute to this dialogue by suggesting that how co-ethnics imagine nationality, class and gender is crucial to how they interact with co-ethnic others and has important implications for assimilation.

Immigration and the cultural politics of being Chinese

One way to understand the effects of China's rise is to examine how Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese overseas imagine China and its outflow of new Chinese migrants. With the rise of China, Singapore, like other high-income countries dependent on international capital flows, must now grapple with the shift from western-based capital to Chinese-based capital flows. At the same time, due to China's uneven developing status, host societies must negotiate the flows of new Chinese migrants which consist of both higher-wage professionals as well as low-wage workers.

Singapore provides a compelling site to investigate anxieties towards the rise of China and its outflow of new Chinese migrants as it is the only state outside of Greater China (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong) with a predominantly ethnic Chinese population. Singapore is both an outsider as well as an insider. As a longstanding political and military partner of the United States, Singapore is as anxious as any western country in watching China's ascent. At the same time, Singapore's geographical and cultural proximity to China has translated to worries of China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea as well as its diasporic policies.

Singapore's insider and outsider positionality is nowhere clearer than in the ongoing trade war between the US and China. In the 2019 National Day Rally, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke at length

31 Gordon Milton, Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Alba Richard and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

about Singapore's ethnic Chinese and the need to remain sovereign and independent amidst the US-China trade war:

> "If we support China, the US and other countries may think we do so because we are a majority Chinese country and therefore accede to China. But China may also misunderstand if Singapore supports the US … In fact, on occasions when Singapore and China have held different views in the past, some of our friends from China have asked us: since we share a common language, a common ancestry and a common heritage, why does Singapore not share a common view?"[32]

Singapore's predominantly ethnic Chinese population has also increased state anxieties in other ways. Since 2018, China launched a new five-year visa for foreigners with Chinese ancestry, in a bid to lure overseas Chinese to "participate in China's economic development".[33] This compelled Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to point out publicly in 2019 that Singaporean-Chinese are different from Chinese communities elsewhere, including China.[34] Even as Singapore attempts to define its own Chinese identity, however, it cannot deny its large proportion of China-born population. The number of Chinese migrants in Singapore at its peak, was estimated at between 700,000 to one million, representing a substantial proportion of Singapore's 5.7 million population.[35] While the number of Chinese nationals in Singapore has since fallen, it is still the second largest migrant population, second only to Malaysians, occupying 18% of Singapore's

32 "National Day Rally 2019: Singapore Wants to Remain Good Friends with US, China; Must Always be Principled in Approach, says PM Lee," Linette Lai, *The Straits Times*, August 18, 2019, accessed on May 1, 2020 from https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/national-day-rally-2019-spore-wants-to-remain-good-friends-with-us-and-china-must-always-be

33 "China to Issue 5-year Visas for Foreigners of Chinese Origin," Danson Cheong, *The Straits Times,* February 1, 2018, accessed on October 29, 2019 from https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-to-issue-5-year-visas-for-foreigners-of-chinese-origin

34 "S'pore's Chinese Community Different from Others Elsewhere: Pm Lee," Faris Mokhtar, *Today Online*, February 4, 2019, accessed on May 30, 2019 from https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapore-chinese-community-different-from-others-pm-lee-chinese-new-year-message.

35 No concrete data is available from the state, see Malcom Moore, "Singapore's 'Anti-Chinese Curry War'," *The Telegraph*, August 16, 2011, accessed on April 5, 2015 from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/singapore/8704107/Singapores-anti-Chinese-curry-war.html; Ching Ching Yim, *Transnational social spaces and transnationalism: A study on the new Chinese migrant community in Singapore,* 2011, Doctor of Philosophy. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong; Yeoh and Lin, "Chinese Migration to Singapore: Discourses and Discontents in a Globalizing Nation-State."

foreign-born population.[36] This number does not account for the number of new citizens which as of end-2010 consisted of 175,155 new citizens and permanent residents from China, including Hong Kong and Macau, in Singapore.[37]

Singapore's dilemma in terms of China, new Chinese migrants and a predominantly ethnic Chinese population mirrors the anxieties faced by global cities all over the world as they grapple with China's ascent and negotiate old and new flows of Chinese migration. How do shifting global capital configurations affect the terms in which ethnic Chinese negotiate their imaginaries of China and Chinese identity? Investigating how Singaporean-Chinese and mainland Chinese migrants imagine their Chinese identity against the backdrop of China's ascent offers insights into global power shifts that transform our understanding of Chinese identity.

