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The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity (review)

Haiming Liu

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The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity. Edited by Laurence J.C. MA, and Carolyn CARTIER. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003. 400 pp.

THE DISCOURSE ON TRANSNATIONALISM has contributed greatly to the understanding of overseas Chinese communities. In the past few years, scholars of Asian and Asian-American studies have done ground-breaking work in rejecting assimilationist theories relating to the collective identity and migration patterns of overseas Chinese communities, and have produced a wealth of scholarship which has elevated the study of overseas Chinese into a more mature and independent field of academic enquiry. The book under review is one such valuable contribution. It is unique in two significant ways. First, many of the contributing scholars are specialists in geography, who provide new perspectives and information in an area traditionally dominated by historians, sociologists and literary critics. Second, it covers overseas Chinese across the world — from Southeast Asia, Oceania, North and Latin America, to Europe — and focuses on the post-1960 era. The book also includes discussions on the Chinese population in Hong Kong and Taiwan; scholarship on the Chinese communities in these two areas had long been marginalized and relegated to area studies. The current surge of interest in transnationalism has finally placed Chinese Diaspora as an important theme in global studies.

In “Space, Place, and Transnationalism in the Chinese Diaspora,” Laurence Ma has rightly pointed out that “the conceptions of international migration are simply incapable of capturing the essence of the rapidly changing nature of global migration,” and new theoretical frameworks are needed to understand the emerging plural societies, dual loyalties of populations, and multiple affiliations of the transnational corporations, social organizations and family networks. Since social networks are often “place-based and place-nourished,” contemporary Chinese immigrants often develop a cultural landscape that crosses national boundaries. Ma has emphasized the dynamics of the overseas Chinese population as a fluid and flexible global network, and that overseas Chinese history should be placed in a larger historical context beyond national boundaries. In “The Chinese Diaspora or the Migration of Chinese Peoples,” Ronald Skeldon has provided a concise discussion on Chinese migration and explained why the historically loaded meaning of the word “diaspora” does not fit the Chinese experience. His point is important. “Diaspora” is a fashionable and hackneyed term in today’s academic writings. In fact, some of the chapters in the book are really about Chinese migration, not Chinese Diaspora. A number of the chapters have included long bibliographies of theoretical writings on Chinese Diaspora without adequately and specifically addressing the subject.

Carolyn Cartier's chapter provides a thorough description of the Chinese community in Malaysia. Numbering at about 5 million, the Chinese population in Malaysia is one of the largest overseas Chinese communities. An important contribution of this chapter is the author's discussion of the historical background of the post-colonial government's New Economic Policy and its impact on the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. Her interpretation of the government's attempt at restructuring Malaysia's economy by favoring the Malays is fair and insightful. It reminds readers of the long-standing "middle-men minority" status of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Her discussion of the remigration wave of Chinese in Malaysia is interesting because it shows how contemporary overseas Chinese have become even more transnational than before in a globalized economy. The author has also provided good documentation of the linguistic and cultural origins of the Malaysian Chinese in Guangdong and Fujian provinces. However, her discussion could have been more specific on how Chinese identity has been transformed and shaped by the social forces. It would also have been much more helpful to the readers if the author had given a clear definition of the identity of the Chinese in Malaysia.

Jonathan Rigg's chronological documentation of the Chinese experience in Thailand and Vietnam is precise and illuminating. Historically viewed as "Jews of the Orient," Chinese merchants in Thailand "established wealth without power" and struggled with the identity issue. Their dilemma was especially intriguing during World War II as they were needed as well as guarded against by the de facto Japanese authority and the Thai government. Their economic success in contemporary times, according to the author, is linked to a high degree of assimilation. The second and third generations of the Chinese in Thailand have spoken the local language, and adopted Thai names. However, they seem to look upon themselves as Chinese again as China's economy grows and trading with China becomes important. Chinese migration history in Vietnam deserves much attention because many Chinese in Vietnam, like the Chinese in Thailand, "assimilated" into the local culture. However, they were ruthlessly persecuted and driven out as "boat people" by the Vietnamese government during the post-Vietnam war era. Some of the policies pursued by the communist government were similar to those carried out by the nationalist government in the South. The author could also have looked more closely at the persecutions to see whether they were more racially based or politically oriented. More information is also needed on what specific policies, discriminations and persecutions have been conducted by the Vietnamese government. Through the recollections of many "boat people" published in a number of anthologies on Vietnamese Americans, we have learned that their property and business were confiscated, and Chinese-language schools were closed down. But scholarly work on the "boat people" in Vietnam has remained scarce.

Like Jonathan Rigg's piece, Robert B. Kent's chapter, "A Diaspora of Chinese Settlement in Latin America and the Caribbean," covers two huge regions. The article provides a concise chronological discussion of how and when the Chinese have moved into those two areas since the 19th century. His study of the Chinese population in each of the two nation-states is the most important part of the article, as it draws attention to the discrepancy between two different ways of enumerating the Chinese population in Latin America. Data from the Commission on Overseas Chinese Affairs of Taiwan and a few widely quoted studies have recorded as many as over one million Chinese. Kent insists that the number is grossly exaggerated. He suggests that such data probably include descendants of Chinese immigrants and descendants of Chinese who married non-Chinese in the area. He also brings up the interesting point that some of the governments in Latin America try to revitalize old Chinatowns while downplaying the size of the Chinese population. The negotiation process over Chinese identity between nation-states and the overseas Chinese population is a fascinating topic.

George S.C. Lin's chapter is an important and useful discussion of the migration history of the Chinese in Hong Kong. The author points out that the Hong Kong population is diverse and many families came from immigrant background. In daily communication, many children switch between English, Cantonese and the dialects of their parents. But his argument that Guangdong culture is marginal as the Cantonese make up only four percent of the Chinese population, is misleading. China is made up of many different provinces, local dialects, traditions and customs. All other local cultures, not just Guangdong culture, would be marginal, by Lin's reckoning. The statement that 64 percent of the entire nation speaks Mandarin needs some clarification. Does this 64 percent speak only Mandarin, or local dialects as well? The author states that "most of the Hong Kong population came from southern China, particularly Guangdong and Fujian provinces. Geographically, this is a region known as 'Lingnan'...." I am not sure if Lingnan includes Fujian though it does include Guangdong, part of Guangxi, Hong Kong and Macau. Lin's discussion of Lingnan culture is nonetheless important because it illustrates that immigrants are not people uprooted from one set of social relationships and absorbed into another. Instead, they are socially related people with a culture that is often place-based.

Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh's piece on the Chinese in Singapore looks at how Chinese as a majority negotiated and renegotiated their cultural, linguistic and social landscape with the nation state and other ethnic groups. Maggi W.H. Leung, Cindy Fan, and Chung-Tong Wu, each in her/his way, has challenged the assimilationist theory, and rejected the established premise of migration pattern as a straightforward, two-step, unidirectional movement in which Chinese immigrants were "pushed out" of their homeland and "pulled" into the receiving countries. The most useful paradigm in transnational and Diaspora studies is to propose a

de-nationalist perspective on the migration pattern and social origins of immigrants, emphasize the dynamics of the immigrant communities and their culture as a global phenomenon, and promote a community- and immigrant-centered scholarship. Most chapters in this book have followed this paradigm. In that regard, it is a valuable addition to the existing scholarship on transnationalism.

HAIMING LIU

HLAWXL@aol.com

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona