Phoebe Hairong Li


China’s rise to become a global economic power has dramatically increased the world’s interest in this country and its people. Its new prosperity has been accompanied by greater geo-political influence, a form of soft power often exercised through investments in both developed economies and business and infrastructure projects in the global South. Although still a rival to the West, the terms of this rivalry have shifted from cold war ideological and military threats to economic grievances over industrial espionage, currency valuations, and product integrity. But the current rivalry is throughout met by reciprocal investment and an undeniable mutual economic dependency. One of the many manifestations of the new China is the mobility of highly skilled and well-financed Chinese to countries throughout the world, who, unlike their poor and little-educated sojourner forebears, are full of ambition and confidence in themselves and their homeland.

Phoebe Li’s *A Virtual Chinatown*, although set in New Zealand, is as much about contemporary China as it is about the Chinese in New Zealand. This is how it should be as contemporary educated and well-to-do émigrés from China are connected with the homeland perhaps on an equal footing to their connection to their new home. Part sociology, part history, and part media studies, Li’s book offers a fascinating window into modern migration and integration. Yes, her story is set in her own new home of New Zealand, but what she reveals is just as true of the Chinese in Canada, the United States, Australia, Europe, and increasingly in Latin America and elsewhere. This is a book for anyone interested in the dynamics of contemporary Chinese migration and in many of the social impacts throughout the world of China’s economic and geopolitical rise.

Li ably situates her analysis of the role of ethnic Chinese media in the integration of Chinese immigrants in New Zealand, describing policy changes in both Beijing and Wellington that have led to a rapid growth in the Chinese population in New Zealand. China’s 1986 loosening of its exit controls not only offered a new freedom to its people and the potential for much greater investment and trade, but it also hugely increased the supply of migrant workers to countries in the West that, without China’s liberating exit and return policy, might have faced immigration shortfalls. It was, for example, only a few years later that China became the predominant source country for migration to Canada. New Zealand, a year after China began opening its doors, followed suit by replacing its immigration recruitment preferences for Anglo-Europeans to
a global search for human capital and investment dollars. The Chinese responded in large numbers. Li’s account of post-1987 migration to New Zealand is rich and supported by a generous use of statistics. The Chinese came to the country for many reasons including to work, to establish businesses, for family re-unification, and for education. The exodus by 2007 had reached 40 million globally, an astonishing figure that dwarfs the population of a great many countries. Most accounts of the “push and pull factors” of international migration tend to follow economic and sociological lines; but in the case of Chinese emigration, it was a policy change that made the difference. Policy is often dismissed as a significant explanation of migration phenomena, but China’s policy to allow its people to leave and return changed the face of international migration and in ways whose effects are still being felt to this day. New Zealand took advantage of the new Chinese openness and, as Li reports, changed the character of its cities. China has become New Zealand’s principal source country for immigrants, replacing the United Kingdom in a strategic move that recognized the UK’s turn towards Europe following their joining the EU. New Zealand had hoped to compensate for the loss of British investment and trade by establishing relations with Asian countries and their rapidly developing economies.

New Zealand immigration policy is partly intended to address the emigration of New Zealanders, principally to Australia; it is, then, a policy of replacement migration as Li makes clear. When a society replaces part of its population with people from not only other countries but whose language and culture are at a considerable distance from one’s own, the challenge of integrating the newcomers becomes acute, far more so than when New Zealand’s main source country was the UK. Li looks carefully at the ways in which Chinese arrivals have over the decades inserted themselves into New Zealand society, noting the often sharp differences among the groups who have arrived at various times. In this exploration, Li shows her knowledge of not only contemporary migration and integration trends but of contemporary academic theory, applying it where it makes sense and doing so without infusing the discussion with the mind-numbing jargon of the post-modern academy. Indeed, her writing is fluid and pleasing to read and, despite its freedom from academic jargon, she does contemporary theories a service by adding to their robustness through her applications of them to her major case study.

Li subtitles her book, *The Diasporic Mediasphere of Chinese Migrants in New Zealand*. Her route into the ways in and degrees to which integration is taking place is the media, specifically the role that ethnic Chinese media play and have played in helping new arrivals settle into their new home. She displays her historian credentials by taking us through the media of the past and bringing us fully up to date with portrayals of contemporary print, broadcast, and