# 'Being Chinese' in Mauritius and Madagascar: Comparing Chinese Diasporic Communities in the Western Indian Ocean

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## Abstract

Chinese migration to the Western Indian Ocean since the 1800s was part of an earlier historical trend that saw European colonial powers setting up plantation economies that required foreign laborers. Migrants from Southern China arrived in Mauritius and Madagascar first as indentured laborers, and later as free merchants. Despite many similarities between the two diasporas, they differed in terms of their cultural and linguistic propensities. Furthermore, since the 1990s, both Mauritius and Madagascar have been experiencing rising influences of Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrants working in infrastructure construction, commercial and educational sectors. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in these two Western Indian Ocean countries between 2015 and 2020, this paper applies the theoretical lens of 'diaspora-for-others,' featured in this special issue, to explore the similarities and differences between Chinese migration trajectories to Mauritius and Madagascar, and their respective diasporic identity formations. Local socio-historical contexts in Mauritius, Madagascar, and China influence the transnational experiences of Mauritian and Malagasy Chinese communities, which further contributes to their heterogeneous, fluid and changing cultural identities. In addition, the People's Republic of China's increasing engagement in Western Indian Ocean countries as a gateway to Africa in the past two decades has also created more nuances in the distinguishable boundaries within the Chinese diaspora communities in the region.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on the Chinese presence in Africa has experienced a significant boost in recent decades, following a trend of increasing Chinese investment in and migration to various African and Western Indian Ocean countries.[1] However, encounters between China and the Western Indian Ocean region, facilitated by trade, can be traced back to as early as the 15th century. Historical and archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Chinese seafarer Zheng He and his fleet navigated a route from Southeast Asia to the Chagos Archipelago and beyond, in the general direction of Madagascar and the Comoro Islands.[2] The first significant wave of migrant laborers from China to the Western Indian Ocean region dates to the 19th century, when European colonial powers required foreign laborers to work on newly established plantations. Instead of understanding China-Africa encounters solely as a recent phenomenon, this paper adopts historical and ethnographic perspectives to discuss how connections between the two regions have developed from the colonial to postcolonial period.

Chinese diasporic communities belonging to various ethnic backgrounds have negotiated their cultural identities within their respective communities in relation to their host countries, and within the context of the broader transnational diasporic communities living beyond the Western Indian Ocean regions. Upon closer examination from anthropological perspectives, their identity as diasporic Chinese is often falsely perceived as culturally homogenous. Instead, identity formation *within* different Chinese diasporic communities points to internal ethnic, migratory, language, and cultural variations. Thus, this paper aims to compare the similarities and differences in the history of migration and the formation of diasporic identity of Chinese communities that settled in Mauritius and Madagascar from the nineteenth century onward. As many diaspora scholars have argued convincingly, comparative approaches in diaspora case studies can be useful to examine nuances and shifts in diasporic practices, identities, notions of belonging, and of the 'home,' as they allow us to cross-analyze the regional and temporal divergences that diasporic movements have generated in different social and historical contexts.[3] In

[1] Yoon Jung Park, "Sojourners to settlers: Early constructions of Chinese identity in South Africa, 1879–1949," *African Studies*, 65, 2 (2006), 201-31.

[2] Roderich, Ptak, "Review of *Zheng He xia Xiyang xin kao* 郑和下西洋新考, by Yunzhong Zhou," *Archipel*, 89 (2015), 205-8.

[3] Martin Slama and Johann Heiss, "Comparing Arab diasporas: Post-9/11 and historical perspectives on Hadhramis and Syro-Lebanese Communities in Southeast Asia and the Americas," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31, 2 (2011), 231-50; Iain Walker, "Comorians and Hadramis in the Western Indian Ocean: Diasporic Practices in a Comparative Context," *Social Dynamics*, 38, 3 (2012), 435-53.

keeping with this argument, this paper highlights the distinctions between long-established ‘old’ Chinese communities, and those consisting of ‘new’ Chinese migrants in both Mauritius and Madagascar.[4] The ‘new’ Chinese diasporic groups reflect the larger trend of China’s economic and sociopolitical investment in Africa since the 1990s. China’s engagement in the region has also spurred changes in the existing political alignments between China and the ‘old’ Chinese diasporic groups already settled in the region.

This article is based on findings from our respective anthropological research conducted in Mauritius and Madagascar. Sharing similar research interests has sparked a series of fruitful conversations between us, which inspired our collaboration in writing this paper, to compare different Chinese diasporic communities based in the Western Indian Ocean. Zhang’s research primarily focuses on the recently-arrived Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrants of Madagascar.[5] Guccini’s work focuses on a particular ethno-linguistic group called the Hakka Mauritians belonging to the ‘old’ Chinese diaspora in the region. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out over a period of 16 months from 2015 to 2019, Zhang’s research in northern Madagascar focuses on Chinese-Malagasy encounters in the sugar plantation corporations, transnational business networks, and Confucius Institutes located in the region. Guccini’s 10-month fieldwork, conducted in Mauritius in two stages between 2018 and 2020, centers on the subject of changing heritage, identity, and language practices in the Hakka community in Mauritius. Our combined findings are based on data collected through semi-structured interviews and cultural immersion, which involved participant observation in Chinese-language classrooms, cultural events, and other social encounters in these two countries. While collaborating on this paper, we realized that there is a need for a more nuanced explication of what it means to ‘be Chinese’ in the Western Indian Ocean, by giving special attention to internal and interregional differences in diasporic identity formation, experiences and practices.[6]

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[4] Terms such as ‘old’ and ‘new’ Chinese denote the established status of the diaspora communities themselves, and not the demographics of the population within these communities. The terms come from a direct translation from the Chinese languages, based on how more recent Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrants describe the differences between the two diasporic groups. “Old Chinese” (*lao huaqiao*) conveys a meaning that they have migrated to the country a long time ago, while “New Chinese” (*xin huaqiao*) refers to the more recently established Chinese communities. These terms and the distinctions between them are referenced in various academic publications. See, for example: Cornelia Tremann, “«Anciens» et «Nouveaux» Chinois à Madagascar: Stratégies d’intégration et rapports de force intergénérationnels,” *Politique Africaine*, 134 (2014), 69-88; Carol Chan, “Chinese migrants’ spatial politics of belonging, identity, and citizenship in Santiago de Chile,” *Citizenship Studies*, 25, 1 (2021), 106-23.

[5] Mingyuan Zhang, “Being Chinese in Madagascar” (Unpublished PhD diss., Western University, 2018).

[6] We cannot claim to provide a comprehensive overview of Chinese identity in the Western Indian Ocean in this paper, as

The paper starts off by tracing the historical trajectory of Chinese migration to Mauritius and Madagascar, and contextualizing this history vis-à-vis the contemporary circumstances of these communities. In so doing, this paper distinguishes between the 'old' and 'new' communities that have entrenched themselves in our respective field sites. We then discuss and seek to complicate the term 'diaspora' as a theoretical concept, to reflect the experiences of the diverse Chinese communities with whom we work in the Western Indian Ocean. We apply the lens of transculturality and fluidity in analyzing cultural boundaries to challenge essentialist views of a unified Chinese diasporic identity. Furthermore, we use the framework of 'diaspora for others' to capture the interrelations of various diasporic formations in the Western Indian Ocean.[7] We argue that Chinese communities in Mauritius and Madagascar, while comparable on many accounts, are made up of smaller subgroups and need to be differentiated through their historically and locally specific contexts. Meanwhile, these Chinese communities also navigate dynamic cultural boundaries with other ethnicities in Mauritius and Madagascar, resulting in the attribution of multivalent meanings with the term 'being Chinese.' Unfortunately, widely perpetuated generalizations about the nature of the Chinese diaspora, as well as efforts made by the Chinese Government to unite and reform Chinese diasporas around the globe, continue to undermine the efforts to recognize the diversity of Chinese diasporic communities.

## PAST AND PRESENT CONTEXTS OF CHINESE MIGRATION TO THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

### The 'Old' Chinese Communities from Fujian and Guangdong

Mauritius and Madagascar host two of Africa's four oldest and largest Chinese communities, alongside South Africa and the French La Réunion Island.[8] The history of Chinese migration to Mauritius and Madagascar can be traced back to the 1800s, and was part of a historical trend that witnessed the establishment of plantation economies by the colonial powers in these regions, resulting in an increased demand for additional laborers

we only compare two case studies based on our respective fieldwork areas. Although Guccini's work included two short research trips to the islands of Rodrigues and Réunion, the data collected from the Chinese communities settled in these locations was too limited to be used to draw larger comparisons.

[7] See: Iain Walker, "The Hadrami diaspora: A "diaspora for others" in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 4, 2 (2021), 188-210.

[8] Heidi Østbø Haugen and Jørgen Carling, "On the edge of the Chinese diaspora: The surge of Baihuo business in an African city," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28, 4 (2005), 639-62.

to supplement the colonized population. The second half of the 19th century, in particular, saw a great expansion in the search for new sources of labor that could be employed in these tropical colonies.[9] This resulted in the development of widespread patterns of Chinese migration across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, to places as distant as Latin America. In the Western Indian Ocean, the earliest Chinese agricultural recruits were brought to Mauritius and Réunion Island in 1829.[10] Later in the nineteenth century, Chinese laborers and merchants arrived in other Western Indian Ocean countries, such as Madagascar and the Seychelles, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the establishment of the French protectorate in Madagascar in 1885.[11] As we will further demonstrate, the experiences of Chinese laborers varied in Mauritius and Madagascar due to differences in cultural and historical contexts.

Mauritius was first colonized by the Dutch in the 17th century, followed by a century-long period of French colonization, before the British captured the island in 1810. The British took advantage of the island's convenient position as an ocean gateway between the African and Asian land masses, while also seeking to put an end to French attempts at sabotaging their maritime trade routes in the Mascarenes.[12] Though the colony was officially under British administration until its independence in 1968, Mauritian society continued to be French-dominated both culturally and linguistically, a trend that continues to this day.[13] Through this long history of colonialism, the island's population was in continuous flux, with the arrival and settlement of the French and British colonists, and the subsequent influx of people they enslaved from Africa, especially Madagascar, and indentured laborers and skilled workers from British India and China.[14] The rise of the system of indentured labor was a direct outcome of the abolition of slavery by the British in 1834, as the colonial power scrambled to maintain its plantation workforce.[15]

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[9] Huguette Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, *La diaspora Chinoise dans L'Océan Indien occidental* (Aix-En-Provence: GRECO-Océan Indien, 1981), 38.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid, 42.
[12] Reena Dobson, "Beaches and breaches: Articulations and negotiations of identity, ethnicity and cosmopolitanism in Mauritius – 'The most cosmopolitan island under the sun'," *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies,* Special Edition: On the beach (2007): 4-11; Jean Houbert, "Creolisation and decolonisation in the changing geopolitics of the Indian Ocean," in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, eds. Shihan de S. Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 123-87.
[13] Dobson, "Beaches and breaches," 4-11; Huguette Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, "Mauritius," in *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan (Surrey: Curzon, 1998), 351-55.
[14] Kenneth McPherson, "Mauritius: Mirror and model of history," in *Multiple Identities in Action. Mauritius and some Antillean parallelisms*, eds. Vinesh Y. Hookoomsing, Ralph Ludwig and Burkhard Schnepel (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 32-44.
[15] Burkhard Schnepel, "Guests without a host. The Indian diaspora(s) in Mauritius," in *India Beyond India: Dilemmas of belonging,* eds. Antonie Fuhse and Elfriede Hermann (Göttingen: Göttingen University Press, 2018), 131-49.

The workers were often of low social status in their countries of origin, and they frequently lacked financial stability, which made it easier for colonial powers to employ them for longer periods of time, often stretching over a few years, through the imposition of binding contracts and low salaries. During this period, as Marina Carter and James Ng Foong Kwong put it, "labour demand from the West met dislocation and desperation in the East."[16] Most Chinese indentured laborers coming to Mauritius were recruited from the Dutch East Indies, Singapore, and Penang.[17] They had migrated to Southeast Asia due to the political unrest and economic hardships prevalent in China in the 18th and 19th centuries.[18] Given the traumatizing losses suffered by these communities during the journey, and on account of the poor working conditions in Mauritius, many of the newly landed Chinese asked to be repatriated soon after their arrival in Mauritius.[19] However, the Chinese community continued to grow; in addition to laborers, the Western Indian Ocean also attracted free merchants and traders in significant numbers.[20] Not forced into an indenture contract, the Chinese immigrants had better work prospects than the Indians. However, unlike the Indian workers, the Chinese were considered aliens and not British subjects; with the expiration of the period of indenture, they were not allowed to buy or inherit land.[21] Instead, they leased property to set up shops, and they became essential providers of food and other goods across the island.[22] By the end of the 19th century, about 81.3% of the Chinese population in Mauritius were likely traders.[23]

Mauritius emerged as an important hub for the Chinese diaspora in the Western Indian Ocean World.[24] The first members of the Mauritian Chinese population were mostly Cantonese and Fujianese people. In the wake of the Hakka-led Taiping Rebellion (*taiping tianguo*; 1850-64), and with the lifting of the Chinese emigration ban under the Peking Convention (1860), the first Hakka immigrants arrived in Mauritius in 1860.[25]

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[16] Marina Carter and James Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong. Sino-Mauritian settlement and economic consolidation* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 3.
[17] Huguette Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, "Mauritius," 351-5.
[18] Huguette Ly Tio Fane-Pineo and Edouard Lim Fat, *From Alien to Citizen. The integration of the Chinese in Mauritius* (Rose-Hill, Mauritius: Éditions de l'océan Indien, 2008), 63-6.
[19] Carter and Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong*; Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, "Mauritius," 351-5.
[20] Carter and Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong*, 51; Ly Tio Fane-Pineo and Lim Fat, *From Alien to Citizen*, 22-3, 42-3.
[21] Carter and Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong*, 5; Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, "Mauritius," 351-5.
[22] Carter and Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong*, 5-6, 194-7.
[23] Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, "Mauritius," 351-5.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Carter and Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong*, 65-6; Ly Tio Fane-Pineo and Lim Fat, *From Alien to Citizen*, 38-40. The latter elaborate that the convention was signed by the Emperor after British and French troops invaded the capital. Prior to the treaty, most Chinese had to board ships in Portuguese-administered Macao to bypass the law banning emigration.

Continuous Hakka emigration from China resulted in their rise as the dominant Chinese community in Mauritius from around the beginning of the twentieth century.[26] The legalization of emigration in China enabled women to emigrate and allowed migrants to take their families with them.[27] It thus changed within the diaspora not only its ethnic configuration, but also the gender dynamics. Up until the first quarter of the 20th century, Chinese immigrants to Mauritius were mostly male. Although sexual relations between Chinese men and local women were fairly common, legitimate marriages were rare.[28] Children, especially daughters, of mixed relationships were often baptized as Catholic, in accordance with the faith of their Creole mothers, regardless of the partner's ethnicity.[29] Consequently, a majority of the Mauritian Chinese identify as Catholic Christians today.

