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Commentary

Looking to China and Back: On India's Diaspora Engagement, Knowledge Transfer, and the Limits of Inclusion

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Abstract

Against the background of the rise of 'diaspora institutions' since the early 2000s, this commentary reflects on China's diaspora engagement and India's interest in it in the context of its own institutionalization of diaspora engagement since the early 2000s. It argues that, notwithstanding historical and political differences, some lessons could be learned from China. These pertain to the importance of recognizing the various segments of the diaspora; the role of community organizations; the centrality of diaspora research; and the connection between diaspora policies and shifting national priorities. However, both in China and India, some principal limits remain in terms of diaspora engagement due to the prioritizing of the socio-economically advantaged; the tension between cultural, ethnic, and territorial understandings of the nation; and because political inclusion lags behind the focus on economic and knowledge contributions. These limits lead us to reconsider some of the shared ideas, assumptions, and practices behind the rise of 'diaspora institutions' in a broader sense.

Keywords

Diaspora engagement; China; India; nationalism; knowledge transfer

Why Chinese Diaspora Engagement and India?

China and India have the world's largest diasporas, with recent estimates of around 60 million (2014) and 28 million (2015) respectively (Zhang 2014; Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs website). Because these estimates would include both ethnic Chinese and Indians holding foreign nationality and Chinese and Indian nationals, numbers vary greatly based on how ethnic Chinese and Indians are identified and identify themselves. It is however estimated that the number of Indian nationals currently residing abroad is higher than that of Chinese nationals residing abroad (over 15 million versus over 9 million in 2016) (Brown 2017). To reach out to and engage with 'their' diasporas, China and India have set up 'diaspora institutions,' 'formal government offices dedicated to emigrants and their descendants,' which are now present in more than half of the United Nations Member States (Gamlen 2014). As such, the term diaspora, initially applied to refer to the forced exile of Jews and Armenians and connoting suffering and oppression, has become infused with new meaning. Governments, among others, have used it as a stance or idiom to 'remake' the world through an appeal to loyalties (Brubaker 2015: 129). Diasporas in this sense are made and unmade as governments see fit, expanding and contracting according to domestic, regional, and global structural changes. They are by no means homogenous or fixed and are composed of an amalgam of sub-groups.

Obviously, we can ask ourselves whether members of a 'diaspora' would want to be 'included' in state policies and targeted by nation-states their ancestors left long ago. The underlying question I wish to address here is that, if these policies exist and are growing rapidly worldwide, are some ways of engagement better than others? Can we learn from existing practices? Since the 2000s, India has made efforts to institutionalize its diasporic outreach efforts, and in doing so, it has shown interest in diasporic engagement in China, which has a longer history of institutionalized engagement. In light of this interest, the question arises: What is China's mode of engagement and can it offer any lessons for India? One could argue that the different historical trajectories of both would make a comparison of present policies superficial at best. In addition, one could object that differences in the nature of governance, political ideologies, and institution-building between the two countries pose severe limits to any application of China's engagement in an Indian context. India is, after all, the world's largest democracy, whereas China remains a Party-state ruled by the Chinese Communist Party. In fact, some have argued that these different systems of government have resulted in a more economic and cultural 'strategy' for China, and a more political 'strategy' for India (Brown 2017).

In spite of these limitations, it is worthwhile to ponder the question of the Chinese mode of diaspora engagement in relation to India for three reasons. The first is the obvious reason mentioned above: India has shown interest in China's 'model' when it redesigned its system for diaspora engagement in the 2000s, raising the imperative question of 'models,' knowledge transfer and 'best practices' in a field where target

groups are marked by diversity. Given this diversity, is it useful to think in terms of ‘models’ and ‘modes of engagement’? Can knowledge be ‘transferred’ in this context? Secondly, in spite of the different historical trajectories of China and India, there are some remarkable similarities in their history of diaspora engagement that make this question all the more relevant. Even though China’s nationality law was based on *ius sanguinis* or blood right and India’s on *ius soli* or right of the soil, China did not necessarily have a more inclusive policy at all times since the start of engagement in the late nineteenth century. Between the 1850s and 1940s, facing imperialism and war, both China and India reached out to diasporic populations in their struggle for independence. Following independence and with the start of the Cold War and decolonization, both subsequently took a more distant approach toward diasporic populations. Finally, under economic restructuring during the 1970s, both re-engaged with their diasporas and invited them to contribute to the homeland’s development. In the process of diaspora engagement, their respective nationality laws also evolved. We could hence say that, in spite of differences, there were also some significant overlaps in engagement practices. Thirdly, the fact that both are multi-ethnic states also makes it relevant to look at China in relation to India, because this complex composition also shapes their response to extraterritorial nations. Both China and India are presented with numerous challenges in terms of nation-building, and these challenges are also reflected in diaspora engagement.

