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ROUNDTABLE: DECOLONIZING CHINESE HISTORY

The Multidirectional Diaspora: Writing Chinese Migration History in a Time of Global Racial Reckoning

Taomo Zhou 💿

School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore Email: Tmzhou@ntu.edu.sg

In *On not speaking Chinese*, cultural studies scholar Ien Ang characterizes migrant scholars as 'tactical interventionists'; instead of making counter-hegemonic claims, they usually bring out the contradictions and the violence inherent in all posited truths.¹ In the spirit of this claim, I thought long and hard about how to make the best use of my connections to both worlds – my lived experience of growing up in China and my access to academic resources in English-language academia. As James Gethyn Evans will show in his essay in this roundtable, 'decolonizing' the field of Chinese history should involve the dual tasks of questioning the hegemonic narratives propagated by the People's Republic of China (PRC) government *and* the concentration of knowl-edge production in the Global North. Without the participation of PRC-based scholars, the current 'decolonization' movement would become a Western enterprise just like colonization.

My fellow panellists' essays successfully de-centre the PRC state in historical narratives about non-Sinitic states, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Maoist organizations in places such as India and Peru. Yet we have not fully addressed the issue that prestige gravitates toward the English-language world. As a result, scholars who receive their training, write, and teach entirely in Chinese are peripheral relative to global academic networks.² As Stuart Hall says, 'everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power'.³ From my privileged and protected position as a US-trained researcher now working in Singapore, I do not see myself as a representative of the PRC intellectual

¹ Ien Ang, On not speaking Chinese: living between Asia and the West (Abingdon, 2001), p. 2.

² Lin Yao, 'Brokered dependency, authoritarian malepistemization and postcoloniality: reflections on Chinese academia', *American Behavior Scientist* (published online 1 Nov. 2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221134840.

³ Stuart Hall, 'The meaning of new times', in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, eds., *New times* (London, 1989), p. 133, cited in Ang, *On not speaking Chinese*, p. 36.

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community, which is self-reflective, self-reflexive but often silenced by a political regime that induces systematic malformations of knowledge.⁴ But I aspire to use this opportunity to bring in an awareness about the complicated entanglement we are all embedded in.

Our conversation here about Chinese history is inspired by the rising social justice movements in North America. In the past few years, the word 'decolonization' has gained an extended scope beyond its original meaning of 'making a colony into a self-governing entity with its political and economic fortunes under its own direction'.⁵ In the domains of education and culture, the loosely defined term 'decolonization' commonly refers to efforts to empower marginalized groups by questioning Eurocentric knowledge production. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to this broadened understanding of the concept as the 'decolonization paradigm'.

In the field of Chinese migration studies, literature scholar Shih Shu-mei has pioneered the adoption of 'colonialism' to characterize the domination by mainland China's homogeneous representation of 'Chineseness' over various forms of Chinese identities worldwide. Shih wrote as early as 2011, 'Writers and artists on the multifarious margins in China and outside have critiqued China-centrism and the hegemonic call of Chineseness, considered as *colonial* impositions of arbiters of identity.'⁶ Shih and many other scholars are rightfully alarmed by the PRC's economic and geopolitical ascent and its growing efforts to engage the Chinese overseas. In Xi Jinping government's official discourse, Chinese migrants and settlers, whose lineages might have been outside China for generations, are unified by 'a common root of the Chinese ethnicity, a common soul of the Chinese culture, and a common dream for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'.⁷

Given the popularity of the decolonization paradigm in the Euro-American context, should we – historians of China in the English-speaking world – mobilize it for our critique of the PRC state? More specifically, would the 'decolonization paradigm' help us destabilize a civilizational discourse that defines Chineseness by blood and descent? Would it help us counteract the PRC government's propaganda that conflates ethnicity with cultural conformity and expects affinity for a monolithic homeland?

In this essay, I argue that the ubiquitous use of 'decolonization' in contemporary Western public discourse has diluted the term's explanatory power, and that applying it to a different social context will likely obstruct rather than aid our analysis. I agree with scholars and activists including Olúfémi Táíwò, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang that 'the easy absorption and transposing' of the

⁴ Lin, 'Brokered dependency'.