In Madagascar, French colonial powers first established a protectorate in 1885, and they subsequently occupied the island by 1895. Chinese laborers were brought from China's southern province of Guangdong to the new French colony, to work on the sugar and vanilla plantations. By the end of the 19th century, French colonial authorities had brought over more than 4,500 Chinese contract laborers to Madagascar, among which the first 3,000 arrived between the years 1896 and 1898.[30] In the ensuing decades, many more Chinese immigrants left their home country for Madagascar, in order to escape from a series of military uprisings that eventually overthrew the last imperial dynasty of China in the early 20th century. Independent Chinese migrants continued to settle in Madagascar until the 1940s.[31] Compared to Mauritius, where the majority of the Chinese diaspora belongs to the Hakka community, the Chinese diaspora in Madagascar is primarily composed of people of Cantonese descent.[32] These distinctions within the Chinese immigrant communities may be understood in the context of the longer prehistory of Hakka-Cantonese relations in China. There had been violent clashes between the two communities in the mid-nineteenth century, which are known as the Hakka-Cantonese Wars.[33] The Hakka people were generally unwelcome in the Cantonese lands of southern

[26] Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, "Mauritius," 351-5.
[27] Ly Tio Fane-Pineo and Lim Fat, *From Alien to Citizen*, 39.
[28] Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, "Mauritius," 351-5.
[29] Carter and Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong*, 143, 165.
[30] Tremann, "«Anciens» et «Nouveaux» Chinois à Madagascar," 69-88; Live Yu-Sion, "Madagascar," in *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Pan, 347.
[31] Tremann, "«Anciens» et «Nouveaux» Chinois à Madagascar," 69-88; Cornelia Tremann, "Temporary Chinese migration to Madagascar: Local perceptions, economic impacts and human capital flows," *African Review of Economics and Finance*, 5, 1 (2013), 7-16.
[32] Tremann, "«Anciens» et «Nouveaux» Chinois à Madagascar," 69-88.
[33] Eriberto P. Lozada Jr., "Hakka Diaspora," in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas. Immigrant and refugee cultures around the world*, eds. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember and Ian Skoggard (New York: Springer, 2005), 92-103.

China, such as the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. Consequently, the early Cantonese community in Madagascar "made sure it stayed [Cantonese], warding off any Hakkas."[34] Hence, the 'old' Chinese community in Madagascar has remained almost exclusively Cantonese, whereas in Mauritius, they have learnt to cohabit with the later-day Hakka arrivals.

Under French colonial rule, Chinese residents in Madagascar "were obliged to be members of an official organization chaired by a person appointed by the colonial authorities," to enable ease of governance.[35] Tche-Hao notes that the Chinese in Madagascar often played an intermediary role between the Europeans and the Malagasy people, given that they were not averse to going deep into 'the bush' (as Europeans were) to collect coffee beans, vanilla, cloves, and other cash crops, to sell to bigger French collector-exporters.[36] Many of these Chinese people, living within allegedly closed communities, sustained some Chinese cultural practices, while also gradually adopting elements of European lifestyles. For example, according to Tche-Hao's observations from the year 1961, the Chinese in Madagascar continued to consume Chinese food almost exclusively, but forks and spoons had gradually replaced chopsticks on their dining tables. Tche-Hao also observed that some Chinese in Madagascar had adopted Catholic or civil wedding ceremonies. Today Madagascar hosts the second largest population of Chinese descent in Africa and the Western Indian Ocean, ranking behind only South Africa (and ahead of Mauritius).[37] Most of the Cantonese-speaking Chinese population in contemporary Madagascar is engaged in trade and private business, and many have family members who have migrated further to Europe or North America, while some also seek new business opportunities in China – the imagined homeland. They are well integrated into mainstream society and officially recognized as one of Madagascar's main ethnic groups, which includes the *Merina*, the *Sakalava*, the French (*vazaha*), the Indian (*karany*), and the Comorian (*ajojo*).

[34] Yu-Sion, "Madagascar," 349.
[35] Solofo Randrianja and Stephen Ellis, *Madagascar: A Short History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 166.
[36] Tsien Tche-Hao, "La Vie Sociale des Chinois à Madagascar," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 3, 2 (1961), 170-81.
[37] Yoon Jung Park, "Chinese migration in Africa," *SAIIA Occasional Paper*, 24 (2009): https://saiia.org.za/research/chinese-migration-in-africa/ [accessed: March 25, 2021]; Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong. "Friends and interests: China's distinctive links with Africa," *African Studies Review*, 50, 3 (2007), 75-114.

## The 'New' Chinese Communities from Mainland China

The next significant wave of Chinese immigration to the Western Indian Ocean region and Africa was facilitated by China's foreign aid programs, which were profoundly shaped by the country's Communist Revolution and the creation of the principle of "non-interference in [the] internal affairs" of other countries in the 1950s.[38] In the 1960s, Chinese aid programs, motivated by strategic and ideological goals, burgeoned in Madagascar and other countries on the African continent. Evoking common sentiments of solidarity in fighting against colonial powers, China's government provided aid to newly independent African countries with the aim of wresting diplomatic recognition away from Taiwan, and to counter the influence of both the West and the Soviet Union in the region. As Brautigam remarks, in the 1960s when Chinese delegations visited Africa, they thought they saw a lot of similarities in their respective journeys of gaining national independence from colonial powers: "like China a decade earlier, Africa was emerging from a long period of colonial plunder and needed to produce food, clothing, and other daily necessities."[39] For instance, China's offer to build the TAZARA railway in Tanzania and Zambia (1969 to 1974) was promoted as "an international poster child" of China-Africa Socialist solidarity and comradeship.[40] Among the many other projects in Africa between 1965 and 1985, China's aid program helped establish eight sugar plantations and factories in Africa, including one plantation in Morondava, Madagascar.[41] While many countries in the Global South were going through market liberalization and structural adjustment, starting from the 1980s onwards, China was entering a period of *Reform and Opening* (*gaige kaifang*) promoted by the Communist State. Marking the beginning of China's reform era, starting in 1978, the top-down policies of Deng Xiaoping's regime "increased reliance on market mechanisms for the distribution of capital, resources and goods" and "[opened] the country to broader cultural and economic exchanges with the capitalist world."[42] At the turn of the 21st century, the Chinese Government implemented what has been termed as a *Going-Out Policy* (*zouchuqu*), and the *Belt and Road Initiative* (*yidai yilu*). These ambitious state policies are designed to encourage China's influence overseas through investments in infrastructure, trade, and educational projects.

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[38] Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The real story of China in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 24.
[39] Ibid., 33.
[40] Jamie Monson, "Defending the people's railway in the era of liberalization: TAZARA in Southern Tanzania," *Journal of the International African Institute*, 76, 1 (2006), 113-30.
[41] Deborah Brautigam, *Will Africa Feed China?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 116.
[42] Osburg, John. *Anxious Wealth: Money and morality among China's new rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 4.

On the other hand, post-independence Mauritius, with its significant Indian-Mauritian ethnic majority, enjoyed historically close economic and political relations with India. Following the expansion of Chinese influence, as discussed previously, Chinese investment in Mauritius increased notably in the early decades of the 21st century. This marked China's entry into a region which had hitherto been under the commercial and cultural influence of its regional rival, India.[43] Despite the relatively new trends of providing aid and investment, the diplomatic ties between Mauritius and China have historic precedent. A so-called 'Sino-Mauritian Friendship,' often iconized by pictures of a panda and a dodo (the extinct flightless bird endemic to Mauritius; see Fig. 1), had been cultivated since 1972, when Mauritius officially recognized the 'One-China' policy, supporting the mainland state's territory disputes with Taiwan.[44] More recently, a visit by the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, to Mauritius, at the end of July 2018, was highly anticipated by many Mauritians, especially those of Chinese descent, despite being only a short stopover of about 24 hours.[45] Chinatown in Port Louis was decorated with banners and flags welcoming the President, and all roads across the country were closed for thoroughfare, so that Xi's passage across the island would not be impeded by Mauritius' frequent traffic jams. His visit resulted in the announcement of new financial investments for Mauritius, totaling $23 million, as well as an invitation for Mauritius to attend the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing in the same year.[46] A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Mauritius and China went into effect in January 2021, marking the first FTA between China and an African country.[47]

