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

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, 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 adjustments to the Chinese society on their part, but 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 huojiao or guiqiao, both simply mean ‘overseas Chinese’. The word guiqiao, as an official category, first appeared in a 1957 document that introduced the States of Overseas Chinese, Families of Overseas Chinese, Returned Overseas Chinese and Returned Overseas Chinese Students (Gaoyu huoqiao, guiqiao, quanquanzhongguoren (overseas Chinese residents), 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 to be unitary in both ethics and 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 re-educated and constantly monitored by purposely established state apparatus and through specifically designed policies. An editorial of the flagship newsletter of the State Commission of Overseas Chinese Affairs, Qiaomin 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 guiqiao [family members of overseas Chinese or returnees] have been living on remittances and have never participated in the Chinese revolution. They must be remodeled into working people who will live on their own labour; as they [guiqiao and qiaojuan] have relatives overseas, they are susceptible to capitalistic 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 recompensation 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 guihu (return and absorb) and guishen (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 gui (sojourner overseas) has negative connotations, and suggests someone who is an outlier or untrustworthy. The guiqiao category 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 was 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 with other Chinese citizens with appropriate preferential arrangements’ ([jihsihongen, shidangzhagou]). The original thoughts of policy makers at that time, especially Liao Chengzhi (1918-49) and Fang Fang (1917) 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 mobilize them to participate in socialist development. The relationship between the government and the guiqiao 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 (chow-yung-yong). Guiqiao and even guishen who 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’. 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 realised that ‘overseas connections is a good thing’ 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 nationalist, ethnic and cultural narratives, the real thinking of the returnees themselves is far more complicated. Disappointed by their experiences in Indonesia, the returnees – more than 250,000 guiqiao left for Hong Kong and Macao along with their families in the late 1970s once China loosened its control. 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.

Since the 1990s, China has received a new generation of returnees. Dubbed huojiao, 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.

Wang Cangbai

Department of Politics and International Relations
University of Westminster, UK
wangc@westminster.ac.uk

Notes