

The Disobedient Diaspora: Overseas Chinese Students in Mao's China, 1958-66
不歸順的歸國流散者：僑生在毛澤東時代中國(1958-66)

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Abstract

Between 1950 and 1966, about 60,000 overseas Chinese youth, officially known as *qiaosheng*, entered the People's Republic of China (PRC) as students and refugees from Southeast Asia. In the state archival record, *qiaosheng* appeared collectively “disobedient” to socialism, first cast as “capitalist” during the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) and later as a “two-faced” threat during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Not to be taken as face value, their supposed “disobedience” illustrated the broad and complex challenges that the diaspora posed to Mao's China. Even as the Party-state valued the mobilization of overseas Chinese resources, a combination of massive inflows of refugees from abroad and radical transformation at home produced many conflicts over *qiaosheng* across the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, the narrative of “disobedience” revealed not only an unstable relationship between China and the diaspora, but also how the diaspora functioned as a key site whereby differences between socialism and capitalism were worked out.

Keywords

Communist China; Chinese diaspora; *qiaosheng*; students; refugees
建國后中國；華人流散史；僑生；學生；難民

Introduction

In 1958, about three thousand *qiaosheng* – an official term for foreign-born Chinese students — lived in Guangzhou city. During a National Day celebration in 1960, *qiaosheng* at a school were recruited to perform a dance in traditional Indonesian costume. To the dismay of the authorities in attendance, the dancers “dressed like hooligans” and changed the words of the song “Socialism is good” to “Capitalism is good.” According to Party officials who later commented on the event, such misconduct was not an isolated incident, but a common problem. In their

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telling, *qiaosheng* frequently behaved like “spoiled youths”, “disobedient to school regulations, unmotivated [in their studies], indulgent, and wasteful”. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), some spoke derisively about the campaign, saying that the glowing reports of production were nothing but “party boasting” (*dang chuiniu*) and “falsified figures” (*xubao shuzi*). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), *qiaosheng* were portrayed as a potent threat to socialism, while celebratory accounts of those who resolutely cut ties with families overseas to become “new peasants” also appeared in the archival record (Guangzhou City Archives 1958: 194-48; 1960: 194-85; 1966: 192-66).

Taken together, these accounts dramatized *qiaosheng* disobedience and subsequent reform, but it would be a mistake to take them at face value. This is because their “disobedience” was mediated by a larger state discourse about the Chinese diaspora (*huaqiao*), a chief object of struggle in the early decades of the People’s Republic of China. To the Communist Party-state, managing the diaspora signaled prospects of a stronger nation through the use of overseas Chinese resources, but the actual handling of the various groups involved, including *qiaosheng*, turned out to be enormously complicated and sometimes threatening to the socialist order. This was indicated by the fact that the diaspora in the 1950s came to include not only Chinese living overseas, but also a growing array of groups who newly “returned” to the homeland. Among them were *qiaosheng* who grew up in European colonies or newly independent countries in Southeast Asia. Most had never lived in China, but “returned” to pursue a Chinese-language education and seek refuge from political turmoil in Southeast Asia. Said to have been “spoiled by capitalism” in the reports, *qiaosheng* attracted attention because of their foreign upbringing and political ambiguity as socialist subjects. Their presence and supposed insubordination confounded the Party-state view of a bounded Chinese society awaiting liberation. The archives

do not tell us about *qiaosheng* who were not “disobedient” in the language of the state, or whether similar traits also existed among their domestic peers. Instead, officials isolated *qiaosheng* based on an assessment on how well they could serve national goals. As the nation was radically transformed across the 1950s and 1960s, *qiaosheng* represented a focus of conflict over the purpose and direction of socialism.

Seen this way, the image of “disobedience” was not only a matter of encountering unruly youngsters from abroad, but a state commentary on the complex challenges that the diaspora posed to the nation. It can be explained in three ways. First, “disobedience” spoke to the unpredictable and massive influx of returnees like *qiaosheng* into China, challenging national integration at every turn. In postwar Southeast Asia, decolonization, independence movements and Cold War struggles targeted many long settled Chinese communities, casting them as “alien” and forcing them into diaspora. Between 1950 and 1966, over 420,000 Southeast Asian Chinese fled to China due to local expulsions, PRC-sponsored repatriations, or other difficulties. The number also included 60,000 *qiaosheng* who joined the exodus. Even though the PRC state did call on Chinese abroad to join the building of new China periodically, it had never anticipated such large and continuous flows. As the archival records suggest, when it came to *qiaosheng*, officials stressed not their youthful idealism for aspiring to help build China, but their wild behavior that threatened to disrupt national construction.