As a result of these reforms and developments, Chinese workers, business owners, and language instructors have been drawn to the Western Indian Ocean by economic, employment, and experiential opportunities. Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrant workers are different from the so-called 'old' Cantonese and Hakka Chinese, not only because their experiences in the host countries are relatively new, but also because few of

[43] John F. Copper, *China's Foreign Aid and Investment Diplomacy, Volume III. Strategy Beyond Asia and Challenges to the United States and the International Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Iain Watson, *Foreign Aid and Emerging Powers. Asian perspectives on official development assistance* (London, New York: Routledge, 2015).
[44] Carter and Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong, 137-139*. The authors do not use the term 'Sino-Mauritian Friendship' or make reference to icons thereof, but they note an apparent "Chinese interest in 'this island gateway to Africa'" following the official recognition, and they state that the friendly rapport between China and Mauritius had a reaffirming effect on the diaspora and its relationship with the Chinese mainland.
[45] Guccini's field notes, 27 July 2018; Roukaya Kasenally, "China in Mauritius: Gateway to Africa or forgotten friend?" *L'Express* (31 August 2018): https://www.lexpress.mu/node/338182 [accessed: 31 July 2019].
[46] Kasenally, "China in Mauritius."
[47] Lauren Johnston and Marc Lanteigne, "Here's why China's trade deal with Mauritius matters." *World Economic Forum* (15 February 2021): https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/02/why-china-mauritius-trade-deal-matters/ [accessed: 17 February 2021].

them display the intention to settle there permanently and make Mauritius or Madagascar their ‘home.’ The established Chinese communities are thus faced with the “challenge of accommodating new cohorts of economic migrants,” but also have to deal with the growing cultural influence actively promoted by the Chinese Government in the region.[48] The PRC has set up multiple economic and cultural organizations in the Western Indian Ocean, such as the China Cultural Center (CCC), and more recently, the Confucius Institute (CI); the latter is a worldwide educational project that aims to promote the spread of Chinese language and culture across the globe. In addition to these, branches of Chinese banks and the headquarters for Chinese companies, such as the telecommunication giant Huawei, have also been established in this region.[49]


***Fig. 1. Info banner for a week-long Chinese cultural education program for Mauritian children and adult learners with instructors from the PRC, culminating in a performance at the Mauritian Chinese venue Hua Lien. The banner shows a dodo, representing Mauritius, and a panda, representing China, waving the national flags of both countries. Photo taken by Federica Guccini.***

[48] Julia Kuehn, Kam Louie, and David M. Pomfret, “China Rising: A view and review of China’s diasporas since the 1980s,” in *Diasporic Chineseness after the Rise of China: Communities and cultural production*, eds. Julia Kuehn, Kam Louie and David M. Pomfret (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 1.
[49] Kasenally, “China in Mauritius.”

Not only are these projects meant to help diversify the countries' economies, and to expand their finance and information technology sectors, but they also serve a function as vehicles for the promotion of 'soft power,' thereby inspiring goodwill for and closer relationships with the Chinese Government, among the countries of the region.[50] For instance, the donation of the proceeds from the performance of a Chinese ballet troupe in Mauritius in 2017 was meant not only to encourage "cultural trade in Africa," but also to enhance "the social image of the Chinese Government."[51] Other efforts at displaying and propagating soft power, include expanding centers for the instruction of Chinese language and culture, through the CI and CCC, to teach Mandarin, Chinese martial arts, crafts and music, as well as promoting the circulation of Chinese commodity goods in the region. Consequently, as more jobs are opening up for Chinese mainlanders, who are usually employed on short-term contracts, the local communities are observing an increasing flow of 'new' Chinese migrants.[52] Thus, people of various ethnic backgrounds in both countries have started to take Mandarin courses for purposes of business. Furthermore, some Mauritian and Malagasy Chinese use the process of learning Mandarin as a way to reconnect with their Chinese roots.

Although there is an apparent distinction between the 'old' Chinese communities and the 'new' Mandarin-speaking Chinese in both Mauritius and Madagascar, it is still too simplistic to assume that the latter belong to a homogenous diaspora community. In order to capture the subtle differences within the 'new' Chinese immigrant worker community, scholars interested in China-Africa encounters require a more nuanced understanding of the internal diversities within Chinese domestic society. Differences of age, gender, region of origin, socioeconomic background and professional affiliation greatly influence the experiences of these 'new' Chinese migrant workers overseas. The first distinction to be made is between Chinese workers of state-owned corporations and government-sponsored projects, and those running private businesses of their own. Chinese state-owned corporations are mostly involved in infrastructure construction, mining, and agro-industrial projects such as building roads, telecommunications or hydraulic facilities, and managing mining projects or plantations. The majority of the

[50] See, for example: Watson, *Foreign Aid and Emerging Powers*.
[51] Yanqun Song, "Preface," in *活動集錦 [huódòng jíjǐn]. Highlights*, eds. Yanqun Song, Jun Feng, Zihao Hu, Jiayi Li and Wendy Li (Mauritius: China Cultural Center, 2018), 3.
[52] It is hard to give an accurate estimation of how many among the 'new' Chinese settled permanently in Mauritius and Madagascar. However, based on fieldwork observations, we noticed that a very small percentage intended to obtain permanent residency in these countries, and that most of the 'new' Chinese adopted a transnational lifestyle by frequently crossing borders.

Chinese workers working for such projects are middle-aged men from rural backgrounds. Another distinctive Chinese government-sponsored project is the Confucius Institute. Most of the language instructors affiliated with the Confucius Institute are newly graduated young women in their 20s to 30s. Working for state-owned corporations and state-sponsored educational projects means that these Chinese workers are officially affiliated with a governmental or para-governmental agency, and enjoy more institutional support financially, logistically, and symbolically. Another category of Chinese migrant workers in Mauritius and Madagascar is composed of private business owners. They are usually petty entrepreneurs who run small-scale businesses such as hotels and restaurants, seafood import-export, fashion and electronic device boutiques, small cotton plantations, artisanal mining, and so on. They decide to come to Mauritius and Madagascar because they are motivated by an individualistic drive to make money, relying heavily on members of their family and social networks, who have already gained some experience of working in these countries. Compared to the workers affiliated with state-sponsored projects, Chinese private business owners receive less institutional support for their businesses, and there is a wider diversity within this group as well.

## Negotiating Chinese Diasporic Identities and Cultural Boundaries

### In-Between: Lived Tensions and Transculturality in Chinese Diasporic Communities

The general idea of ‘diaspora’ is that of a globally dispersed group of people, all hailing from but leading lives outside a common racial, ethnic, national or religious place of origin.[53] Their simultaneous perspectives from the inside and outside make it possible to question the perceived rigidity of these origin categories. However, there is also a troublesome tendency to homogenize diasporic formations and experiences, which ultimately gives the impression of the existence of a “transnational nationalism.”[54] Instead, if we embed diasporas within diversity – within sites of difference, fragmentation and augmentation, or sites that are “‘in the beyond’” or “‘in-between’” – we can observe how identities are splintered, confused, or molded. Investigating these social spaces, in which identities are renegotiated as ‘in-between’ or ‘beyond,’ allows us to challenge the hegemonic norms of identity categorization.[55]

[53] See: Floya Anthias, “Evaluating ‘diaspora’: Beyond ethnicity,” *Sociology*, 32, 3 (1998), 557-80.
[54] Ien Ang, “Together-in-difference: Beyond diaspora, into hybridity,” *Asian Studies Review*, 27, 2 (2003), 145.
[55] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004 [1994]), 10.