Imagining Chinese identity

What is Chinese-ness? This is a big question this book does not seek to address specifically, and indeed, cannot. Various scholars have attempted to address this question and answers are disparate at best.[38] At risk of oversimplification, the debates may be best defined as the primordialists versus the modernists, with some arguments falling in between these two positions. Tu Weiming's seminal work on Chineseness: "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center"[39] is one example of a primordialist perspective where he suggested that the rise of Chinese cultural consciousness is

36 "Migrants in Singapore mostly from Malaysia," Ee Lyn Tan, *The Straits Times*, January 19, 2020, accessed on April 12, 2020 from https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/migrants-in-spore-mostly-from-malaysia

37 Wong, "Anti-China sentiments will do no good."

38 Wei-ming Tu, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center." *Daedalus* 120, no. 2 (1991): 1-32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20025372; Ien Ang, "Together-in-difference: Beyond Diaspora, into Hybridity." Asian Studies Review 27, no. 2(2003): 141-54. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820308713372; Chris Vasantkumar, "What Is This "Chinese" in Overseas Chinese? Sojourn Work and the Place of China's Minority Nationalities in Extraterritorial Chinese-Ness." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 2 (2012): 423-46. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911812000113; Loong Wong, "Belonging and Diaspora: The Chinese and the Internet." *First Monday* (2003). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v8i4.1045; Michael Jacobsen, "Re-Conceptualising Notions of Chinese-Ness in a Southeast Asian Context. From Diasporic Networking to Grounded Cosmopolitanism." *East Asia* 24, no. 2 (2007): 213-27. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-007-9015-y; Lok CD Siu, "Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: Chineseness and Belonging in Central America." *Social Text* 19, no. 4 (2001): 7-28.

39 Tu, "Cultural China."

embedded in "ethnic, territorial, linguistic, and ethical-religious terms".[40] Chineseness, according to Tu, does not necessarily stem from holding a Chinese passport. Rather, he emphasizes the predominance of "bloodlines" in recognizing the ethnic Chinese across the globe. Tu's approach has been criticized by scholars as reifying Chineseness; a point this book is eager to avoid. Rather, Chineseness can be viewed as a paradox as it is "simultaneously many and one – many within the PRC and one without".[41] Within China, Chineseness is plural, consisting of a majority Han population and fifty-five minorities. Outside of China, however, there is only one "Overseas Chinese-ness that is geographically unbounded and resolutely uniform in ethno-racial terms".[42] It is this paradox of Chineseness that belies why scholars cannot agree on its definition.

Accordingly, this book approaches Chineseness as processual rather than fixed.[43] In other words, Chineseness is used in this book in a modernist/constructivist manner. As Ien Ang (2005) wrote, "If I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics". I consider the question "what is Chineseness?" to be less important than the puzzle of "how is Chineseness constructed?" It is the "situatedness"[44] of Chineseness that the book is concerned with; the context in which Chineseness is expressed and contested. In other words, rather than seek to define the "factual substance" of Chineseness, it is more significant to "know who is really speaking, how statements are produced and disseminated, how they relate to other discourses, and, finally, how they become systematized and institutionalized".[45] Through approaching Chineseness as a cultural discourse that is "not just imagined but authorized and institutionalized",[46] this book investigate how Chineseness is imagined both by people *and* the state, including how states authorize and institutionalize Chineseness (see Chapter One).