Second, “disobedience” pointed to the tensions between mobilizing Chinese abroad and those at home, the two goals that collided during the 1950s and 1960s. This can be observed from a close parallel between policy changes toward overseas Chinese groups and official criticisms of *qiaosheng*. Given the importance of remittances as a source of foreign exchange during the Cold War, the Communist state extended a number of special rights and privileges to

overseas Chinese, their dependents living in China, and returnees during the early 1950s. However, intense struggles during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), first to dramatically raise national production and later to reinstate class struggle, demanded a sharp disciplining of all these groups to stringent norms of behavior. During the process, state policies toward them veered from privileged treatment to equal handling to outright suppression (Fitzgerald 1972, Peterson 2012). Correspondingly, official portrayals of *qiaosheng* in the archives also went from disrespectful to rebellious to fully submissive. Placed in the larger frame of radical socialist transformation, “disobedience” was not as much the failure of *qiaosheng* to reform sooner, but more the failure of the state to maintain a stable course of development, as well as to address new contradictions in its relationship with the diaspora.

Third, “disobedience” represented a state perception of a broad-based problem existing among all returnees, calling into question their collective desirability as socialist subjects. Even though *qiaosheng* attracted special attention because most were young and single men, state provisions of education and employment to them were part of a wider package to resettle other groups of returnees. For that reason, *qiaosheng* were sometimes subsumed under *guinanqiao*, a broader official term for “overseas Chinese returnees-refugees.” This was because all subgroups — *guiqiao* (returnees), *nanqiao* (refugees), *qiaosheng* (students) — shared a similar set of needs in the eyes of the state. Many of them required housing, jobs, health care, and financial aid, which made resettlement a demanding operation. As agricultural mobilization became the mainstay of policies in the second half of the 1950s, all subgroups were classified as “surplus labor power” (*shengyu laodongli*) subject to relocation to state farms (GZCA 28 May 1956: 194-35) — a directive that came to provoke widespread resistance. As discussed earlier by Han

Xiaorong in this special issue, their opposition to state policies was collectively explained as “disobedience” to be controlled. This observation soon led to the important question of whether the returnees-refugees were in fact fit for life in socialist China.

Drawing on the Guangzhou City Archives and Guangdong Provincial Archives, this article asks what the state narrative of *qiaosheng* “disobedience” revealed about the role of the diaspora (*huaqiao*) in the early years of the PRC. As socialist construction deepened from 1958 to 1966, the diaspora emerged as an important site whereby differences between socialism and capitalism were worked out. On the one hand, Party officials came to understand *qiaosheng* as “capitalist,” stubbornly disobedient and threatening, even though socialism itself had been an unstable project. On the other hand, *qiaosheng* also used their position as returned members of the diaspora to challenge the purported superiority of socialism, albeit in limited ways. In sum, the narrative of “disobedience” about *qiaosheng* was symptomatic of the changing relationship between diaspora and nation across the 1950s and 1960s. It also shed light on the larger struggle for a socialist China.

The Great Leap Forward, 1958-60

The association of *qiaosheng* with “disobedience” should be understood in the context of the Great Leap Forward, since the campaign marked the beginning of such commentary in the archival record. In the reports, Party officials characterized *qiaosheng* as uniformly critical and even dismissive of socialism. Focusing on their behavior in the schools, officials were most troubled by three collective traits: “disobedience to authority”, “material indulgence”, and “political apathy”. Officials linked these traits to a previous life abroad, imagining that *qiaosheng* had been spoiled by an upbringing lacking in discipline, abundant in comfort, and free

from political commitments. Nonetheless, *qiaosheng* voices in the archives produced a different echo, even as it was filtered through strong official disapproval. Drawing on personal experiences living in Southeast Asia, many of the youths boldly questioned the direction of socialist policies, pointing to the food shortages in China that they found to be absent abroad. Some cited their own knowledge of international affairs, emphasizing the limits of Communist power. As the Great Leap evolved into a national crisis, *qiaosheng*, like many other returnees, came to be criticized as “capitalist” because of their seeming unwillingness to conform to the virtues of thrift and industry. To make matters worse, as returned members of the diaspora, some even contested the authority of socialism by claiming to be experts in their own right.

One vividly recorded case of disobedience from 1960 was that of Zhou Renguang, a fifteen-year-old student enrolled in the Huaqiao Primary School. Zhou had returned to Guangzhou from Thailand in 1957 and was head of a youth gang. School authorities reported that he refused to attend class when his stomach was not full, had “yellow” (pornographic) thoughts and harassed female students, called the principal a conniving “old fox”, and accused the school administration of admitting only students from rich families. To the dismay of the authorities, Zhou also conveyed his dissatisfaction through political language. He called Communists “rice buckets” (*fantong*), strutted around the dormitory wearing a Nationalist *Guomindang* party badge, and claimed that he was an agent of the *Guomindang* and a good friend of the United States. Added to this were his “reactionary” comments, such as “socialism is so superior that we all have nothing to eat. What is better than having an empty stomach?”; “The moon is so bright tonight. Why aren’t the American airplanes [bombers] coming?”; “The United States is good. What is so good about the ancestral country?”; and “Long Live the Republic of

China!” (the Nationalist regime in Taiwan). Shocked at his behavior, officials decided that it was characteristic of all *qiaosheng*, and Zhou must be sent to labor reform (GZCA 1960: 194-180).