Scholars use a myriad of concepts to term these composite identities. In many colonial and postcolonial contexts, including that of Mauritius, 'creolization' and 'hybridity' are common. Creolization can be loosely defined as the "mixing of cultural elements" in contact, though this entails the problematic underlying assumption of holistic, homogeneous identities prior to the mixing.[56] Homi Bhabha uses 'hybridity' to challenge the neglect of those who identify outside or beyond the categories/systems/processes of colonial classification: He stresses the "ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority."[57] It is tempting to claim the term in this way; however, it also invites an ideologically charged, biological interpretation drawing on its historical connection to "taxonomies of race and link[s] with the racial management of the colonial subject, such as the implementation of anti-miscegenation laws".[58] The transcendence of cultural boundaries and emergence of new categories may then be more suitably described as 'transculturality'. The concept of transculturality goes beyond stiff notions of monolithic, bounded culture, while also embedding a critique of both interculturality and multiculturality for reproducing the very trope they seek to overcome.[59] Transculturality aims at a more fluid experience of cultural belonging, one dependent on relational and multivalent 'transcultural encounters.'[60] In these encounters, embedded in various social constellations, new forms of identities emerge and become salient. This allows us to explore the "inner differentiation and complexity" of collectives and different positionalities within them.[61] As such, 'in-betweeners' "experience and express migration and diaspora in ways that are related to the experiences of their parents, but that are also innovative, bifurcated, and differential."[62] Thus, while many first- or second-generation Chinese immigrants in Mauritius and

[56] Patrick Eisenlohr, "An Indian Ocean 'Creole Island'? Language and the politics of hybridity in Mauritius," in *Multiple Identities in Action*, eds. Hookoomsing, Ludwig and Schnepel, 88; Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Creolization in anthropological theory and in Mauritius," in *Creolization: History, ethnography, theory*, ed. Charles Stewart (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2006), 153-77.
[57] Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, 162.
[58] Shuang Shen, *Cosmopolitan Publics. Anglophone print culture in semi-colonial Shanghai* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 44. See also: Pauline Turner Strong, "On Theoretical Impurity," *American Ethnologist*, 33, 4 (2006), 585-87.
[59] Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality - the puzzling form of cultures today," in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, eds. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (London: Sage, 1999), 194-213.
[60] Veli-Pekka Lehtola, Kuisma Korhonen, Kari Alenius, and Harri Mantila, "Approaches to transcultural encounters," in *Transcultural Encounters*, eds. Kari Alenius and Veli-Pekka Lehtola (Rovaniemi: Pohjois-Suomen Historiallinen Yhdistys / Societas Historica Finlandiae Septentrionalis, 2015), 5-13.
[61] Welsch, "Transculturality," 197.
[62] Chantal Tetreault, *Transcultural Teens. Performing Youth Identities in French Cités* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 4.

Madagascar still (initially) feel quite ‘Chinese’ and profess a strong sense of community with other diaspora members, many of the following generations express a shift towards a broader Mauritian/Malagasy, Western or cosmopolitan identity, but often adding ‘of Chinese origin’ as a heritage marker. They are further influenced by their individual migration experiences (for example, the experience of study or work abroad), as well as connections to family members and friends in other places, building transcultural networks that inform their identities.

If we acknowledge that transculturality shapes diasporic experiences in such manifold ways, we also need to consider that pluralities are never just multiple singularities. Despite this shift in migrants’ lived experience, transculturality and especially the buzzword ‘diversity’ are often still commodified as social values and exploited for economic gain or sociopolitical reasons. As such, what makes people ‘different’ is often tokenized. For instance, inter-ethnic referencing in multicultural Mauritius takes a homogenizing turn when Mauritian Chinese are degradingly called *sinnwa macao* (Chinese from Macao) or greeted with the Mandarin “ni hao.” Macao, albeit the embarkation point of many early immigrants, is not the typical region of origin among the Mauritian Chinese. In fact, with most of their population today having been born in Mauritius, the insult rather reads as a version of the racist ‘go-back-to-where-you-come-from’ taunt. Similarly, Mandarin does not historically form part of most Mauritian Chinese people’s linguistic repertoire or heritage, though nowadays it is certainly the most commonly studied Sinitic language within and outside the Chinese community in Mauritius. It should be noted that other ethnic groups in Mauritius are also often reduced to a specific region of origin or language. This further indicates a trend of essentialization of ethnolinguistic belonging in a diverse social environment.

To challenge this, we should then think of diasporas as plural, rather than a unified entity. It would be quite wrong to speak of *the* Chinese diaspora in Mauritius or Madagascar, when this would incorporate both ‘old’ and ‘new’ Chinese, Chinese of all ethnicities, regions of origin, genders, age groups, and sociopolitical and religious affiliations. There is a tendency to get stuck defining diaspora by common characteristics or origin, neither of which captures the fluidity and ambiguities we would like to stress here. They are perhaps best expressed when James Clifford calls attention to the “lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” that diaspora creates.[63] We should perhaps then pay

[63] James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 9, 3 (1994), 311.

more attention to what diaspora *does* rather than what it *is* (or is not). A focus on specific "diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices" and social interactions that communities engage in allows for a more fluid model of diasporic formation.[64] In this sense, we can differentiate between Hakka and Cantonese diasporic practices in Mauritius, even though there is a lot of overlap and cross-influence between the two communities, due to their long-standing interactions both in China and Mauritius. Different practices between the Hakka and the Cantonese people can come into play when considering, for instance, which languages they speak with the eldest community members, or how they prepare certain food dishes. Similarly, practices among the 'old' Chinese population often differ from those of the 'new' Chinese, and overlap to a much lesser extent, as they do not interact much with one another. A pertinent example would be the modes of networking and communication: while most 'old' Mauritian Chinese stay in touch with other members of the diaspora through means of WhatsApp or Facebook, conversing mostly in English and French, the more recently established Chinese migrants use WeChat – a Chinese-developed social media app – to connect with other Chinese citizens in Mauritius, and conversing typically in Mandarin.

Interestingly enough, this analytical urge to differentiate between several sub-communities within a seemingly homogenous diaspora is counteracted in practice by governmental attitudes and policies—of not just the local-level governance organizations in which our sample communities are situated, but also China's central government in Beijing, which has been steadily increasing its hold over the 'old' communities. When mainland Chinese educational institutions were reformed under the 1991 'Patriotic Education Campaign' (*aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu*), a simultaneous movement of "systematic ideological and institutional efforts to cultivate Chinese nationalism among diasporic communities" was also introduced.[65] Events influenced by such movements are common in both Mauritius and Madagascar. They are mostly carried out by or in cooperation with the Chinese Embassy, China Cultural Center or the Confucius Institute, and often through the efforts of delegations of teachers dispatched from Mainland China. Speakers at these events often express wishes such as "may the friendship between Mauritius and China be everlasting," to situate the event within the aforementioned diplomatic narrative.[66] At other times, they seem to imply that the established communities have lost touch with their 'Chineseness.' For instance, a speaker at a summer school showcase used the

[64] Rogers Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28, 1 (2005), 13.
[65] Kuehn, Louie, and Pomfret, "China rising," 4.
[66] Guccini's field notes, 30 January 2020.

metaphor of “having planted a little seed of Chinese culture in students’ hearts that one day will grow into a beautiful flower,” even though most students in attendance were Mauritian Chinese.[67] Similarly, in its brochure, the CCC states that their classes are “allowing Chinese culture to take roots in Mauritius,” though the Chinese presence in Mauritius predates the founding of the CCC in 1988.[68]

The reality of cultural mediation outcomes is, of course, more complex. Most of the occasional displays of this ‘real’ Chinese culture remain just that—displays, highlighting the role of the Chinese Government as a culturally invested partner of Mauritius. The most notable exception is the tangible increase of interest in learning Mandarin. Events organized by the Chinese Government-sponsored institutions primarily use Mandarin Chinese, though the majority of attendees have no working knowledge of the language and depend on English or French translations. Mandarin courses have been replacing the teaching of other Chinese languages such as Hakka and Cantonese. This is considered part of PRC’s official language policy and is aimed at creating a sense of Chinese “linguistic citizenship.”[69] The rise of Mandarin learning and teaching within the global Chinese diaspora is not accidental, but part of an ideology of Chinese unity that is increasingly undermining the diversity of global Chinese diasporas. The case of Mauritius provides a fitting example of what Aihwa Ong calls “political projects” aiming to “weave together diverse populations who can be ethnicized as a single worldwide entity” by invoking global *huaren* (ethnic Chinese) solidarity.[70] To address this issue, Ong warns against conflating the diaspora as a politically exploited rhetoric, and to recognize the diaspora as comprising of differentiated, heterogeneous experiences. Thus, stressing the differences between various lived experiences of ‘being Chinese’ in local contexts outside of China, and acknowledging the emergence of diverse transcultural identities in diasporic communities, becomes integral to opposing the growing trend of monolithization, both in scholarly and popular discourse. There is no *one* Chinese diaspora, nor is there an inherent cohesion in the different local Chinese diasporic groups.