The contestation of Chinese identity becomes starker when migrants are investigated. Migrants are forced to create new imagined worlds from the ones they had come from; imaginaries of which are nuanced by mass

40 Ibid., 3.

41 Vasantkumar, "What Is This "Chinese" in Overseas Chinese?," 426.

42 Ibid.

43 Vasantkumar, "What Is This "Chinese" in Overseas Chinese?," 427.

44 Allen Chun, *Forget Chineseness: On the Geopolitics of Cultural Identification* (New York: SUNY Press, 2017).

45 Allen Chun, "Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity," *Boundary 2* 23, no. 2 (1996): 111-138 (114-115)

46 Chun, "Fuck Chineseness," 111-138.

migration and the mass media.[47] Such imaginaries may not fit or fit well with the dominant imaginaries of nation-states. In other words, migrants' imaginaries can merge or clash with the worlds they have moved into. Moreover, imaginaries are not forced on people in a single direction but challenged by co- and counter-imaginaries.[48] My Chinese migrant respondents have found their imaginary of "we are all Chinese" displaced in Singapore by Singaporean-Chinese's imaginaries that "Chinese migrants are different from us". Singaporean-Chinese imaginaries of Chineseness are also displaced by the large number of "more authentic" Chinese migrants from the "motherland" with their versions of Chineseness.

Importantly, migration does not only displace migrants but also the host society, whether physically or imaginary-wise. The cultural "certainties" of a place are reconfigured with migration such that even the host society that has not "moved" may find their relationships to a familiar place changed.[49] This book distinguishes itself from mainstream work on migration and integration by not only investigating migrants or hosts but both migrants *and* hosts. This approach enables us to see the different imaginaries of Chinese-ness as well as how migration transforms both migrants *and* hosts.

Investigating "imaginaries" is useful to locate the lived worlds of migrants and hosts. However, the book is further interested in the *social:* to not only illuminate how migrants or the host society think *but how they think of themselves amidst others.* Using the "social imaginary" instead of only "imaginary" brings attention to the interactional nature of migration, of encounters between migrants and hosts, and of confrontations and concurrence. "Social imaginary" is useful as a microscopic lens to understand how people construct their worlds as collective agents and the complex of meanings that underlies people's behaviour.[50] It is also useful on the meso level: it allows us to investigate how the state and mass media shape social imaginaries. On a macro level, investigating social imaginaries enables us to understand how migration and globalization are negotiated in people's lives. Importantly, despite the book's focus on Chineseness, the "social" is emphasized over the "cultural" as the book's foremost argument is that

47 Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Toward New Imaginaries: An Introduction," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 1-99. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/26270; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

48 Gaonkar, "Toward New Imaginaries."

49 Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Culture, Power, Place: Ethnography at the End of an Era," in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

50 Gaonkar, "Toward New Imaginaries," 1.

"Chinese culture" is *socially constructed*. It is precisely due to its fluid and constructed nature that Chineseness is open to contestation.

Through stitching together the two concepts: how subjects imagine their social existence alongside others ("social imaginaries") and an ethnic lens ("Chineseness"), this book seeks to venture beyond narratives of encounter by pushing for an understanding of the link between words/action and imaginary. This contributes to a more rounded understanding of "processes of negotiation, of co-production as well as co-presence".[51] In so doing, *Contesting Chineseness* advances migration and ethnicity scholarship in three ways. First, I draw out how Singaporean-Chinese and Chinese migrants have different imaginaries of Chinese identity. This analysis contributes to unpacking the complexities of mass migration, super-diversities and the assumed homogeneity of the Chinese. Second, I show how my respondents imagine Chineseness alongside nationality, class and gender: factors which combine in myriad ways to produce hierarchies of Chineseness. Third, I consider my respondents' interaction with state discourses on migration and Chinese capitalism to show how the state and China's ascent shape their Chinese subjectivity.

Insider, outsider and digital ethnography

As a second-generation Singaporean, I have had to contend with a hybrid identity since a young age. My maternal grandparents and paternal great grandfather originated from China. My maternal great-grandmother may have had Burmese or Thai origins while my paternal grandmother's origins were unknown. I was nonetheless labelled "Chinese" at birth in the official "race" category, just like my father and mother, although as many have told me, I do not look one bit Chinese. I grew up with American media and was inculcated in British English in Singapore's education system up to bachelor's level. In school, I took Mandarin as a compulsory "Mother Tongue" subject till I was seventeen years old. As a result, I cannot communicate with any of my grandparents who spoke little Mandarin and only Chinese vernaculars of which I had meagre understanding. The arrival of new Chinese migrants since the 1990s in Singapore was an opportunity for me: I wanted to find out what Chineseness is.