Though an extreme case, this example recorded during the Great Leap reflected a common pattern of observations in the reports: *qiaosheng* were rebellious and self-indulgent. In official portrayal, they regularly shouted “reactionary slogans,” engaged in stealing and gang fights, insulted teachers, and bullied other students. They “skipped classes”, “lived in hotels” instead of school dormitories or ordinary housing, “got involved with hooligans”, “participated in criminal activities”, and “had casual relationships with women”; the last of which indicated that officials were particularly concerned with male behavior (GZCA 1958: 194-48). Party officials also criticized *qiaosheng* for “extravagance”, asserting that they “only loved talking about food, clothing, and entertainment”. To circumvent the state-imposed system of dining halls and meal tickets, many used foreign-issued documents of all kinds, such as passports, birth certificates, and immunization records, to eat in restaurants designated for tourists, paying cash (GZCA 1960: 194-180). Some frequently stole food from peasants. A few converted the wooden planks of their beds into cooking fuel. Concerned simply with the uncontrollable behavior of *qiaosheng*, Party officials did not discuss in their reports whether these actions were caused by a real problem of food shortages.

Another common accusation was that *qiaosheng* were “apolitical”, but a closer look at the evidence suggested quite the contrary. In the extreme example mentioned before, Zhou’s open discontent – from apparently never having a full stomach, to the school’s preferential treatment of wealthy families, to claims of superiority of the U.S. and the Nationalists in Taiwan – was political commentary. Others whose satirical statements can be found in the archival record, said that the Party slogan “More, Faster, Better, and Thriftier” (*duo kuai hao sheng*) was

contradictory because “the making of steel was quick but not better” and that “the People’s Communes were “established too early and got ruined” (GZCA 1960: 194-180). Furthermore, even as the Party trivialized *qiaosheng*’s concern over eating, the “excessive” comments about food consumption were direct criticisms of socialist policies. Like Zhou, some *qiaosheng* protested, “There is no way to buy any food. The ancestral nation focuses only on nation building, not people’s lives”. Others went as far as to say, “Biscuits in the ancestral nation are the best fire-resistant material. Not even a dog will eat them.” (GZCA 1960: 194-180) Focusing on the lack of food in the city and the inedible quality of what was available, these charges nonetheless reflected the everyday experience of hunger during the Great Leap. As the nation was called upon to make sacrifices to raise production and surpass the West, these politically charged comments highlighted the gap between state ideology and social reality. It is important to remember that many people across the country shared similar views about the shortages and poor quality of food, as well as experiences of starvation. Therefore the Party’s dismissal of the criticisms as limited to a spoiled group of *qiaosheng* only concealed the widespread occurrence of such experiences.

Though condemned for showing “little interest in politics”, many *qiaosheng* seemed actively engaged, if only in a subversive way. As the Party continued to set them apart from the domestic population and preach the superiority of socialism at home over capitalism abroad, *qiaosheng* simultaneously endorsed and disrupted the narrative by saying that they were indeed a separate and distinct group. However, this condition also allowed them to turn their experiences outside China into a powerful tool of critique. As one *qiaosheng* said, “When [I was] abroad, there was coffee and milk every day, and all the biscuits you could eat. Whatever you want, you get it. Here [in China], we don’t have enough to eat”. Another complained, “Three meals a day

have been reduced to two. In the future, those two meals may even have to be cut”. There was “rigid emphasis on spiritual life and not material life. It is difficult to get by”. One youth went as far as to suggest that life under socialism was substandard and subhuman, saying “[the] poorest people overseas live better lives than those in the [ancestral] country. Those in the [ancestral] country live worse than a dog overseas. Even the dog in our family had some meat to eat.” (GZCA 1960: 194-85). Others aggressively challenged Chinese official interpretations of international politics. Referring to the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957, some *qiaosheng* firmly rejected the supremacy of socialism over capitalism, saying “The U.S.S.R. surpasses the U.S. in satellite technology only. As for science as a whole, the U.S. surpasses the U.S.S.R.” Highlighting the military prowess of the U.S., one youth mocked the low status of China in comparison, despite Party propaganda claiming the contrary, “The status of the U.S. is very high in the United Nations. Ours is very low. How can you say the ‘east wind prevails over west wind’?” (GZCA 1960: 194-85) Using their experiences and knowledge outside China as a frame of reference, these youths confidently questioned the state as the sole authority on international affairs.

Perhaps the most serious challenge of all, some *qiaosheng* went after the Party’s apparent disregard of national, racial and class politics in Southeast Asia, making socialism seem like a self-serving ideology. Reflecting on contemporary events in Indonesia that targeted the Chinese minority, one *qiaosheng* from Indonesia dropped a rhetorical comment, “With the anti-Chinese movement happening in Indonesia, how can it be the ‘[east wind] prevailing over west wind’?” Others confronted the Party-state over the question of remittances, turning the logic of class struggle back onto itself. They asked, “The capital of *huaqiao* capitalists came from exploitation. Wouldn’t bringing it back [to China] be a form of exploitation of the Indonesian people?”