⁵ Olúfémi Táíwò, Against decolonisation: taking African agency seriously (London, 2022), p. 14.

⁶ Shu-Mei Shih, 'The concept of the Sinophone', *PMLA*, 126 (2011), pp. 709–18, at p. 710, emphasis mine.

⁷ Xi Jinping (习近平), 'The rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the common dream of the sons and daughters of China at home and abroad' (实现中华民族伟大复兴是海内外中华儿女共同梦), opening speech at the 7th World Congress of Overseas Chinese Associations (世界华侨华人社团联 谊大会), 6 June 2014, http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0717/c397563-27322408.html (accessed 8 July 2022).

term has made the decolonization paradigm into 'a catch-all trope' based on 'gross representations of objective processes and events'.⁸ We cannot defeat the PRC government's essentialist interpretation of ethnic belonging by deploying a conceptual framework that overgeneralizes history in similar ways.

More importantly, the decolonization paradigm projects a false dichotomy which might lend itself to ideological purposes. By creating a binary that pits an oppressive centre in mainland China against progressive peripheries in Hong Kong and Taiwan, or uniform mainlanders against dynamic Chinese communities overseas, the decolonization paradigm might result in a counterproductive attempt to replace the PRC state's essentialist approach to history with another form of essentialism, one that centres 'around the idea that authoritarian China cannot be compared with liberal democratic countries'.⁹ During the Cold War and in what is arguably a 'Cold War 2.0' today, race has frequently been weaponized by nationalists on both sides, whether through Beijing's condemnation on anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States or in Western critique against the mass detention of ethnic minorities in the PRC.¹⁰ This kind of political rhetoric, called 'whataboutism' (bilan zhuyi 比烂主义) by human rights lawyer Teng Biao, 'frames what is happening in the United States (or any other Western country) and China as inherently separate and unconnected in any way – two sides of an equation that ultimately cancel each other out'.¹¹

In the passages below, I show that English-language academic writings on Chinese migration have pioneered the critique against ethno-nationalist narratives about Chineseness. Perhaps beyond conceptually distinguishing or disconnecting the Chinese overseas from China, Anglophone scholars of Chinese migration could use our unique position to help the Euro-American public understand *both* China and the Chinese overseas communities 'in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms'.¹² To this end, perhaps we shall not entirely disavow the hotly debated term 'diaspora'. The very process of decolonization in Southeast Asia created complex circumstances under which certain ethnic Chinese acted diasporically towards China; today, the Southeast Asian Chinese who 'returned' to China leverage their multiple identities and strategize their ties with multiple homelands. As I discuss below, the historical trajectory of the PRC's policies towards the Chinese overseas has not been linear; the migration routes of Chinese overseas are not always

⁸ Táíwò, *Against decolonization*, p. 21; Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1 (2012), pp. 1–40.

⁹ Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, Global China as method (Cambridge, 2022), p. 2.

¹⁰ Jeremy Tai, 'Racial capitalism and the national question in the early People's Republic of China', in Will Bridges, Nitasha Tamar Sharma, and Marvin D. Sterling, eds., *Who is the Asianist? The politics of representation in Asian studies* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2022), pp. 89–108.

¹¹ Teng Biao (滕彪), 'How comparisons between the United States and China became a virus' (中 美比较如何成为一种病毒), *The New York Times Chinese Website* (纽约时报中文网), 28 May 2020, cited in Franceschini and Loubere, *Global China as method*, p. 4.

¹² Mustafa Emirbayer, 'Manifesto for a relational sociology', *American Journal of Sociology*, 103 (1997), pp. 281–317, at p. 281, cited in Franceschini and Loubere, *Global China as method*, p. 6.

uni-directional; and the political identities of the Chinese overseas do not always move along a teleological path from long-distance nationalism to assimilation.