I have elaborated the historical trajectory of diaspora engagement in China and India elsewhere and will focus here on the latest period of re-engagement since the 1970s instead (van Dongen 2017). In doing so, I will pay attention to the conflicting notions of ‘diaspora’ that exist in official discourse in both countries and what this means in terms of the inclusion of diasporas. I will reflect on whether or not we can think in terms of ‘models’ given the contradictions mentioned above. As Gamlen (2014) argues, in order to understand the spread of diaspora institutions, we need to pay greater attention to the role of attempts at establishing a system of global governance in the realm of international migration. Especially relevant here is the role of ‘policy diffusion,’ or how ‘policy ideas are being evolved, assembled, disassembled, disaggregated, dispersed, adapted, transformed, reformatted, and reassembled in different contexts’ (Gamlen 2014: 193). With this in mind, this article reflects on China’s diaspora engagement and India’s interest in it in the context of its own institutionalization of diaspora engagement. It argues that, notwithstanding historical and political differences, some lessons could be learned from China, but there are also severe limits regarding inclusion. These limits also encourage us to question accepted practices and assumptions about diaspora engagement in general.

Some General Lessons from the Chinese Approach

After a period of relative disengagement since the 1950s, both China and India rediscovered and reinvented ‘their’ diasporas in the 1970s. In China, reform and opening

up under Deng Xiaoping benefited from the investment of diasporic entrepreneurs in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, which was not the case in India (Ye 2014). For India, it was the oil boom and migration to the Gulf that spurred renewed engagement with the Indians overseas, even though this only intensified with economic restructuring in 1991 and with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 1990s. In the 1970s, the Indian government already created incentives for Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), such as high interest rates for deposits made in foreign currency (Lall 2001).

In the early 2000s, the High Level Committee of the Indian Diaspora (HLCID) provided a detailed analysis of the Indian ‘Diaspora’ (with capital D) as a basis for policies in India. Policy recommendations included the foundation of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), which was set up in 2004, but which has since (as of January 2016) been integrated into the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). The 2001 High Level Committee report referred to China’s success in diaspora engagement, which was attributed to both its economic reform policy and its attractive diaspora engagement policies (*HLCID* 2001: xvi). While conducting research on Chinese diaspora engagement in 2013, I was contacted by one of the institutions affiliated with MOIA to carry out a study on this topic. The search for academic knowledge in this context reflects the belief that expert knowledge can be transferred to the realm of policies through ‘epistemic communities’ in the realm of diaspora policy-making (Gamlen 2014). Limitations notwithstanding, this was at least an opportunity to engage in this form of knowledge transfer.

The said study I undertook in 2013 outlined the main features of the Chinese ‘model,’ how this model differed from existing Indian institutional and policy practices, and whether it offered any lessons for India. It included a section on the historical background of the Chinese diaspora (stages of migration, geographical distribution, and changes in constitution); diasporic organizations; policies and institutions before and after 1978; remittances and philanthropy; legislation; and protection of citizens abroad. Some of the main points emphasized in these sections are as follows. Firstly, the study highlighted the significance of the historical background of Chinese migration in policy formation. Chinese traders had been present in Southeast Asia for centuries, setting up vast organizations and networks. Coolies, who left China in the nineteenth to work on plantations and in mines following the abolishment of slavery, nevertheless only constituted a small section of the overall Chinese diaspora. Remigration from Southeast Asia to developed nations had marked Chinese migration after World War Two, and since reform in 1978, the so-called ‘new migrants,’ often highly educated and from various parts of China rather than from the Southern provinces, had made their way to developed countries across the world. These various groups, it was noted, have different needs, requirements, and expectations in terms of how they relate to ‘China.’