51 Katy Bennett, Allan Cochrane, Giles Mohan and Sarah Neal, "Negotiating the educational spaces of urban multiculture: Skills, competencies and college life," *Urban Studies*, 54 no. 10 (2017): 2305-2321.

I conducted fieldwork in Singapore in 2013 and 2014, with biannual follow-ups from 2015 to 2018, followed by research and writing up this book in Singapore in 2019 and 2020. I talked to and spent time with sixty-two participants (aged twenty-four to fifty-eight years old) comprising both Singaporean-Chinese (twelve males, twelve females) and mainland Chinese migrants (ten females, twenty-eight males). I accessed most of my respondents through my personal contacts who would recommend other respondents, and through WeChat (see below). I made deliberate efforts to diversify my sources to ensure my participants had diverse occupations and educational backgrounds. As such, my Singaporean-Chinese respondents' occupations ranged from taxi-driver to occupational therapist while my Chinese respondents included construction workers and academics.

Many ethnographers take the view that long-term members who live within the culture lack the ability to see the basic assumptions behind their worldview (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Although I am Singaporean, my position as one who has lived overseas for four years (at the time of my fieldwork) assisted in making me part-stranger and allowed me to occupy simultaneously an insider *and* outsider position during my fieldwork.

As a middle-class Singaporean-Chinese female, I have sought to minimise my positionality with Singaporean-Chinese respondents by letting them choose both the interview locations and language to maximise their comfort level. As an insider, I could include strategies of code-switching between English, Singlish, good Mandarin, bad Mandarin and even Chinese vernaculars to minimise the social/class distance between the respondent and me. At the same time, I positioned myself as an ill-informed overseas returnee i.e. outsider that needed to be enlightened. This placed many of my participants in positions of authority and helped to lessen my middle-class positionality.

My position as an "insider" Singaporean while interacting with Chinese migrants had certain benefits. A poignant example was when I met a group of Chinese construction workers at Geylang (the 'new' Chinatown, see Chapter Five) and asked about their interaction with Singaporeans. They responded that they have never had the opportunity to interact with any Singaporeans, except me. They proceeded to treat me like a star at the dinner, asking me multiple questions about Singapore, and each was interrupting the other to speak with me. At the same time, my then status as a graduate student at an overseas University made me an "outsider" which mitigated the wariness they may normally have with other Singaporeans.

Although I am proficient in Mandarin, however, I am certainly not as fluent as my Chinese respondents. To make up for my shortcomings, I

often prepared for my interviews by looking up words in the dictionary and reading local Mandarin newspapers to brush up on my Mandarin. My efforts were reflected in how many Chinese participants were taken aback by my fluency. I was, of course, also privileged by my high school training in Higher Chinese, a curriculum only available to a select minority in the Singapore education system; a privilege reflective of the many differences within the heterogenous Singaporean-Chinese population, as I highlight in Chapter Four.

This book also used digital ethnography data which was accessed during a time when online narratives of locals and migrants were rife, easily accessible and often openly critical of the Singaporean ruling government. In fact, the internet was seen by many as the reason for the local opposition's large gains in the 2011 elections. In a world where everyday lives are deeply entangled with and communicated via digital technologies, digital ethnography helps to present a more rounded approach to people's lives. In undertaking digital ethnography, I take as its starting point "the idea that digital media and technologies are part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds that people inhabit".[52] At the same time, even as I take digital media as part of the everyday lives of people, it is also not the *only* part. Other aspects of their lives must also be taken into consideration in the analysis: digital ethnography complements my ethnographic work as well as in-depth interviews. I used digital ethnography in two ways. First, I focused on social media websites frequented by Singaporeans and Chinese migrants in Singapore. Social media websites are important in Singapore as they contain alternative narratives, many of which openly counteract state narratives. Second, I used the mobile media application WeChat to access and talk to many Chinese migrants.

I observed social media websites frequented by Singaporeans (Youtube, Facebook, Hardware zone forum, Sam's Alfresco Coffee forum, Sgforums) and Chinese migrants in Singapore (*Tianya sequ* forum, *shichengwang* forum) and did not make known my presence as a researcher as doing so would have disrupted forum group dynamics. I only use quotes that are publicly available. Having immersed myself on these websites since 2013, I have grown familiar with the "code of conduct" as well as colloquialisms of each forum. For instance, on the Chinese forum site *Tianya*, a search for *xinjiapo* (the standard Chinese term for "Singapore") would render far fewer results than using the slang *pokuo* which is more commonly used to discuss

52 Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis and Jo Tacchi, *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2015).

Singapore. I also follow relevant viral threads and videos that are frequently shared on these websites. All digital ethnographic data was collected within a 10-year period, from 2009 to 2019, matching both Singapore's unprecedented immigration growth as well as the growing importance of the digital sphere for alternative views. I have not chosen the most vicious online comments as data. Rather, only online comments that were typical of online narratives that are widely circulated, and which matched my offline observations were chosen. While all my chapters use digital ethnography in a complementary manner, I have dedicated Chapter Four to mainly digital ethnographic data to show how the online overlaps with the offline. Chapter Four should be read complementarily to the other chapters. The contestation of Chineseness online is not only a result of migrant-local tensions, it also actively shapes how people imagine the Chinese Other. Both Singaporeans and Chinese nationals are avid social media users and the overlap of the online with the offline is evidenced through my interviews with many respondents who commented frequently, "Didn't you see this on the online forum? I read about this online".

I initially resorted to using the mobile media application WeChat to access migrants during fieldwork because of failed attempts to access potential respondents through local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). While NGOs under local contexts generally work with caution, their anxieties were elevated after the Little India riots in December 2013 where about 300 people, many of whom are migrant workers, rioted. Twenty-three emergency vehicles were damaged, including five that were torched. The riot coincided with the start of my fieldwork. Understandably, the local NGOs were highly protective of the migrants they served at a highly sensitive time and denied me access. Fortunately, I was informed by many respondents that WeChat was a good means to seek Chinese contacts. To my delight, WeChat's "discovery" function to seek users of the same application who were in physical proximity to me not only identified Chinese migrants in general but many low-wage male Chinese migrants specifically. Frequently hidden from public view, male low-wage workers are imported by the state in large numbers to do construction work and shuttled at the back of trucks between their work sites and isolated dormitories, leaving them little opportunity to interact with Singaporean society. WeChat enabled me to access many Chinese male low-wage migrant workers who were otherwise hard to meet in person: they work long hours with few days off, and many had curfews to meet at the dormitories or worksites they resided in. In total, I chatted online with fourteen Chinese male migrants on the application, met eleven of them in person and conducted phone interviews (an average

of 1.5 hours) with three respondents using the application's call function. The perils of WeChat for me, however, were that it was both a tool for many to liaise with their friends as well as to hook up. There were visibly more male users of the application than females at least in terms of allowing their profiles to be public, and in the vicinities in which I used the application. As a female user, it was unsurprising then that I received more than a few propositions, mostly from Chinese migrants but some from locals too. It was thus with caution that I proceeded with the many conversations I had on the application. Many of these conversations and propositions reminded me of how lonely being a migrant was, especially for low-wage migrants who cannot bring along their family to Singapore and were socially isolated and marginalized. This recognition of their social marginalization led to Chapter Three where I discuss how low-wage male Chinese migrants use strategies to regain Chinese masculinity.

This book seeks to provide a balanced story through examining both Chinese migrants and Singaporean-Chinese's social imaginaries in all chapters. While the social imaginaries of Chineseness are necessarily diverse, I have chosen to focus on themes that are the most contemporary, have the most urgency and which have not been sufficiently covered by extant scholars. The themes of each chapter are detailed in the chapter outline.

Overview of the book

Following this introduction, Chapter One provides an overview of Chinese identity and Singapore's relationship with China. It discusses how state imaginaries of Chineseness are constructed and contingent on the practical needs of capitalism and geopolitics, whether in China or Singapore. I show that Singapore's Chinese identity is interwoven with China and which feeds off China's evolution. The superficiality and fragility of Singapore's Chineseness has been illuminated with the arrival of new Chinese migrants, compelling Singaporean-Chinese to question the state's imaginary of Chinese identity and Chinese homogeneity. This chapter critically explores the assumption that blood and descent predetermine shared cultural consciousness.