Another *qiaosheng* even sided with the anti-Chinese movement in Indonesia, claiming that it was “legitimate from the point of view of Indonesia” because “the existence of *huaqiao* economic activities [affected] the economic independence of Indonesia” (GZCA 1960: 194-85). These statements made clear the political silence around the mobilization of overseas Chinese wealth in socialist China. Although the Party had begun to denounce *qiaosheng* disobedience as a “capitalist” tendency during the Great Leap, it was not yet prepared to consider that remittance-sending Chinese engaged in exploitation abroad. This recognition would have required the Party to acknowledge the charges of anti-Chinese movements erupting across Southeast Asia. It might have even called into question the mobilization of remittances as a legitimate policy for a socialist state. Here, the caustic remarks made by *qiaosheng* demonstrated to the Party-state how the diaspora could potentially subvert national agendas.

As these reports established that *qiaosheng* were unvaryingly “disobedient”, it is important to note that such an assessment was refracted through the pressures of the Great Leap Forward, the greatest crisis thus far in the history of the People’s Republic. Apart from causing severe urban shortages and rural famines, the radical campaign strained an earlier alignment of policies to build socialism and favor special consideration of the returned overseas Chinese, turning the two goals into a contingent opposition. Like *qiaosheng*, other returnees who were not students were also caught in the details of this complication. On the one hand, officials came to condemn the wider group for being “averse to productive labor” (refusing to participate in state-led collectives and projects) and receiving too many food packages from families overseas (to consume privately or sell on the black market). On the other hand, many returnees came to realize that the Party-state was inconsistent and unfair, constantly changing its policies and squeezing them for their wealth, but ignoring their hardships (GZCA 1958: 194-48). These

clashes told of a complicated conflict, as officials claimed that returnee disobedience was rooted in a former life in capitalist countries, while returnees insisted that present injustices under socialism provoked their behavior. The similar pattern of commentary over *qiaosheng* in the archives registered growing anxiety on the part of the Party-state during the years of the Great Leap. In struggling to control the unruly behavior of *qiaosheng*, the Party equated the diaspora with “disobedience”, making it a key arena to negotiate political authority.

Crisis in Indonesia, 1959-1960

As the Great Leap Forward developed into a full-blown catastrophe, a new influx of returnees arrived in 1960, putting more pressure on an already unstable situation. In that year, nearly 100,000 people, including 6000 *qiaosheng*, arrived in China. Although this vast group was officially repatriated by the PRC government, it only came after an unexpected outbreak of anti-Chinese violence in post-independence Indonesia. As early as 1954, recognizing that the overseas Chinese question had become a major obstacle in its strategy of “peaceful co-existence” with the new Southeast Asian nations, the PRC government relinquished all political claims on Chinese overseas and encouraged Chinese overseas to adopt local citizenships (Mozingo 1976). During the 1955 Bandung conference, it also began working with the Indonesian government to abolish the “dual nationality” of its Chinese minority. Under the mutual agreement, Chinese in Indonesia, regardless of place of birth, were to renounce Chinese nationality before they could apply for Indonesian citizenship. However, by the late 1950s, an upsurge of anti-Chinese sentiments thwarted these plans for an orderly transition. A series of discriminatory measures instigated by Indonesian army commanders, including the 1957 closure of Chinese schools, a 1959 ban on alien retail traders that mainly affected Chinese in the countryside, and a prohibition

against the residence of Chinese in West Java, contributed to a mass movement to subdue and drive out the Chinese. Many were evicted from their shops and homes. Some were beaten and jailed (Mackie 1976). In the wake of these developments, the PRC government sent ships to bring 94,000 Chinese to China in 1960. Under the grand slogan, “The great ancestral nation is the most powerful protector of huaqiao” (*weida zuguo shi huaqiao zui youli de kaoshan*), the final number of returnees-refugees entering China reportedly reached 130,000 (Godley 1989).

The surprising spillover of events in Indonesia forced the nation already embattled by the Great Leap to turn immediately to resettlement, but the efforts were met with vigorous resistance from the repatriates. An economically dispossessed and socially mixed group, the majority of these returnees-refugees consisted of small traders and laborers, though there were also thousands of students who came by themselves or with their families. Not a few were *peranakan*, a Chinese-indigenous creole group that had lived in Indonesia for many generations. Many spoke vastly different languages from each other — Javanese, Indonesian, or various Chinese dialects. Some were part or not at all ethnically Chinese, but were children descended from intermarriages, or native women married to Chinese men. By the end of 1960, about 54,000 of these repatriates settled in Guangdong province, including a total of 7000 who stayed in Guangzhou city.