Secondly, the study underscored the crucial role of diasporic community organizations in the Chinese system, both in China (returnees and dependents) and

abroad. Community organizations, originally set up around the principles of dialect, surname, and place of origin, have historically played and continue to play a central role in the life of Chinese emigrants. Even though the principles of organization have evolved (for example, new migrants have also set up alumni or professional organizations), the traditional organizations continue to function as crucial intermediaries between the host societies and China. Apart from regular visits to these community organizations by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), the most important of the institutions for diaspora engagement, two other main institutions have also served to lock in support from these organizations, namely the China Zhigong Party and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC). This system has also included representation in legislative and advisory bodies, namely in the form of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress and through the Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan Compatriots and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Here, we should note that China has built on its long history of engagement to develop this system, and that its Leninist mode of organization has also facilitated a centralized, hierarchical, and multi-level system.

A third important aspect of the Chinese approach that the study accentuated was the gathering of knowledge and research on its diaspora. In China, this has happened not only through research institutes at universities directly administered by the OCAO, such as Jinan University and Huaqiao University, but also through news agencies under the OCAO. In addition, several universities in China contain research institutes specializing in Southeast Asia, where the majority of ethnic Chinese still reside today. Finally, the study discussed the shift from a focus on FDI to attracting knowledge, the connection between diaspora engagement and the development of talent plans, and the emphasis on return migration since the 2000s. Centralizing STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) since the new millennium, diaspora policies in China have been operating in tandem with national development priorities.

In spite of historical and political differences, the Chinese approach offers valid insights for India in four areas. Firstly, China has made efforts to reach out to several 'waves' of emigrants, be it descendants of traders in Southeast Asia or 'new migrants' in the United States. As such, there has been some acknowledgment of the diversity of its diaspora. Secondly, in spite of its hierarchical model and state involvement, the centrality of community organizations nevertheless offers mechanisms for interaction and organization and also a limited form of representation. Thirdly, China has recognized the vitality of research on the diaspora, and academics are involved in dialogues and agenda-setting. Finally, shifts in engagement have followed shifts in overall policy, moving from financial contributions to contributions in knowledge production and allowing for more flexibility in this area (such as contributing from abroad rather than returning, or making it easier to stay in China on short-term visas).

Comparing this to policies in India, we can ask the question of whether sufficient attention has been paid to the different segments of the diaspora, namely early traders, indentured laborers, and those workers and IT specialists who left India since the 1970s. For example, the former Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs only had some offices in emigration states such as Gujarat and Kerala and was not represented throughout India. Secondly, given historical and political differences, India has not relied on a similar community approach as China has, but we can nevertheless ask whether organizations could not play a more central role in diaspora engagement. Hitherto, there has been a limited reliance on organizations such as the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO). Instead, interaction with Indians abroad has often taken place through political speeches at mass events. Diasporic organizations involved have also been organizations in support of political parties such as the BJP (Brown 2017). Thirdly, distinct from Chinese practices, knowledge gathering on the diaspora has remained limited in India, in spite of the fact that the founding of a PIO university and a diaspora database had already been mentioned in the early 2000s. Research remains conducted in a limited number of academic institutions, such as at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and this research often serves policy agendas. Consultation of the Indian diaspora has furthermore only taken place through elite mechanisms such as the Prime Minister's Global Advisory Council of People of Indian Origin, which was also suspended in 2015. Broader consultation mechanisms such as those that exist in China have been absent. Fourthly, diaspora policies in India have not necessarily followed national policies and have remained focused on certain key areas only, such as facilitating networking, the protection of emigrants, and the promotion of trade and overseas investment. The emphasis on the protection of emigrants (also reflected in the position of the Protector General) follows from the vast number of low-skilled workers in the Gulf region. Emigration remains a strategy to reduce unemployment back home and to increase remittances, with a recent shift to attracting more FDI. These practices reflect the continued perception of the diaspora as an economic resource in India, even though some recent efforts have been made in terms of creating knowledge networks.

Limits of Engagement in China, India, and Beyond

In spite of some of the merits of the Chinese mode of engagement, it nevertheless also contains relevant shortcomings. These have to do with the very nature of diaspora, as already referred to above. For what constitutes a diaspora and what does it mean to be 'Chinese' or 'Indian'? In policies, states erase differences within diasporic communities, such as those of origin, class, dialect, ethnicity, or religion, whilst at the same time also reinforcing other differences, such as those between citizens and ethnic diasporas of foreign nationality. Other modes of privileging certain groups over others also contradict the inclusive rhetoric of the Diaspora with capital D.