Chapter Two explores migrants' claims to belonging and citizenship, and the host society's denial of such claims. It shows that contrary to many mainland Chinese professional migrants imagining that they are *like* Singaporeans, Singaporean-Chinese segregate between a "middle-class" us and a "working-class" them. Specifically, it analyses that Singaporean-Chinese imagine the Chinese, especially female migrants, as marked by bad

dressing, poor hygiene, and sexual immorality. For Singaporean-Chinese, these markers are imagined to be Chinese migrants' embodiment of the "third world" status of their country and which construct Chinese migrants as of the lower classes and undeserving of Singaporean citizenship. This chapter concludes with a critical consideration of how class is interwoven with nationality and gender in imaginaries of Chineseness to deny Chinese middle-class migrants the right to belong.

Chapter Three details how Chinese men's use of digital media shapes their sense of identities. Drawing on my text chats, phone chats and meet-ups with Chinese migrant men initiated on WeChat and on internet forums frequented by Singaporean-Chinese men, this chapter analyses the fluid meanings of being a Chinese man. I detail low-wage Chinese migrant men's feelings of displacement and how they are positioned by Singaporean-Chinese men into the bottom rung of a hierarchy of Chinese masculinities. I show, however, that Chinese migrant men can reimagine and reposition themselves in ways that establish their masculinity. This chapter reminds us that gender is an important aspect of imagining Chineseness. It concludes that migrants can reimagine gender, nationality and class to reposition themselves as *better* Chinese men than the host society.

Chapter Four investigates the online narratives of locals and migrants to argue that state constructions of Chineseness can become a site of contestation for people on the ground. It shows how Chinese migrants imagine Singaporean-Chinese as "not Chinese enough" by deriding their weak Mandarin proficiency. In defence, Singaporean-Chinese berate Chinese migrants' "culture". It analyses the fact that both groups display issues of belonging: Chinese migrants imagine a homogeneous Chinese civilization while the Singaporean-Chinese show growing fissures along the lines of class, generation, and language. Challenging extant studies on immigrant incorporation which take for granted host societies' sense of belonging, this chapter reflects broadly on the unstable imaginaries of belonging amongst ethnic Chinese subjects – both migrants and hosts – in this age of migration and China's ascent.

Chapter Five analyses how Chinatowns and their link to Chinese identity is imagined. Through a textured description of both the new and old Chinatowns in Singapore, it explores Singaporean-Chinese' imaginaries of a "new" Chinatown and how it is linked to racialization discourses. How Singaporean-Chinese racialize new Chinese migrants is subtle and reinforced by the media as well as state structures inherited from Singapore's colonial history. While there are parallels between the racialization of Chinese migrants in Singapore and colonial racism, this chapter shows that locals

are not merely emulating colonial discourse. Chinese migrants' response of self-orientalisation adds to the complex rubric of racialization. This chapter analyses how host societies' imaginaries of place can enable illusions of power as well as displace themselves in an increasingly mobile world. It offers a broader reflection of how the intersection of Chinese and global capital with local modernity can produce the racialization of migrants.

Finally, the Conclusion reflects on the COVID-19 pandemic and how it illuminated China's centrality to the rest of the world. It revisits the questions raised in the preceding chapters to reflect on the book's implications for how we understand ethnic Chinese subjects' experiences of nationality, gender and class today in an era of China's ascent. Through these reflections, the Conclusion ends with a discussion of how the book's approach provides deep insights into the imaginaries and limits of ethnicity. These insights enrich understanding of an increasingly mobile and diverse world.

In this book I reveal how Chinese migrants and Singaporean-Chinese imagine Chineseness and how such imaginaries shape how they see the Other as well as themselves. Chinese migrants and Singaporean-Chinese' social imaginaries of Chineseness operate both online and offline and interact with the state's imaginary as well as China's ascent. Contrary to the homogenizing category of "Chinese", Chinese co-ethnics are heterogeneous and their social imaginaries of Chineseness interact in variegated ways with nationality, class and gender. Whether it is embracing China's ascent, counteracting state Sinicization or establishing hierarchies of Chineseness, my respondents are, in their everyday lives, contesting Chineseness.

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