[67] Guccini’s field notes, 27 November 2019.
[68] “Training Courses,” in *活動集錦 [huódòng jíjǐn]*, eds. Song et al., 70.
[69] Minglang Zhou, “Historical review of the PRC's minority/indigenous language policy and practice: Nation-state building and identity construction,” in *China's Assimilationist Language Policy. The impact on indigenous/minority literacy and social harmony*, eds. Gulbahar H. Beckett and Gerard A. Postiglione (London: Routledge, 2012), 18.
[70] Aihwa Ong, “Chinese diaspora politics and its fallout in a cyber age,” in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, eds. Ember, Ember, and Skoggard (New York: Springer, 2005), 394.

## 'Diaspora-for-Others': Diasporic Interconnectedness in the Western Indian Ocean

Let us now shift our focus from local circumstances and international differentiation to an exploration of regional and global interconnections. The Chinese diasporas in the Western Indian Ocean are intricately linked on account of their shared historic past. The majority of migrants from China arrived in Mauritius and subsequently moved "continuously from one island of the Mascarene group to another," often also relocating further to Seychelles, Madagascar and South Africa.[71] The increasing number of Hakka immigrants, for instance, has had a significant impact on the varying ethnic formations of the three Chinese diasporas of Madagascar, Réunion Island, and Mauritius. The rivalries between the Cantonese and Hakka people had commenced back in China itself and had continued within their respective diasporas. But while the rising number of Hakka people had started subsuming the Cantonese community in Mauritius, the same did not happen in Madagascar, where the Cantonese community blocked Hakka arrivals from Mauritius and Réunion Island.[72] In Réunion, the Hakka were accepted, but were geographically separated from the Cantonese with the establishment of independent settlements in the South and the North, respectively.[73] Therefore, these rivalries profoundly affected the way in which these diasporic communities were formed and how they maintained a relationship to each other. In this sense, they can be considered a "diaspora for others," with characteristically "intertwined and all-pervasive relationships," or perhaps rather 'diasporas-*through*-others,' as they were constituted by and through opposing other positionalities.[74]

The outlook of this article is thus an experiment in diaspora-for-others, as we are exploring the similarities and differences between two diasporas in interlinked locations. However, while Walker states that the conventionally evoked 'homeland' does not necessarily have to be part of the diaspora-for-others equation, in the question of the Chinese diaspora we work with, the exclusion of China as a linking factor is almost unthinkable. Many Mauritian Chinese still travel to China to see their ancestors' villages and graves, or to visit family members living there. Some Hakka families in China even keep track of all family members abroad, and they send their relatives books with genealogical records and photographs. On a more political level, the PRC's efforts in

[71] Yu-Sion, "Madagascar," 348; Ly Tio Fane-Pineo, "Mauritius," 351-5.
[72] Edith Wong-Hee-Kam, *La diaspora chinoise aux Mascareignes: Le cas de la Réunion* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 173-4; Yu-Sion, "Madagascar," 347-50.
[73] Wong-Hee-Kam, *La diaspora chinoise*.
[74] Walker, "The Hadrami diaspora," 188-210.

unifying the diasporic communities through language and ideology have initiated a homogenizing trend in shaping diasporic identities. In Mauritius, this can be seen in the way some Mauritian Chinese are eager to show their appreciation for China and voice their loyalty to their homeland through the narrative of the Sino-Mauritian Friendship. For instance, a local Mauritian Chinese politician's video message for China made headlines in early 2020 as an expression of solidarity with China when it was hit by the novel coronavirus outbreak. The video uses phrases such as "I love you, China," "good luck, China," and "we are here for China," an expression quite literally indicative of the idea of diaspora-for-others.[75] This needs to be understood in the context of efforts to align Mauritius with an economic power like China, but it also paints the picture of a Chinese diaspora that takes pride in being Chinese. This sentiment is widely perpetuated among Mauritian Chinese on social media as well, though not without heated debates over diverging opinions among Sino-Mauritians regarding China's political moves. There is thus a tension between those who understand their diasporic community as an "extension of the homeland," those who reject the idea of political and/or ethnic belonging to China, and those who fall somewhere in between.[76] It cannot be denied that there is an entanglement in the linkages, whether they be forged, maintained or broken, that spans across different communities. Diasporic groups, intentionally and unintentionally, exist 'for and through others,' and continually negotiate what it means to them to 'be Chinese' vis-à-vis other salient parts of their identities.

## Negotiating Dynamic Cultural Boundaries in Mauritius and Madagascar

We have so far argued against ideas of ahistorical and bounded diasporic identities by focusing on processes and relationships across time and space.[77] However, we have not yet discussed the concept of cultural boundaries in relation to Chinese diaspora communities in the Western Indian Ocean. In other words, besides analyzing the internal diversity of Chinese diasporas and how they maintain 'diaspora-for-others' or 'diaspora-through-others' relationships with other Chinese diasporic groups through entanglement and interconnectivity, it is also important to triangulate Chinese diasporic communities in relation to other ethnicities in their respective social contexts. A discussion of the 'diaspora' "has by no means replaced nor indeed could it replace a concern with

[75] China Global Television Network (CGTN). "Mauritian Chinese makes micro film to support China amid coronavirus." *CGTN* (27 February 2020): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EQ56Qh3gro [accessed: 26 February 2020].
[76] Ong, "Chinese diaspora politics," 396.
[77] Ira Bashkow, "A neo-Boasian conception of cultural boundaries," *American Anthropologist*, 106, 3 (2004), 443.

ethnicity."[78] To fully understand people's experiences of Chinese ethnicity in the diasporas, the analytical scope must be extended beyond the Chinese communities to understand how interethnic relationships and cultural boundaries are negotiated. As Bashkow argues, rather than understanding cultural boundaries as arbitrary barriers to outside influence or to historical change, they should be seen as irreducibly plural and permeable cultural distinctions, that serve constructive functions in culture and bring out socially meaningful consequences when they are crossed.[79] This approach allows us to focus on the fluid ethnic boundary that defines the group, rather than the cultural elements that it encloses.[80]

In Mauritius, with its self-proclaimed 'rainbow nation' born out of a particular colonial history and its postcolonial policies, ethnic boundaries appear to be much less permeable than in Madagascar. Mauritius is built on the premise of 'Unity in Diversity,' a motto pointing to ideals of a multicultural society, allowing for simultaneous togetherness and difference.[81] Uninhabited prior to colonization, Mauritius has also been described "as an island solely inhabited by 'diasporas'."[82] As such, Mauritians value their precolonial 'outside' roots. Disputes over indigeneity are rare, if not non-existent. This historical circumstance then came to define a type of "cultural citizenship according to which Mauritians are primarily defined as subjects having origins in other parts of the world with continuing commitments to putative ancestral traditions."[83] Although governmental data collection on ethnic backgrounds of the population has been excluded from official categorizations since the latest census in 1982, the lack of numbers has not diminished the importance of ethnic categories in Mauritian everyday life.[84] Most Mauritians still speak of 'Indian,' 'Muslim,' 'Creole,' 'Chinese,' and the occasional 'white' or 'French Mauritian', when referring to 'other' identities on the island. Mauritian

[78] Anthias, "Evaluating diaspora," 576.
[79] Bashkow, "A neo-Boasian conception," 443-58.
[80] Frederik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*, ed. Frederik Barth (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998 [1969]), 9-38.
[81] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Common Denominators. Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of compromise in Mauritius* (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Burkhard Schnepel and Cornelia Schnepel, "From slave to tourist entertainer. Performative negotiations of identity and difference in Mauritius," in *Islanded Identities: Constructions of postcolonial cultural insularity*, eds. Maeve McCusker and Anthony Soares (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), 109-26.
[82] Schnepel and Schnepel, "From slave to tourist entertainer," 113.
[83] Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India. Diaspora, time, and ethnolinguistic belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
[84] Eriksen, *Common Denominators*; Schnepel, "Guests without a host," 131-49. Speculations in the Mauritian Chinese community as to their shrinking numbers are common, and many claim the number may now be down to 12,000 people (roughly 1% of the population, as opposed to 3% in the 1982 census).

society thus operates through a juxtaposition of inclusive multiculturalism and exclusive ethno-communalism.