One mode of privileging concerns that of targeting the socio-economic advantageous and highly skilled members of the diaspora in developed countries who are invited to contribute to the development of the homeland. Since the re-engagement with diasporas following economic restructuring during the late 1970s, both China and India have created a narrative of economic success. After the first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD), which was held in January 2003 around the date of Gandhi's return to India in 1915 to symbolically appeal to the Indian diaspora, Devesh Kapur already warned against policies that would primarily target the rich Indian diaspora in countries such as the United States (Kapur 2003). This followed the announcement that those of Indian origin in a select number of rich countries would be eligible for dual citizenship. Consequently, descendants of the indentured labor diaspora received much less attention, even though Gandhi, employed as a symbol to connect with the Indian diaspora through the PBD, had fought for precisely the rights of this group during his stay in South Africa. In China, similarly, at global conventions where businessmen and officials have interacted in recent decades, the discourse has been one of success and economic achievements. This first narrative, then, remains exclusive from a socio-economic perspective.

A second mode of privileging follows from conflicting understandings of the nation in ethnic, cultural, and territorial terms, each of which leads to the exclusion of certain segments of the diaspora. In some cases, diaspora is defined in civilizational terms, and this civilization is understood primarily in terms of a 'Han' or 'Hindu' nation. Scholars of diaspora, some of whom rejected the term, have made much effort to deconstruct reductionist understandings of diasporas, such as in the form of debates on 'Chineseness' (Ang 2003; Reid 2009). In recent years, scholarship has also paid more attention to the question of ethnic minorities and changes in identification modes of these communities in a global context, but this is not reflected in policies or official discourse (Barabantseva 2011).

The cultural definition of the nation also intersects with and exists in tension with ethnic and territorial understandings of it. Troubled political histories mean that existing territorial borders are imposed on ethnic definitions, leading to a more limited and segmented understanding of the ethno-cultural nation. The emphasis on territorial sovereignty and loyalty, so dominant under the modern nation-state system, already existed during the late Qing dynasty and under the British Raj. In the former, China was considered to be the Middle Kingdom, its edges populated by less civilized barbarians. In the latter, borders were complex but central delineations within British territory and between British India and the Princely States. In a contemporary context, territorial understandings of the nation continue to intersect with the so-called inclusive diaspora engagement that both states promote in official discourse.

In China, nationality laws, even though based on *ius sanguinis*, nevertheless include territorial restrictions. The 1980 *Nationality Law* reaffirmed the no dual nationality principle first instated in the 1950s, thereby clearly drawing a boundary

between the PRC and the millions of ethnic Chinese still residing in Southeast Asia. In India, the Person of Indian Origin (PIO) scheme, which was launched in the late 1990s, emphasized ‘origin’ as a criterion of belonging, but it intersected with territorial definitions of nationhood as it excluded those from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. To refer to the seeming move towards ethnic belonging in conceptions of Indian citizenship in the new millennium, which we also find reflected in policies towards the Indian diaspora, Anupama Roy has used the fitting term ‘the deception of de-territoriality’ to refer to the reality of boundaries that intersect with ethnic conceptions of the nation (Roy 2010: 137).

The tension between ethnic, cultural, and territorial understandings of ‘Chineseness’ or ‘Indianness’ that we find in official diaspora engagement is an extension of debates on the nature of the nation. Already in the early twentieth century, intellectuals and politicians in China and India advocated both a civic nationalism based on voluntary inclusion and primordialist or ethno-cultural understandings of the nation built on pre-existing markers. In China, the scholar, reformer, and journalist Liang Qichao (1873-1929), in his ‘Renewing the people’ (*xinmin*), emphasized the moral and voluntary aspect of nation building, whereas scholars such as Zhang Taiyan embraced ethnic (Han) understandings of the nation (Chu and Zarroa 2002). In India, whereas the Indian National Congress (INC) put forward a civic nationalism (in spite of accusations of elitism and Hindu-centrism), intellectuals such as Lokmanya Tilak (1856-1920) and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) openly advocated a ‘Hindu nationalism,’ even though the latter argued that Hinduism was neither religiously defined nor territorially bound (Chatterji 2013). We find traces of these conflicting markers of the nation in contemporary diaspora engagement policies and rhetoric.

