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# Guiqiao Returnees as a policy subject in China

Nearly half a million Indonesian-Chinese ‘returned’ to China in the 1950s and 1960s, motivated by new Chinese nationalism and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, and by Indonesian policies aimed at marginalising ethnic Chinese. ‘Return’ meant re-embracing Chinese ethnicity, culture, and a political decision to join the new Chinese nation. However, as Wang Cangbai reveals, their journey ‘home’ was to be a painful one.

Wang Cangbai



Fig. 2 (above left) Full of excitement in anticipation for a new life in China, a Peranakan youth visits the Tiananmen Square in 1953 for the first time. Photo courtesy of Huang Fushun.

Fig. 3 (above right) The registration form of Zheng Tianren (originally from east Java), shows that he was enrolled in a ‘preparatory school’ in Beijing in 1957. Upon arrival in China, returned overseas Chinese students were received by qiaowu apparatus and were brought to special ‘preparatory schools for returned overseas Chinese student’ (guiguohuaqiaoxuesheng buxi xuexiao). Image courtesy of Zheng Tianren.

RETURN MIGRANTS ARE OFTEN DRIVEN by material considerations such as higher incomes and better career prospects at home, but for the nearly half a million Indonesian-Chinese – students, petty shopkeepers, traders and labourers – who ‘returned’ to China in the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>1</sup> the motivations were something else. Their decision was partially motivated by the new Chinese nationalism brought about by the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, and partially due to the Indonesian policies aimed at marginalising ethnic Chinese. Most of these returnees were born overseas, including many from *Peranakan* families who have lived in Indonesia for generations. To them, ‘return’ meant a re-identification with the Chinese ethnicity, re-embrace of the Chinese culture, and more importantly, a political decision of joining the new Chinese nation. Ironically and tragically, however, their journey to China turned out to be painful and traumatic. This was not so much because of ill adjustments to the Chinese society on their part, but was mainly due to the Chinese state’s refusal to recognise them as ‘one of us’. They were turned into an isolated group excluded from ‘the People’ (*renmin*).

### The invention of the Guiqiao category

Shortly after their ‘return’ to China, the Chinese government invented an official category, *guiqiao*, to refer to the Indonesian-Chinese and Chinese returnees from other countries. Despite the fact that earlier Chinese governments had previously been engaged with overseas Chinese and that return migration had certainly taken place before, it was the first time that the Chinese government created an official definition for returnees. In the past, returnees were lumped together with overseas Chinese and were generally referred to as *huaqiao* or *qiaomin*, both simply mean ‘overseas Chinese’. The word *guiqiao*, as an official category, first appeared in a 1957 document ‘Explanations about the Statuses of Overseas Chinese, Families of Overseas Chinese, Returned Overseas Chinese and Returned Overseas Chinese Students’ (*Guanyu huaqiao, qiaojuan, guiqiao, guiqiaoxuesheng shenfen de jieshi*), issued by the State Commission of Overseas Chinese Affairs. *Guiqiao* was used as a rather generic term, referring to any overseas Chinese who ‘returned’ to China regardless of their nationalities, age, time

of ‘return’ and whether the ‘return’ was voluntary or forced. In socialist China, the national body politic was imagined not simply in ethnic terms, but also along class lines. The returnees’ dubious class backgrounds and connections with the capitalist world disqualified them from joining the mainstream part of the Chinese nation – the working class ‘People’. They instead had to be re-educated and constantly monitored by purposely established state apparatus and through specifically designed *qiaowu* (overseas Chinese affairs) policies. An editorial of the flagship newspaper of the State Commission of Overseas Chinese Affairs, *Qiaowu Bao* (News of Overseas Chinese Affairs), declared in 1958 (no. 9) that:

“Considering the fact that most *guiqiao* came from capitalist countries and were influenced by capitalist ideology, they must be transformed; as many *qiaojuan* [family members of overseas Chinese or returnees] have been living on remittances and have never participated in manual labour, they must be remolded into working people who will live on their own labour; as they [*guiqiao* and *qiaojuan*] have relatives overseas, they are susceptible to continuous influence of capitalist thoughts. Therefore, the task of transforming *guiqiao* and *qiaojuan* will be time consuming and arduous.”

