
This book is an admirable achievement by a transnational research team composed of five experienced scholars from five countries, each working in his/her respective research locality for three years (1999–2001).

Since the early 1990s, a series of incidents concerning the undocumented migrants from Fujian, a province in southern China, have attracted considerable worldwide attention. On 6 June 1993, the vessel Golden Venture with 286 unexpected Fujian migrants on board was found in the New York harbor. In the summer of 1999, four ships carrying 599 Chinese, most of them Fujianese, appeared off the coast of British Columbia, Canada. Then, in July 2000, 58 Fujianese were found dead in a cargo truck as it was passing through the customs checkpoint in Dover, Britain, and again, on 5 February 2004, at least 17 of 20 cockle pickers who drowned in Morecambe Bay were from Fujian. These incidents prompt the inevitable question: What really happened in Fujian and why did the Fujianese keep taking risks to go abroad? The issue of the Fujian migrants has become a hot topic. For now, however, most studies have focused on the Fujianese in North America. Transnational Chinese is the first one to focus on the Fujianese in Europe, and examine the issue from both the “sending” and “receiving” perspectives.

The book is composed of six chapters. The second chapter provides insightful accounts of the emigration from Fujian, which are mainly based on the fieldwork done by one of the team members, an anonymous local researcher in Fujian. The third chapter discusses the process of “getting out, getting in and moving on,” using important data collected in Europe. The fourth chapter focuses on the work and life of the Fujianese in Europe. At the end of each of the first four chapters, a case study is included as supplementary material. The fifth chapter seems relatively independent, which deals with the politics of migration by looking at the activities of various organizations.

Besides presenting primary data in the core chapters, the authors have made an impressive effort in theorizing Chinese migration in the current global age in the introductory and concluding chapters. The central theme of “Chinese globalization” postulates that the wave of transnational migration has formed an integral part of China’s increasing participation in the world economy. More precisely, according to the authors, the global presence of the Fujianese can be better understood only when the distinctive nature of the Chinese globalization process has been taken into consideration.
The great strength of this book is the excellent fieldwork conducted by the authors in three European countries (Britain, Hungary, and Italy), and two Fujian districts (Fuqing and Mingxi). The countries and districts are well chosen as they appropriately represent the main receiving countries in Europe and sending areas in Fujian. Acknowledging that each European country is unique, the authors have chosen Britain which is representative of the major countries of Chinese settlement in northwestern Europe, Italy which is at the southern frontier, and Hungary which has been the hub of the new eastern frontier since the 1990s. As for the sending areas of Fujian, the Fuqing municipality represents the community with a long history of transnational migration while Mingxi’s transnational migration flow did not surge until the 1980s. As such the readers are given a comprehensive picture of the Fujian migrants in Europe and the situation in their home districts.

In any discussion of the Fujian migrants today, “snakehead” is a topic that cannot be avoided. Who are the snakeheads? Did they initiate the illegal emigration from Fujian? This book deals with these sensitive issues carefully. The main argument of the authors, that Fujianese migration is a much more socially, culturally, and politically embedded phenomenon than the “snakehead” image would suggest and that in fact the commodification of migration does not necessarily entail criminalization, is well taken. On the basis of my own research, I completely agree with the statement of the authors, that is, the often so-called “snakeheads” are “professional service providers, or perhaps even respected community members.”

In the book, the researchers’ attention to detail is impressive. Among others, some special words used among the Fujian migrants have been aptly picked to mirror the situation vividly. For instance, “yang lan ka” is a Chinese expression which, if translated word for word, means “to feed the blue card,” but actually means paying taxes to have one’s resident permit extended. Again, the Chinese word “jie” simple means “receive” or “pick up someone.” But to the migrants, if there is someone to “receive (jie)” you, it means someone will sponsor your migration in the destination country.

Rising anti-immigration sentiment in some developed countries notwithstanding, economic migrants are needed to fill the job vacancies in their adopted countries, particularly in the low-paid and laborious jobs in the construction, agriculture, textile, garment, retail, catering, and some informal economic sectors. The undocumented entry of Fujianese is seen by the receiving countries as a problem originating from abroad, but is actually a consequence of imperfect European economic structures and immigration policies. This book claims that regardless of whether the Fujianese migrated legally or illegally, they have made contributions to the economic development in both their places of origin and destination. The research identifies several ways in which Fujian immigrant labor has played a role in the economies of their adopted countries. The readers will be impressed by the