Although the official policy was to relocate the new arrivals to their “original native places” (*hui yuanzhi*) or the farms throughout the province, most returnees desperately tried to stay in the city, having been small shopkeepers and laborers without agricultural experience in Indonesia. Widespread resistance to rural relocation was reported early in March 1960. To remain in the city, returnees who had money stayed with family relatives, or survived on interest from investment and savings. Some anxiously tried to find work and were reluctant to move to the countryside. A few were helping those not yet there to look for housing to prepare for their

arrival (GZCA 1960: 194-91). Some local residents devised housing scams targeting unsuspecting newcomers looking to buy. Fallen victim to these schemes, some ended up buying wooden shacks that were government property and soon to be demolished. Others bought houses at inflated prices or of smaller sizes than they had been led to believe (GZCA 1961: 194-98).

As the repatriates insisted on remaining in Guangzhou, their need for survival put severe strains on city resources, leaving local officials in a scramble to alleviate the problem. Long lines appeared outside restaurants and shops, as returnees carrying foreign-issued passports and Chinese government-issued remittance certificates tried to buy meals and other necessities. Some participated in speculation in the black market, buying and selling goods such as biscuits, cigarettes, watches and bicycles that they had brought along from Indonesia. Government reception offices reported theft of food items. Even though job assignments and household registrations were to be handled through the Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau and several reception services offices under the Provincial Receiving Committee, individuals found ways to get around the bureaucracy. Some bypassed the Bureau and applied directly to the Public Security Bureau for household registrations in the city to gain faster approval. Others were able to find work in factories through personal connections, even though private recruitment was forbidden. When a chemical fertilizer factory in the suburbs had to lay off its workers, a group of recent returnees who had been employed there illegally went to petition the officials for assistance. Those who had already been relocated to the farms reappeared in the city, searching for work, roaming around in groups, and broadcasting their frustration (GZCA December 1960: 194-91).

Mostly young males, *qiaosheng* belonged to this wider group challenging state policies of agricultural mobilization, but were also singled out because of their perceived labor power.

Initially, the government set up new schools and expanded old ones to accommodate the students. A new university, the Overseas Chinese University, was built in Quanzhou, Fujian. But as these institutions struggled to keep pace with the demand, officials also renewed their criticisms of the students. They charged that the newly returned *qiaosheng* had incorrect, bourgeois thoughts, studying for personal “fame” and “profit”, rather than for the greater socialist cause. In the summer of 1960, thousands were sent to labor camps in the countryside. “Vacation” assignments involving farm work soon became permanent (Godley 1989: 337). As it became clear that relocation to the farms was the only viable strategy to absorb the flood of returnees, the state doubled up efforts to build new national farms and expand existing ones. In Guangdong province, 14 new farms were created, bringing the total to 18 and housing altogether 31,600 people (Peterson 2012: 116). In two of the farms that had been established in the early 1950s, Lufeng and Huaxian, about 70 per cent of all inhabitants came during the year 1960. Even though *qiaosheng* were only about one-fourth to one-fifth of the new arrivals, being young and able-bodied men, they represented one-third to one-half of the labor force on these farms. Their potential contribution to productivity was hence crucial to state consideration (GZCA December 1960: 194-91).

Similar to the earlier reports on *qiaosheng* in the schools, officials reporting on the farms observed that the returned youths were “disobedient” to socialist construction, while *qiaosheng* protested that they had been misled about life in the homeland. A Communist Youth League report in 1961 suggested that while *qiaosheng* had hoped to help build the nation, most had not imagined becoming farmers. This “psychological unpreparedness” led to much resentment and open conflicts. While officials believed that *qiaosheng* were “unprepared”, some youths claimed that they had been “betrayed” because the government seemed interested only in the labor of

repatriates, while showing little concern for their well-being. Some *qiaosheng* were shocked that the farms were a far cry from the mechanized Soviet farms that they had seen in films, but were essentially “deserts” and “wastelands”. Others brashly speculated that the anti-Chinese movement in Indonesia must have been instigated by the Chinese embassy to trick them into returning. Many demanded to go to schools in the city or return to Indonesia immediately (Guangdong Provincial Archives: 1 May 1961: 232-1-51). These comments revealed that at least some *qiaosheng* thought that they had been deceived, had had other options besides coming to China, and deeply regretted the decision. In 1962, some 11,000 students reportedly applied for permits to visit relatives in Hong Kong; very few returned (Godley 1989: 337).

In response, Party officials asserted that *qiaosheng* were utterly unreasonable about a privileged treatment exclusively extended to them but unavailable to others, the result of special consideration for the returnees. For example, officials noted that every *qiaosheng* was entitled to 30 catties of grain each month, about one-third to one-half more than that received by an average peasant. However, everybody complained incessantly that there was not enough to eat, saying, “All the things available here can be bought overseas. But you cannot buy anything once you return. The ancestral nation is lying [about its strength] to foreigners”. Instead of keeping the peace, discontented *qiaosheng* “caused disturbances”, “assaulted kitchen cooks”, and “stole sweet potatoes from the collective”. Only fleetingly did the officials acknowledge that most *qiaosheng* came from educational backgrounds and were inexperienced in farming (GDPA 1 May 1961: 232-1-51). This recognition suggested a probable sense of displacement among these *qiaosheng* who felt trapped in the harsh conditions of farm life without a future.