A commonly heard critique of the 'rainbow nation' is that the colors of the rainbow touch but do not mix – implying that the idea of Mauritian diversity and cosmopolitanism exists only in theory but not in practice. The notion of ethno-communalist belonging is evoked, for instance, when it comes to political representation, kinship, clan and caste statuses, and claims to so-called 'ancestral' languages. It is also frequently communicated in transcultural social encounters, where simple things such as clothing and accessories, religious, visual, or oral expression, and people's names can function as markers of group belonging.[85] Thus, community boundaries are continuously (re-)established and communicated, even though most Mauritians consider themselves to be Mauritian nationals, share *Kreol morisien* (Mauritian Creole) as the mother tongue, and have intercommunal relations and marriages, resulting in progeny with claims to multiple communities. Many other Mauritian groups (and occasionally the Chinese community members themselves) believe that the Mauritian Chinese still practice exclusivity; they are less willing to mingle, and are regarded as generally being "closed."[86] This is aided by a long-standing trend of endogamy within the community. Once a substantial number of Chinese women had arrived on the island, most Sino-Mauritians started marrying within their ethnic community.[87] This is still noticeable in the current make-up of their community, particularly in older generations, although interethnic marriages are becoming increasingly common. And yet, many interviewees in Guccini's study viewed their 'Chineseness' as culturally open. Philip Li Ching Hum, for example, noted that he considers the Chinese a "sponge," easily adapting to non-Chinese environments. Roland Tsang Kwai Kew mentioned that only a Mauritian Chinese could enjoy Indian *roti* (an unleavened flatbread) for breakfast, Hakka *mine* (noodles) for lunch, and Muslim *briani* (a spiced rice dish) for dinner. To scrap either the 'Mauritian' or the 'Chinese' label would not do their identities justice. Evidently, depending on personal stance and perspective, cultural boundaries in Mauritius can be understood as both inclusive and exclusive, with transcultural identities lying somewhere in between.

Anthropologists studying ethnic identities in Madagascar have also paid special attention to the process of negation, negotiation and maintenance of the cultural and ethnic boundaries in the country's long history of hosting internal diversities and encountering

[85] Dobson, "Beaches and breaches," 4-11.
[86] Ibid., 6.
[87] Carter and Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong*, 146.

foreigners. Unlike Mauritius, where the population descends from non-indigenous, displaced foreign groups brought onto the island by colonialists, Madagascar was home to a variety of native Malagasy ethnicities under the rule of the Merina Kingdom, whose ethnicity is usually considered to be of Austronesian origin, in accordance with the evidence discovered by archaeologists and linguists.[88] However, as many scholars have argued, ethnic boundaries in Madagascar are particularly flexible. Ethnic identity in Madagascar retains fluidity and saliency in which "incorporating tendencies are at least as strong as demarcating ones."[89] As Lambek and Walsh argue, the identity of the *Antankarana* people in northern Madagascar is established "less by ascriptive categories than by means of commitment to a certain historical narrative."[90] Based on fieldwork conducted in Southwest Madagascar among the *Vezo* people, Astuti's work also highlights 'inclusion' as a key process in the formation of ethnic identity. Astuti argues that the ethnic identity of *Vezo* is not "a state of being which people are born into."[91] Rather, *Vezo*-ness is a dynamic process of becoming in which people learn to act and perform like a *Vezo.* This incorporating force in defining the fluid ethnic boundaries in Madagascar through social practice and action was palpable during Zhang's fieldwork in the country. As a person of visibly Chinese ethnicity, Zhang was praised for eating a bowl of local 'Chinese noodle soup' at the street vendors. She was regarded as 'having become Malagasy' (*efa gasy*), because she was not afraid of eating Malagasy street food. She received similar comments while taking Malagasy public transportation such as bush taxis instead of taking flights, or when she cooked her food on charcoal instead of on a gas stove, or when she danced to the popular Malagasy music style *salegy*, and so on. Following this logic, everyone can become Malagasy through 'doing' Malagasy. This example of fluid Malagasy ethnicity serves to refute the detrimental "assumption that non-diasporic ethnic culture is itself non-hybrid" or non-transcultural.[92] Therefore, the Chinese diasporic identity in Madagascar should not only be analyzed within its own community, but also from the perspective of dynamic and fluid cultural boundaries in relation to other ethnicities that are particularly salient in the country.

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[88] See, for example: Robert E. Dewar and Henry T. Wright, "The culture history of Madagascar," *Journal of World Prehistory*, 7, 4 (1993), 417-66.
[89] Michael Lambek and Andrew Walsh, "The imagined community of the Antankarana: Identity, history and ritual in Northern Madagascar," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 27, 3 (1997), 309.
[90] Ibid., 308.
[91] Rita Astuti, *People of the Sea: Identity and descent among the Vezo of Madagascar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 16.
[92] Anthias, "Evaluating diaspora," 575.

Although the Cantonese-speaking Chinese in Madagascar used to be described as a 'closed' community as well, the boundaries of Chinese ethnicity are still blurry. For example, the Malagasy vocabulary *sinoa*, when used to refer to people, is a vernacular category that implies an ambiguous ethnic identity different from, and lying in between 'white Westerners' (commonly called *vazaha* in Madagascar) and 'the Malagasy' (*gasy*). Sometimes, the Chinese are loosely included in the category of *vazaha*, partly due to their light-colored skin.[93] Nevertheless, Malagasy people are well aware of the differences between *sinoa* and *vazaha* – as people often mention, Chinese have 'narrow eyes' (*kirko maso*) and 'soft silky hair' (*malemy fagneva*), and Europeans have 'red ears' (*mena sofigny*) and 'hazel eyes' (*gara maso*). *Sinoa* is also the term used to refer to Malagasy people of partial Chinese ancestry. Many Malagasy people mention that their relatives or friends are *sinoa* simply because they have a remote relative who was Chinese.

The long-established Chinese diaspora communities in the Malagasy society are also evident in the use of the vocabulary, *sinoa*, in the regional dialect widely spoken in the north of the island. *Sinoa* is not only used to describe the appearance of people of Chinese descent; *things* are also categorized as 'Chinese' or *chinois/sinoa* as well. These linguistic practices reflect a broader picture of how Malagasy people have selectively constructed the meaning of Chinese people, things, and culture, from their encounters with people of Chinese descent since the end of the 19th century. For instance, almost every Malagasy restaurant and street vendor serves *soupe chinoise* (Chinese soup) – instant noodle soup sometimes boiled with chicken, shrimp or mixed vegetables, and *riz cantonais* (Cantonese rice) – stir-fried rice with turmeric, green beans and carrots. After their meals, customers may even ask for *dessert chinois* (Chinese dessert), meaning a toothpick. *Lokin'i chinois* (Chinese cooking) means cooking with many ingredients mixed together and without concern for food taboos (*fady*), alluding to a widespread stereotype in Madagascar that Chinese people eat everything. The list is long, and many Chinese are just as puzzled as the Malagasy people as to what is especially 'Chinese' about *mofo chinois* (Chinese bread) and *pommes chinois* (Chinese apples). As demonstrated above, the pragmatics of the Malagasy vocabulary *sinoa*, on the one hand, reflect the persistence of cultural boundaries between the Chinese, the Westerners and the Malagasy; while on the other hand, they also demonstrate the level of integration of Chinese ethnicity within the Malagasy society.

