Abstract

Beginning in the early 1950s there were tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese who chose to ‘return’ to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Until fairly recently, little attention has been given to the approximately 600,000 ethnic Chinese who chose to immigrate to China from locations throughout Southeast Asia, as well as further afield in the first few decades after the founding of the PRC. There were many factors influencing their migration to a country that many had never stepped foot on. However, it is clear that the Chinese state made a concerted attempt to rally the support (capital and immigration) of overseas Chinese communities. Many of the returnees were resettled on one of dozens of ‘Overseas Chinese Farms’ (huaqiao nongchang) scattered throughout the provinces of southern China. Outside of China they were considered ‘Chinese’ and foreign, juxtaposed against the local or ‘indigenous’ identities that had taken shape in tandem with the independence of former colonies in Southeast Asia and the rise of modern nationalism. Upon their ‘return’ to what was, for many, an imagined ancestral homeland — a country many of them had never seen — they were confronted with a different type of discrimination and suspicion than they faced ‘abroad’. This was despite, and in some cases because of, certain favorable policies enacted by the party state to assist in their relocation and assimilation into society. Ironically, some of the same policies that sought to gradually assimilate them into Chinese society actually reinforced their position as ‘permanent outsiders’: the creation of an official ‘huaqiao’ legal status; institutionalized segregation in the form of huaqiao nongchang, huaqiao villages, and huaqiao schools; and a resultant pariah status that did not begin to recede until after the reforms of the late 1970s. While the concept of ‘huaqiao’ (overseas Chinese sojourners) was falling out of use among Chinese communities abroad, the word was taking on a new meaning in the PRC, both for the Chinese party state, and for those who would come to self-identify as huaqiao/guiqiao.