Scholars of Chinese migration have long debated how to define the subject of their research. The authority of the field, Wang Gungwu, avoids the term 'diaspora', because it uncritically assumes 'China' as the homeland of all people with Chinese ancestry and ignores the diverse local conditions in which ethnic Chinese construct new identities and communities.¹³ When used without discretion, the term 'Chinese diaspora' is dangerous due to its implication of political association between the PRC and ethnic Chinese all over the world. As historian Madeline Hsu puts it, '[T]his danger can emanate both from China in cultivating Chinese overseas as resources for national development and from non-Chinese in perceiving such a threat from settled ethnic Chinese populations.'¹⁴ Shih Shu-mei further asserts that the term 'diaspora' is a 'euphemism' for Chinese settlers' colonial practices in the past and a tool for the PRC's mobilization of Chinese overseas in the present.¹⁵

In contestation against this understanding of the Chinese diaspora, Shih Shu-mei carves out a counter-hegemonic cultural space of 'Sinophone', which refers to 'Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness'.¹⁶ The core of this concept is a rejection of identification with the PRC and an affirmation of local allegiance. As Shih writes, Sinophone culture in any given nation-state is 'an integral part of that nation-state's multi-culturalism and multilingualism'; for instance, 'Sinophone American culture is American culture.¹⁷ Shih's theorization has profound impacts among historians. For instance, from the gender perspective, recent works by Rachel Leow and Sai Siew Min critique how Chinese patriarchies perpetuated the myth of undisrupted lineage rooted in the homeland.¹⁸

The role of China in the world economy and global politics has been influencing English-language studies of ethnic Chinese overseas. In the North America context, the history of Chinese overseas initially operated as a marginal extension of Chinese studies.¹⁹ The anti-communist and anti-Chinese

¹³ Wang Gungwu, 'A single Chinese diaspora? Some historical reflections', in Wang Gungwu and Annette Shun Wah, *Imagining the Chinese diaspora: two Australian perspectives* (Canberra, 1999), pp. 2–15.

¹⁴ Madeline Y. Hsu, 'Decoupling peripheries from the center: the dangers of diaspora in Chinese migration studies', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 20 (2019), pp. 204–15, at p. 210.

¹⁵ Shu-Mei Shih, 'What is Sinophone studies?' in Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, eds., *Sinophone studies: a critical reader* (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 1–3, at p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 7–8.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rachel Leow, 'The patriarchy of diaspora: race fantasy and gender blindness in Chen Da's studies of the Nanyang Chinese', *Twentieth-Century China*, 47 (2022), pp. 243–65; Siew-min Sai, 'Becoming Chinese in the Malay world: colonialism, migration and history in Singapore', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 24 (2023), pp. 606–24.

¹⁹ Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among others: emigration in modern times* (Lanham, MD, 2009), p. 5; Hsu, 'Decoupling peripheries from the center', pp. 204–5.

violence in Southeast Asia and the civil rights movements in the United States gave rise to research models that presented the experiences of the Chinese overseas as part of the national histories in their countries of residence.²⁰ This emphasis on localized belonging is a rebuttal against the American domino logic that after the communist victory in China in 1949, the Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia would collectively serve as Beijing's fifth column.²¹ As Deng Xiaoping initiated Reform and Opening in China, a transnational turn in historiography led to 'an explosion' of studies on Chinese identities and networks that traversed the boundaries of the nation-state.²² Sinophone studies' advocacy for 'decoupling' between Chineseness and China foreshadows the ongoing decoupling between the United States and the PRC.²³ As optimism at the height of globalization during the first decade of the twenty-first century dwindled, many Chinese overseas feel vulnerable and thus desire to present themselves as assimilated minorities in their countries of residence, rather than being forced into political affiliation with China.