[93] Maurice Bloch, *Placing the Dead: Tombs, ancestral villages, and kinship organization in Madagascar* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1971), 31.

However, with the growing influence of mainland China in the recent decades, Malagasy people have realized that the term *sinoa* alone does not distinguish between the 'old' and 'new' Chinese communities in Madagascar. Thus, people have started to make distinctions between *sinoa gasy* (Malagasy Chinese) and *sinoa* (Chinese); the former refers to the long-established Cantonese-speaking Chinese people, and the latter to the Mandarin-speaking Chinese from mainland China. As a result, new meanings are being associated with *sinoa* in Madagascar, just as elsewhere in Africa. As Brautigam argues, 'the Chinese' nowadays are many things in Africa: touring presidents delivering grand promises for partnership, companies building roads and telecommunication infrastructure, factory managers demanding long hours of work, traders bringing relatively cheap commodities to new markets, and vocational teachers and youth volunteers driven by a sense of curiosity, adventure, and a spirit for helping the poor, to give just a few examples.[94] In many contexts of interethnic encounters, vocabularies of racial categories such as *vazaha, sinoa* and *gasy* are not only used to describe the appearance of certain ethnic groups of people and their diaspora, but are also used to convey underlying assumptions associated with ethnicity. As Bloch has argued, *vazaha* means clever, crafty, or "dangerously full of tricks," – "a quality which is typical of Europeans and which is more feared than admired."[95] A thing is *vazaha* because it is remotely associated with foreigners. Similar examples can be found elsewhere in the world; Bashkow argues in his study of the meaning of whiteness in Papua New Guinea, that vernacular categories such as 'European,' 'Westerner,' or 'American' constitute a powerful ideological force in the lives of the people of Oceania.[96] Stemming from racial stereotypes and ideas associated with 'white people' and their objects, institutions, places and activities, the ideological power of race significantly influences local people's imaginings of social universes that incorporate diverse perspectives on education, time use, diet, architecture, morality, religion and economics.

The arbitrariness, flexibility and context dependence of ethnic boundaries relevant to 'being white' in Papua New Guinea also pertain to the study of the meaning of 'being Chinese' in the Western Indian Ocean. In Mauritius, some people use the slang term *sinnwa nef* (new Chinese) to describe someone who is acting cluelessly in a new or unfamiliar environment, thereby negatively stereotyping the local Chinese community as

[94] Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift,* 310.
[95] Bloch, *Placing the Dead*, 31
[96] Ira Bashkow, *The Meaning of Whitemen: Race and modernity in the Orokaiva cultural world* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

awkward or inept. Interestingly, though the term could suggest a connection to what we term the ‘new’ Chinese migrants from mainland China, perhaps as a reaction to their growing presence in the country, this term seems to actually have been around longer, which implies a reference to earlier Chinese migrants to Mauritius instead. In Madagascar, on the other hand, new meanings associated with ‘being Chinese’ have indeed emerged in relation to the proliferation of new Chinese migrant workers. As an example, people have recently started to describe telephones of poor quality as *telefony chinois* (Chinese telephone), associating *sinoa* with a negative stereotype of ‘not trustworthy’ and ‘having bad quality.’ People are also starting to describe finishing a project very fast as ‘doing things like a Chinese,’ due to their experiences of working with Chinese businesses, which demand punctuality and efficiency. However, as the encounters between the ‘new’ Chinese and Malagasy people are still ongoing, it remains to be seen how the meaning of *sinoa* may evolve further to help negotiate dynamic cultural boundaries in Madagascar.

## Comparison and Conclusion

The widely acknowledged meanings associated with Chinese diasporic identities and their ‘Chineseness’ in both Mauritian and Malagasy societies derive from their encounters and interactions with Chinese diasporas since colonial times. We have discussed four prominent themes related to Chinese diasporic identities in the Western Indian Ocean in this paper, by comparing similarities and differences between Mauritius and Madagascar. Firstly, we examined the heterogeneity of the Chinese diasporic communities on account of their differing migratory trajectories and historical contexts. There is a need for more intricate perspectives to account for the various Chinese communities in Mauritius and Madagascar, paying special attention to internal and interregional differences in diasporic identity formation, experiences and practices. Both countries have a long history of hosting Chinese immigrants who are now commonly identified as the ‘old’ Chinese. However, although located in similar geographic locations, the experiences of the ‘old’ Chinese diaspora is different for a number of compelling reasons that challenge notions of its homogeneity. The ethno-linguistic complexion of the Chinese diaspora in Mauritius, for instance, differs from that in Madagascar, where the majority of the old diaspora is Cantonese, not Hakka.

This, we have argued, can be explained through the historic entanglement of the two countries, and the establishment of ‘diasporas-for-others,’ specifically of ‘diasporas-*through*-others,’ which highlights that these diasporic communities did not develop in

isolation, but in correlation. Similarly, diasporic interconnectedness has an impact on contemporary community relationships. A prominent relationship is the complex linkage between the diasporic communities and China, which has recently started being regarded as not only an ancestral 'homeland,' but also as an economic benefactor to profit from. While many in the diasporic community distance themselves from both the PRC's political moves and from a uniform 'Chinese' identity, there are also diasporic voices that proudly (re-)claim 'Chineseness' in the wake of the PRC's growing global influence.

Thirdly, we discussed the fluid cultural and ethnic boundaries between Chinese diasporic communities and other ethnic groups in the two countries. In both Mauritius and Madagascar, ethnic diasporic consciousness is frequently evoked in everyday life, resulting in a strong sense of ethno-communal belonging and a continuous negotiation of boundaries in transcultural encounters. Both countries have established a sense of what 'being Chinese' means, based on encounters with the long-established 'old' Chinese diaspora in their respective historical and social contexts, while making sense of how encounters with the 'new' Chinese communities have brought novel meanings to the ethno-diasporic consciousness. Local particularities as well as group-specific and individual positionalities and stances need to be acknowledged, when it comes to different feelings and articulations of 'being Chinese' in the Western Indian Ocean. Individual variations in these factors, and their own contextualized involvement in specific encounters with non-Chinese Mauritian and Malagasy communities, shape the experiences of diasporic Chinese people, as well as the impressions they leave behind among their host communities.

Finally, by exploring the changing meanings associated with Chinese diasporic identities in the Western Indian Ocean, we shed light on the sociocultural implications of China's increasing economic and political engagement in the region, and its changing role in the globalized world. While the 'old' Chinese communities were recruited by colonial powers as indentured laborers in domestic Chinese society, the 'new' Chinese communities arrived in the Western Indian Ocean region along with new investments, consumption choices, and opportunities for employment and education. Therefore, the arrival of 'new' Chinese migrants has been transforming the local lived experience, through projects of economic and political investments, and the creation of networks of commodities, language classes and cultural events. Consequently, the meanings of 'being Chinese' in the local context of Mauritius and Madagascar have continued to evolve. Chinese diasporic communities are often subject to cultural stereotypes derived from perceived homogeneity in relation to their host communities, and they also face

homogenizing pressures from political agendas of the Chinese State. As a result, community members have to constantly negotiate between the opposing forces of internal variation of diasporic contexts and practices on the one hand, and politically driven ideologies of cultural unity on the other.