In Chinese, the word *gui* (return) means more than a reverse movement. It also implies a reconversion of allegiance and renewed pledge of obedience, specifically to those who had previously deviated from the norm, but then came back to comply. For example, the words *guihua* (return and absorb) and *guishun* (return and obey) were used to describe the incorporation of ethnic minorities or rebels by the authorities. In addition, deep attachment to the home land was traditionally seen as the normal state of life and a respected virtue. For instance, the Ming and Qing Courts strictly prohibited their subjects from going abroad for most of their reign. Therefore, in Chinese tradition, the word *qiao* (sojourners overseas) has negative connotations, and suggests someone who is an outcast or untrustworthy. The category *guiqiao* was purposely created by the party-state in order to call for returnees’ loyalty to the socialist motherland, and at the same time to enable the state to monitor and control the returnees.

### Historical vicissitudes

The relationship between the state and *guiqiao* has been unstable, and has been conditioned by changes in the overall political atmosphere. Roughly three stages of development can be discerned. In the early 1950s, the Chinese government formulated a set of policies designed specifically toward *guiqiao*. The central principle of the policies at this stage was ‘to treat [the *guiqiao*] equally as other Chinese citizens with appropriate preferential arrangements’ [*yishitongren, shidangzhaogu*]. The original thoughts of policy makers at that time, especially Liao Chengzhi (廖承志) and Fang Fang (方方) who had overseas backgrounds themselves, was to grant *guiqiao* certain privileges in daily life, such as additional rations to purchase luxury goods at special shops, in order to facilitate their adaptation and to mobilise them to participate in socialist development. The relationship between the government and the *guiqiao* decisively deteriorated at the second stage. During the Cultural Revolution, many *guiqiao* were accused of being ‘spies’ or ‘counter revolutionaries’ and were imprisoned; more were attacked for subjugating themselves to foreign forces (*chongyang meiwai*). *Guiqiao* and even their China-born children were refused entry to the army, the Party, any professions that were considered vital to state security, or from taking up important positions in the state apparatus. The overseas Chinese policies, as observed by Fitzgerald, ‘had veered from left to right, and alternated between severity and leniency’.<sup>2</sup> At the third stage, in the 1980s, the situation changed again. When China earnestly needed foreign investment and technologies for its economic

reform, Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese leaders suddenly found that ‘overseas connection is a good thing’<sup>3</sup> which could be utilised to bridge China with the outside world. *Guiqiao* once again became a positive term. Underlying these dramatic turns in the *guiqiao* policies throughout history has been the state’s constant pursuit of ‘national interest’. The *guiqiao* policies thus constitute an integral part of how the Chinese state has imagined itself, its relation to the internally differentiated population, and its relation to the outside world.

### Re-migration

The political categorisation of *guiqiao*, as a special policy subject, has created profound gaps between the returnees and the local mainland Chinese. Whereas discussions about *guiqiao* in both academic and popular publications are dominated by nation-centric narratives, the real thinking of the returnees themselves is far more complicated. Disappointed by their experiences in China, more than 250,000 *guiqiao* left for Hong Kong and Macao along with their families in the late 1970s once China loosened its control.<sup>4</sup> However, even among the *guiqiao* who stayed in China – most of whom were beneficiaries of the preferential treatment in the 1950s and were staying in the cities after receiving university education – there is still a strong feeling of estrangement and a mentality of sojourning. A survey of Indonesian-Chinese in Beijing in 1998 revealed that, among the 359 respondents, over 11 per cent said they regretted ‘returning’ and over 29 per cent said they would stay in Indonesia if they could choose again.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1990s, China has received a new generation of returnees. Dubbed *haigui*, they are mostly mainland Chinese who have studied or worked overseas for a period of time. How will they fit in with the new developments in China? It is perhaps too early to determine what their relations to the state and the larger society will be. However, the *guiqiao* story forcefully reminds us of the role that the party-state has played in shaping the returnees’ life of in China.

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### Notes

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Fig. 1 A group of Indonesian-Chinese in their sixties performs an Indonesian folk dance wearing traditional Indonesian costumes in Hong Kong in 2001. They are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of a Chinese school in Palembang, Indonesia. They returned to the mainland China in the 1950s and 1960s and then re-migrated to Hong Kong in the 1970s. Photo courtesy of the author.