While enriching discussions of the heterogeneity and hybridity of Chinese communities around the world, Shih's 'exclusionary approach' to mainland China might suffer from a methodological asymmetry and might foreclose the possibility of exploring transnational connections.²⁴ Whereas the diversity, adaptivity, and resourcefulness of the ethnic Chinese abroad are celebrated, the Han mainlanders could be made to appear as homogeneous and docile subjects of the state. Against Shih's proposal of 'non-relation with China', literature scholar David Der-wei Wang suggests a broader definition for Sinophone studies which includes mainland Chinese writers.²⁵ Similarly, historian Chien Wen Kung outlines a more expansive scope for 'Sinophone history' stretching from Taiwan to the Philippines.²⁶

Perhaps we can reframe the question from either/or – for or against diaspora – to if and how. As Ien Ang once wrote, 'If I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics.'²⁷ What motivates the PRC state to claim or disavow Chinese overseas and under what conditions? Conversely, what motivates

²⁰ See, for example, Leo Suryadinta, ed., Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians (Singapore, 1997).

²¹ Ngoei Wen-Qing, Arc of containment: Britain, the United States and anticommunism in Southeast Asia (Ithaca, NY, 2019).

²² Shelly Chan, Diaspora's homeland: modern China in the age of global migration (Durham, NC, 2018), p. 5.

²³ Chien-hsin Tsai, 'Issues and controversies', in Shih, Tsai, and Bernards, eds., *Sinophone studies*, pp. 17–24, at p. 20.

²⁴ Flair Donglai Shi, 'Reconsidering Sinophone studies: the Chinese Cold War, multiple Sinocentrisms, and theoretical generalization', *International Journal of Taiwan Studies*, 4 (2021), pp. 311-44.

²⁵ David Der-wei Wang, 'Sinophone intervention with China: between national and world literature', in Huan Saussy, ed., *Texts and transformations: essays in honor of the 75th birthday of Victor H. Mair* (New York, NY, 2018), pp. 59–79, cited in Shi, 'Reconsidering Sinophone studies', p. 313.

²⁶ Chien Wen Kung, Diasporic Cold War: nationalist China, anticommunism and Philippine Chinese, 1930s-1970s (Ithaca, NY, 2022), p. 223.

²⁷ Ang, On not speaking Chinese, p. 36.

individuals to attach themselves to or detach themselves from the PRC and under what historical circumstances?

As with many other states that have a large population of overseas nationals, the PRC's connection with its diaspora is not predetermined by blood and descent. While these factors represent key conditions, the PRC's ties with its diaspora have been carefully regulated by its policy-makers in accordance with changes in the international order.²⁸ In its first years of existence after its founding in 1949, the PRC struggled to win formal diplomatic recognition from certain decolonized or decolonizing countries. As a member of the communist bloc and the state which now governed where many Chinese overseas perceived as their ancestral homelands, the PRC appeared to many as a threat to the post-war order – a non-compliant outlier that rejected a clear separation between domestic and foreign affairs. To alleviate fears among many newly independent Southeast Asian countries for political and military intervention, the PRC and the Indonesian government signed the Sino-Indonesian Dual Nationality Treaty at the Afro-Asian Conference of 1955. In this agreement, the PRC renounced the Republic of China's Nationality Law, which claimed anyone born to Chinese parents anywhere in the world as a 'Chinese national'.29 The 1955 treaty presented an exclusive choice to Indonesianborn Chinese: either register as PRC nationals or undergo formal naturalization procedures and become Indonesian citizens.³⁰ In the words of leading PRC scholar of Chinese migration, Zhuang Guotu, by repudiating jus sanguinis (blood right) citizenship, the PRC 'decolonized' from Southeast Asia.³¹

After the Second World War, a significant number of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia embraced PRC-oriented identities as a means of decolonization. Like the Hong Kong activists of the 1960s depicted in Gina Tam's essay in this roundtable, left-leaning Chinese–Indonesian youth who came of age during Indonesia's struggle for independence saw socialist China as a symbol of national self-determination. The PRC–Indonesian collaboration in the Afro-Asian movement, in which the formerly colonized countries became vocal on the international stage for the first time, bestowed liberating potential on PRC-oriented identity. By looking towards the PRC, some left-wing youth found a new way to define 'Chineseness' in the Indonesian context that departed from its past association with middlemen serving Western colonialism. Identifying with a progressive ancestral homeland paradoxically

²⁸ Els van Dongen, 'Behind the ties that bind: diaspora-making and nation-building in China and India in historical perspective, 1950s–2010s', *Asian Studies Review*, 41 (2017), pp. 117–35.