Seen more broadly, the stubborn “disobedience” of *qiaosheng* to become laboring subjects indicated that the return of the diaspora invited formidable instability to a changing

China. Coinciding with the Great Leap, the challenges added by the Indonesian crisis came in the form of major diplomatic setbacks, sudden waves of reverse flows, pressing needs for accommodation, and aggressive protests about mistreatment. Difficult as they might seem, these encounters told of a political determination to maintain the aims of mobilizing Chinese at home and abroad, despite the widening differences. At the same time, the burden of reconciling the differences fell on the returnees more and more. In a speech made during a Great Leap meeting in April 1958, Guangzhou Mayor Zhu Guang urged returnees to observe the following norms of conduct: “reform themselves from the ways of old society overseas by ceasing to engage in smuggling [of goods bought from Hong Kong] and market speculation [of foreign exchange]; strive for remittances; manage the household by diligence (*qin*) and thrift (*jian*); participate in socialist construction whenever possible; educate the children to take up labor and don’t spoil them; and urge their relatives overseas to obey the laws of their countries of residence” (GZCA 1958: 194-48). Moreover, returnees should encourage their relatives living in Hong Kong and Macao to move back to the mainland, while they themselves should avoid visiting those two places.

This call to simultaneously strengthen and sever transnational ties, as well as to stop and maintain transnational habits of living, revealed how poorly returnees fit in the shifting terrain of Mao’s China. They were called upon to become dutiful, frugal laborers bound to the collective and to limit their ties abroad. Yet they were also supposed to retain active enough connections with families overseas to receive remittances and channel them unfailingly toward the nation. What was left out was how these new directives rendered the transnational way of life nearly impossible. The serious problem was aptly described by one returnee in the reports, “Huaqiao policy gets created at five o’clock and revised at six o’clock [changes constantly]. It is like

flowers reflected in a mirror, moon reflected in the water [i.e. cannot be grasped]”. Facing confusing and ever-changing expectations of their role, returnees including *qiaosheng* became “disobedient” subjects that increasingly stood in the way of socialist transformation.

The Cultural Revolution, 1966-76

As the state led a slow recovery from the Great Leap Forward in the early 1960s, opposing efforts led by Mao Zedong to reinvigorate class struggle soon put *qiaosheng* and other returnees in jeopardy. The agenda to include these groups in socialist construction had been in place since the early years of the People’s Republic, but it utterly collapsed during the bitter struggles against revisionism of the 1960s and 1970s. Already reproached as “capitalist” and “bourgeois” during the Great Leap, returnees now lost their appeal as possible socialist subjects because of a new claim that they engaged in exploitation abroad. Classified as one of the “seven black elements” (*hei qi lei*) during the Cultural Revolution, “overseas Chinese” (*qiao*) were expunged from the socialist imaginary, together with landlords (*di*), the rich (*fu*), counterrevolutionaries (*fan*), criminals (*huai*), rightists (*you*), and spies (*te*). In an atmosphere of paranoia, all transnational ties were branded as “foreign relations” (*haiwai guanxi*), a term equated with political subversion. Open violence against returnees and resident families of overseas Chinese became commonplace. New regulations forbade them to leave the country, visit relatives overseas, send letters overseas, or receive remittances (MacFarquhar 1974, Zheng 1995). During this time, returnees, students, and resident families of Chinese overseas, which had received somewhat distinct attention earlier, were lumped together as *huaqiao*, a problem that is also explored by Caleb Ford in this special issue.

This dramatic turn came as a result of a late and rigid application of class analysis to the diaspora. Even though the Communist Party had been active in courting overseas Chinese support since the 1920s (Peterson 2012), it was also true that the leadership under Mao Zedong had never integrated diaspora into the central critiques of capitalism and imperialism. Instead, the early inclusion of diaspora had been mostly driven by a pragmatic strategy to outflank the rival Nationalists. Consequently, the Party emphasized how Chinese overseas could serve the creation of a new order, but had not expected that their inclusion should inspire any changes to the nature of that order. This position got carried over into the post-1949 period, during which the government often handled matters related to the overseas Chinese in a piecemeal fashion. It was not until the mid-1950s that it developed the first coherent policy to encourage remittances and offer preferential treatment to returnees and resident families of the overseas Chinese. Assumed to be fundamentally different from the domestic population, these groups were treated as transitional subjects to be brought into the fold of socialism at a future time. However, as socialist transformation gathered speed through the 1950s, it was not at all clear if the groups were above class analysis, and for how long.

