

## **ABSTRACT**

This article examines how and why the cultural and political significance of China as ancestral home was transformed during the half century between 1850, which marked the start of mass migration from China, and the turn of the twentieth century when modern nationalist ideologies first appeared in China and then spread rapidly to Chinese emigrant communities in Southeast Asia and beyond. I examine this transformation by looking at the role of merchant philanthropy, which is a crucial site for the construction and articulation of emigrant discourses of native place attachment. The article first examines the rise of philanthropy as a merchant strategy for claiming elite status and community leadership and for negotiating with political power in late Imperial China. It then looks at how and why homeland philanthropy was embraced by merchants in overseas Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya beginning in the late nineteenth century. The final section examines the shift in the ideological underpinning of merchant philanthropy from Confucian culturalism to modern nationalism, and considers the implications of this shift for merchants' role in native place society and politics.