²⁹ On the Republic of China's 1929 Nationality Law, see Shao Dan, 'Chinese by definition: nationality law, jus sanguinis, and state succession, 1909–1980', *Twentieth-Century China*, 35 (2009), pp. 4–28.

³⁰ Taomo Zhou, Migration in the time of revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War (Ithaca, NY, 2019).

³¹ Zhuang Guotu, *Huaqiao huaren yu zhongguo de guanxi* (Guangzhou, 2001), pp. 251–2, cited in Kung, *Diasporic Cold War*, p. 8.

became, for some left-leaning ethnic Chinese, a way to negotiate political belonging in an anti-imperialist Indonesia. 32

Formerly enthusiastic participants in PRC-oriented diasporic politics in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s, many Indonesian-born Chinese who migrated to mainland China are now acting diasporically towards Indonesia. In September 2022, the Indonesian ambassador to China visited Guangdong's Yingde Overseas Chinese Tea Farm, a resettlement site for ethnic Chinese expelled from Indonesia due to discriminatory policies in the 1950s and 1960s. The ambassador was warmly greeted by farm residents who dressed in batik, spoke fluent Bahasa Indonesian, cooked Indonesian food, and performed Indonesian dances.³³ These 'returned' ethnic Chinese used their migratory experiences as a cultural resource for developing tourism and a political capital to win recognition from the PRC government, which was eager to cultivate cordial relations with the largest economy in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the new context of growing trade between the two countries, some of these migrants even re-Indonesianized their children by sending them 'back' to study in Indonesia, as an Indonesian diaspora identity is an asset which would open more employment opportunities for mainland Chinese youths. Several second-generation migrants embark on career paths such as Indonesian translators and teachers, local staff at Indonesian consulates, and reporters with a Southeast Asia focus in China.

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In his 2019 public history book, Peking University professor Luo Xin writes, 'Historians are not only the victims of dark times, but also the makers of dark times.' In warning against the rise of popular ethnonationalism in China, he recalled how historians working for Hitler contributed to the spread of Nazism and antisemitism. In a precarious political environment where the risks involved in directly confronting the state are high, Luo encourages fellow historians to stay faithful to their moral responsibility through acts of professional refusal – specifically, not participating in nationalist myth-making projects.³⁴

Luo and a few other PRC experts on China's northern frontiers have publicly criticized arguments that declare the supremacy of Han culture.³⁵ Meanwhile, another group of scholars has openly expressed concerns over Beijing's propaganda regarding the Chinese overseas. In 2016, Liang Yingming, professor

³² Hui Yew-Foong, Strangers at home: history and subjectivity among the Chinese communities of West Kalimantan, Indonesia (Leiden, 2011).

³³ Huang Huilan (黄慧兰) and Wang Minghui (王明惠), 'Indonesian ambassador to China, Djauhari Oratmangun, visits returnees from Indonesia' (印尼大使周浩黎探望印尼归侨), 26 Sept. 2022, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/j3WDvvLZ4ZSxkqkj9F000A (accessed 27 Sept. 2022).

³⁴ Luo Xin (罗新), A rebel who refrains from doing things he/she should not do: critique, skepticism and imagination (有所不为的反叛者:批判、怀疑与想象力) (Shanghai, 2019).