A turning point came during the Socialist Education Movement in 1963, a campaign that helped spark the Cultural Revolution a few years later. During the Great Leap, official criticism of returnees as “capitalists” had referred to the difficulty in remaking them as laboring subjects of the collective. By the early 1960s, Party theorists began to portray them as an exploitative class. For example, one piece written by the United Front Department of the Foshan District Committee in 1963 said that *huaqiao* capitalists were similar to domestic capitalists, since both “[made] a livelihood by controlling the means of production and exploiting the working class”. Nevertheless, the article posited a key difference: the “double nature” (*shuangchong xinzhi*) of

huaqiao capitalists. On the one hand, cadres explained, *huaqiao* had suffered the oppression and discrimination of foreign imperialism and ethno-nationalism. Therefore they looked upon the ancestral nation as their protector and cherished hopes that it would become wealthy and powerful. This showed that they were patriotic. On the other hand, their interests as a capitalist class led them to harbor misgivings about socialism. They were also easily swayed by reactionary propaganda overseas. This “double nature” of *huaqiao* capitalists caused them to “wander around the intersection of two very different social systems, socialism and capitalism, as well as to place one foot in each of two different boats at the same time”. Thus, the article concluded, the class struggle against *huaqiao* capitalists, which implied those overseas and returned, was bound to be long and tortuous (GDPA 1963: 216-1-368).

This theorization marked a major shift in the Party understanding of the diaspora. Here, overseas Chinese capitalists were firmly linked with exploitative behavior, making them politically suspect. Patriotic as they might seem, it was then decided that they engaged in the exploitation of the working class overseas, as did the domestic capitalists in China. Therefore, being oppressed and oppressive at the same time, *huaqiao* were unable to side with either capitalism or socialism in a decisive manner. This “double-sidedness” made them transgressive and unreliable, as captured by the expression “to place one foot in each of two different boats at the same time”, commonly used to describe infidelity in romantic and sexual relationships. As class struggle against *huaqiao* was declared essential and exceptional, transnational ties became a serious liability.

Recast as a two-faced threat to socialism, *qiaosheng* and other returnees now faced the most extreme scrutiny. In the past, the Party opined, too much attention had been given to accommodating the special characteristics of *huaqiao*. Henceforth, a sharp line must be drawn

between socialism and capitalism, the exploiting and the exploited. “Politics” must be highlighted (*tuchu zhengzhi*) through the study of Mao Zedong Thought. In the archival record, there were corresponding accounts of *qiaosheng*’s political awakening on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. Narrated in the first person, the stories conveyed a new sense of class consciousness, often culminating in a total repudiation of transnational ties. Typical of this genre was a piece by a young woman, Zhang Xiufen, entitled “Listen to the words of Chairman Mao. Dedicate one’s youth to the ancestral nation” (May 12, 1966):

I was born into a *huaqiao* family. My father and uncles all live abroad. After graduating from senior high school in 1963, I was not admitted into a university. I stayed at home and did nothing for three years. From a young age, I was under the influence of capitalist thought. I grew envious of the indulgences of my relatives abroad who wore high-heeled shoes and stylish clothes...At the end of 1963, my uncle overseas introduced me to a *huaqiao* youth named Cai XX. Cai owned two restaurants in Colombia. I thought that after leaving the country, I would be able to enjoy wealth, live in a foreign-style house, and get around in a car. At that time, I was assigned to do some substitute teaching in a primary school. I kept counting the days [before my departure]. My individualistic and selfish thoughts were many. I thought that I was applying my talents to trivial tasks. Cai seemed to be a sincere man and we began writing each other. He also tried to arrange for documents for me to leave the country.

In this account, Zhang confessed that her “capitalist” upbringing encouraged sloth and waste. Instead of committing to productive labor, she idled for years and indulged in consumption. The prospects of marrying a rich overseas Chinese man set off reveries of a life surrounded by

material pleasures. But when she learned about Mao Zedong thought, Zhang instantly realized her mistakes:

Later, I joined the street neighborhood youth association and studied the thought of Chairman Mao. I learned to analyze things through “class.” What is the class background of Cai? After marrying him, wouldn’t I become the housewife of a capitalist? I would then look after the children, cook, and depend on another person for a living for the rest of my life. What’s more, in a capitalist society, men have the right to have “three wives or four concubines.” Therefore, I abandoned my wish to leave the country. I applied to work in a farm village. (GZCA 1966, 192-66)

Here, integral to Zhang’s political awakening was a paired analysis of class and patriarchy. Recognizing the potential danger of double oppression, first by becoming dependent on a capitalist and then being confined to traditional gender roles, she rejected the marriage proposal and dropped her plans to leave China. Instead, she devoted herself to socialist construction in the countryside.

Another example of self-criticism involved Zhang Yingguang, a male *qiaosheng* who had recently come to China and who lived on the Huaxian Fruit and Fertilizer Farm, named after the leader of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) Hong Xiuquan. Zhang recounted his transformation into a “new peasant” in a piece entitled, “Always listen to the words of Chairman Mao. Make a lifetime of revolution in the village” (April 19, 1966):

I came from a *huaqiao* merchant family. In 1960, I came back to study. I wanted to become an expert, an engineer. I was afraid of going to the village. Salaries were low and you had to endure sun and rain. Work was dirty. Life was dull...After reading Mao’s essay about the spirit of the Foolish Man [Moving the Mountain], I joined agricultural

production. My parents objected and terminated their remittances. They said that I needed to inherit the family business.