A third shortcoming of policies that also constitutes a form of exclusion is that developments regarding political inclusion have lagged behind the demands for economic and knowledge contribution from the diaspora. Dual nationality was first raised in China in 2004, but has not been granted. Legislation to manage overseas Chinese affairs also continues to fall behind policies, with only a handful of laws regarding land use, investment, legal protection, nationality and exit and entry. As noted, the Chinese diaspora has increasingly been represented at the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), but representatives do not have voting rights as yet. In India, the PIO Scheme was discontinued and merged into the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) Scheme in 2015 which, in spite of its name, continued to be marked by territorial exclusion and did not grant political rights. The use of ethnic origin cards is but one form of ‘para-citizenship’ that ties governments to populations abroad without granting citizenship (Ragazzi 2014: 76).

Overall, in both China and India, and in diaspora engagement practices elsewhere, there has been much reference to symbolism and emphasis on emotional belonging, but a

pragmatic flexibility short of *de facto* inclusion has marked policies. In China, there is a clear historical reason behind this, as ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia were considered exporters of Communism during the Cold War period and they were hence encouraged to take up nationality in the host societies from the 1950s onwards. In spite of a more inclusive policy during the 1990s that included both Chinese nationals abroad (*huaqiao*) and ethnic Chinese of foreign nationality (*huaren*), in practice, a clear distinction between nationals and ethnic Chinese has been preserved. The point is of course not that this distinction should not be preserved—many ethnic Chinese might not even be interested in China’s outreach efforts—but rather that there is a discrepancy between discourse and reality and that pragmatism often overrides the interests of diasporic subjects. Hostilities toward ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian countries, as for example in Indonesia in 1998, only led to a cautious reaction from China. As China has also become an immigration country in recent decades, it has become more flexible in allowing for short-term stays, but the threshold to long-term residency and citizenship remains very high. Due to practices of illegal overstaying, China is nevertheless reconsidering its policies and it can be expected that barriers to long-term residency will be lowered in future. We should also note that in this respect, China has reportedly taken note of India’s PIO and OCI cards and has discussed the use of an ‘overseas Chinese card’ (Brown 2017). Hence, the ‘knowledge transfer’ does not move in one direction and this is not to say that another story about what China could or would want to learn from India could not be told.

As long as political inclusion remains reduced to a right that can be bought through investment for the happy few (with citizenship having become a commodity), domestic Chinese or Indians might also not be too keen on seeing the diaspora included politically. In addition, with governments granting financial and other benefits to highly-educated returnees, a two-tier system is created that may cause resentment among those educated and trained at home. As Brubaker (2015: 19) notes, citizenship in this sense is far removed from T.H. Marshall’s understanding of it as ‘counteracting the inequality-generating logic of capitalism.’ As such, the role of class divisions in diaspora engagement, not just in China and India, but overall, and how this affects various forms of inclusion, should be properly acknowledged and mediated.

Conclusion

Even though China’s diaspora engagement offers some insights for India, such as making attempts to reach out to the various segments of the diaspora; involving community organizations and relying on consultation mechanisms; investing more in academic and policy research on diaspora; and, in terms of policies, moving away from a focus on remittances and FDI to knowledge and talent return policies, the Chinese system also has its limitations in terms of inclusion. These limitations also lead us to question some of the assumptions and practices in the field of diaspora engagement. In both China and India,

an increasingly inclusive rhetoric targeting both nationals and those of ethnic descent has been accompanied by *de facto* exclusive policies. ‘Models’ for engagement in this sense have been instrumental and development-driven, extending deficits within the nation-state beyond borders.

Firstly, more should be done to move away from a discourse of economic success that privileges the socio-economically advantaged as showcased on conventions where government and business intersect. Secondly, the tension between ethnic understandings of the nation and cultural and territorial understandings of it means that the discourse on the inclusion of the ethnic diaspora is to a certain extent a hollow rhetoric. The limits of civic nationalism are hence extended to the diasporic realm, where civilizational or territorial markers limit inclusion of groups that do not belong to the preferred nation. Finally, mechanisms for political inclusion need to be more than just symbolic or emotional markers of belonging. Informal consultation mechanisms are a hopeful start, but more work is to be done. If Diaspora, as Brubaker argues, is also a normative term used by states to remake the world in their image, some long-term thinking needs to be done about whether the order they envision is merely an economic one. When we think about ‘models’ of engagement, the question is whether states are willing to envision diasporas as more than ‘assets’ or politically paralyzed ‘para-citizens.’

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