³⁵ See, for example, Ge Zhaoguang (葛兆光), Here in 'China' I dwell: reconstructing historical discourses of China for our time, translated by Jesse Field and Qin Fang (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2017); Yao Dali (姚大力), Ten theses on northern ethnicities (北方民族史十论) (Guilin, 2007).

emeritus at Peking University, remarked that it caused great discomfort among the Chinese overseas and aroused suspicion from foreign governments when PRC officials addressed both PRC nationals abroad and foreign citizens of Chinese descent as 'overseas compatriots' (*haiwai qiaobao*). Liang reminds policy-makers in Beijing to respect the fact that when Chinese people living overseas adopt foreign citizenship, they pledge political loyalty to their own countries of residence rather than acting in co-ordination with the PRC.³⁶

The brave voices of critical thinkers in the PRC remind us of the importance of constructing a transnational alliance amidst what are often 'nationally mediated structures of power and oppression'.³⁷ In the ongoing movements to undo the legacies of colonialism, the nebulous and over-used decolonization paradigm creates dualism and suggests irreconcilable differences. When uncritically transplanted to the English-language study on China, this method might drive us to become reactive rather than reflective on contemporary geopolitics, reinforce rather than transcend ideological divisions, and reproduce rather than overcome the logics of essentialism. While Sinophone scholar Shih Shu-Mei rightly highlights the need to oppose the ethnonationalist claims of the contemporary PRC government, we cannot 'decolonize' the study of Chinese overseas by dispensing with 'China' entirely. Historically, the PRC's anti-colonial ideology had a strong influence on the politics of belonging among the ethnic Chinese during Southeast Asia's decolonization process. In our current time of global political polarization, engagement with PRC-based scholars might be a critical step towards further pluralizing Chineseness and the most tactical act of counter-hegemonic resistance.

To counter the PRC state's essentialist discourse about the Chinese overseas, the controversial concept of diaspora might serve as a useful tool when it is understood as a multidirectional process that can be instrumentalized by both the governments and migrants in different ways. As historian Adam McKeown argues, 'understanding diaspora as a category that can be used to define and describe social groups is not so desirable as the development of a *diasporic perspective* that can direct the analysis of geographically dispersed institutions, identities, links and flows'.³⁸ From such a diasporic perspective, migration from China persisted during the Mao era, when the country was perceived as secluded from the rest of the world; it is becoming increasingly multidirectional and it will almost certainly continue.³⁹ There will always be ethnic Chinese abroad acting diasporically toward the mainland due to emotional ties, social networks, ideological beliefs, economic interests, or sheer opportunism. Indeed, when we characterize diaspora as a 'process rather

³⁶ Yew Lun Tian (游润恬), 'Peking University professor Liang Yingming: China should understand the positions of the Chinese overseas rationally' (北大教授梁英明:中国要理智看待海外 华人立场), *Lianhe zaobao* (联合早报), 22 Feb. 2016.

³⁷ Dean Istuji Saranillio, 'Why Asian settler colonialism matters: a thought piece on critiques, debates, and indigenous difference', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 3 (2013), pp. 280–94, at p. 286.

³⁸ Adam McKeown, 'Conceptualizing Chinese diasporas, 1842–1949', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 58 (1999), pp. 306–37, at p. 307, emphasis mine.

³⁹ Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, *Citizens in motion: emigration, immigration, and re-migration across China's borders* (Stanford, CA, 2019), pp. 1–2.

than an object of analysis', we would agree with Sinophone scholar Shih Shu-mei that 'diaspora has an expiration date' and 'everyone should be given a chance to become a local'.⁴⁰ But if we take a similarly 'processual' view concerning mainland China and understand it less as a static, enclosed society and more as an elastic, evolving social space, we might conclude that 'it is not probable that the "end of diaspora" is in sight'.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ Shih, 'The concept of the Sinophone', pp. 713–14. On diaspora as a 'process', see for example Sidharthan Maunaguru, 'Thinking with time: reflections on migration and diaspora studies through Sri Lankan Tamil marriage migration', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64 (2020), pp. 1485–96, at p. 1488; and Lok Siu, *Memories of a future home: diasporic citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (Stanford, CA, 2006).

⁴¹ Josh Stenberg, Chien-Wen Kung, and Charlotte Setijadi, 'From Pulau to Pulo: archipelagic perspectives on Southeast Asian Chinese ethnicity from the Philippines and Indonesia', *Asian Ethnicity*, published online 13 Oct. 2022, p. 5.

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