In this story, Zhang blamed his class background, *huaqiao* and capitalist, for his pretentious disposition. Because of his desire to become “expert”, meaning intellectually skilled but not politically conscious, he unduly avoided physical labor. As he tried to correct himself through Mao Zedong thought, his parents overseas punished his new outlook by ending the remittances. Their obstruction forced Zhang to re-evaluate his family ties:

I was determined to be an heir of the proletariat, not the capitalists. So I was determined not to inherit my father’s business. My parents forbid me to farm. They stopped sending money. This is because of their class nature and political attitudes. They considered farming a lowly business. If [my parents turned me into] an heir of capitalism, that would not be showing me their love, but rather doing me harm. It would be to destroy my revolutionary career. (GZCA 1966: 194-68)

This narrative illustrated how the broader conflict between socialism and capitalism played out in Zhang’s family. On the one hand, his parents wanted him to inherit the family business overseas, opposed to his revolutionary commitments, and showed disdain for farm labor. On the other hand, using class analysis to interpret his parent’s actions, Zhang came to realize that he must shun the example of his father, cut off his family ties, and embrace his new life as a peasant. In terms of “parental guidance”, Zhang went on to declare that the history of the Chinese Communist revolution — from the heroic struggles on the Korean battlefield to Mao’s essay, “Serve the People” to the selflessness of Canadian doctor Bethune and Party member martyr Zhang Side — provided the more appropriate kind.

Without any doubt, the veracity of these autobiographical narratives should be questioned. But the examples powerfully illustrated one fact for analysis: the profound transformation expected of *qiaosheng* under the Cultural Revolution. Through the means of class struggle, the young narrators in the archival record turned against their past as members of the diaspora and were born again as “new peasants”. Even though the critiques of returnee extravagance and disdain for agricultural labor had been made before by Party officials in the 1950s, these first-person narratives served a new agenda to discredit transnational connections on a far more intimate level. Separating themselves from marriage and kinship ties, *qiaosheng* in the stories seemed to have successfully ended their transitional status as socialist subjects. But the virulent attacks on diaspora groups in the broader society soon suggested that unfettered suppression imposed by others, rather than conscious transformation led by the individual, was the more common reality. Dramatized in the stories of *qiaosheng* struggling against their own families, instead of being struggled against, the diaspora embodied the Party’s deepest anxieties as it seemed to expose the vulnerability of socialism.

Conclusion

The controversies over *qiaosheng* “disobedience” showed that diaspora was an indispensable means of forging, and therefore understanding, the early history of the People’s Republic of China. During the 1950s and 1960s, *qiaosheng* arrived with high hopes for educational and job opportunities to shape the ancestral homeland. Many also came as part of a wider group of returnees-refugees who saw China as a safe haven from the political upheaval in Southeast Asia. As the upsurge of anti-Chinese movements unexpectedly sent close to half a million people to the PRC, the massive inflows forced the government to confront many

challenges brought along by the social heterogeneity of the returnees and the economic pressures in their integration. Drawing on their knowledge and experiences outside China, *qiaosheng* also mounted incisive critiques about the Party, questioning socialism as a lived experience and a political means to bring progress. Managing diaspora turned out to be a key component of national development and control. Claiming to be part of diaspora also gave some returnees the authority to speak, albeit in limited terms.

Meanwhile, Mao's China was hardly the homeland of peace and stability that many returnees had wished for. Its rapid transformation from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution, as well as the social strife that happened as result, turned the twin goals of mobilizing Chinese at home and abroad into a deep contradiction and later a damaging conflict. As Party leadership continued to situate *qiaosheng* and other returnees between socialism and capitalism in a shifting terrain, diaspora repeatedly functioned as an important site where the two systems were defined and redefined in relation to each other. In so doing, the Party faced the complex questions of which groups to mobilize, which groups to suppress, and how to be in charge, with answers varying from one point to the next. Because of their supposed "disobedience", though more accurately the ever-changing expectations, returnees like *qiaosheng* were caught in the incessant attempts to reposition socialism vis-à-vis the wider world.

Finally, even though the Party violently suppressed the role of diaspora during the Cultural Revolution, this shift was just as important as the earlier accommodation in the 1950s, since the abolition also proved temporary. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping after 1978, the attraction of overseas Chinese capital and expertise became essential to yet another new agenda of socialist modernization. As China transitioned from the Mao era to the Deng period and beyond, the redrawing of lines between socialism and capitalism renewed desires to manage and

claim diaspora, bringing them to a full circle. In all of these cases, the invocations of diaspora were politically contingent, rather than culturally determined. They also made clear that “return” was almost always a complicated proposition.

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