Book Reviews

Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce


The first edition of this book was published in 2000 and was subsequently republished in 2011. While the Chinese translation was made available recently, this review was written based on the 2011 edition. The publishing background of the book reveals its value in academia. The published Chinese translation reflects a great deal on the high demand of the book in both the East and West academic realm. The book acquires its value by exploring the collective memory of Chinese overseas, Singaporean Chinese and their ethnic-cultural identities and the lineage transnational network. This is a product of ethnographical study. The author conducted interviews and questionnaires for a broad and in-depth understanding of the subject matter. As a member of the Singaporean Anxi (安溪) Ke (柯, as Kuah in Hokkien dialect) community, the author took the opportunity to establish participant-observations but non-intrusively as an “insider” for the purpose of the research. In other words, she has the advantage of an insider’s position to trace the lineage links between the Ke Singaporeans and the ancestral village counterparts in Anxi County under the influence of transnational trends. The book establishes that the connection between Singaporean Chinese and China is not restricted by geographical limitations and instead is enhanced under the context of globalization.

Kuah-Pearce examined the relationship and continuity between Singaporean Chinese and their lineage members in China theoretically using the 1978 China government’s open-door policies and economy-oriented reformations as a starting point on the timeline. Taking the contributions of the Ke Singaporean Chinese in Anxi as an example, the main question of this study is why Singaporean Chinese have made consistent contributions to the socio-economic developments (refer to Chapter 5 for more details) and have channelled overseas efforts to ancestor worshipping as well as inspiring religious revivalism in qiaoxiang (僑鄉). Kuah-Pearce argues that the collective memories of the older generation Singaporean Chinese enforced their sense of moral responsibilities. In particular, the older generation Singaporean Chinese vividly remembered the poverty and suffering in qiaoxiang. Such
moral responsibilities instigated contributions to build basic infrastructure, establish educational facilities and finance small-medium enterprises in the ancestral village. The author names this phenomenon “moral economy”. The Older generation Singaporean Chinese, including the first generation migrants and local born, are unwilling to omit collective memories and nostalgic sentiments from their conscience and are making an effort to pass these memories and sentiments onto the younger generations. There are, though, tension and conflicts between the different generations as the younger generations do not feel attached to qiaoxiang in the way their parents or grandparents did. Kuah-Pearce notes that the collective memories, on the other hand, provided Singaporeans the basis of their ethnic-cultural identity and reminded them of “who they are” and “where their ancestors came from”.

While the collective memories served to help with the Singaporean's sense of identity, it also led to their involvement in the ongoing affairs of the ancestor land. Singaporean Chinese participated greatly in cultural activities in the ancestral village; such as the revival and reproduction of ancestor worship rituals as well as religious belief. More importantly, China relatives and respective official cadres understood the cultural needs of Singaporean Chinese; their longing for cultural identities and historic roots. The kin members and the officials in China thus allowed for cultural concessions after the 1980s. Cultural concessions were recognized as exchanges for economical co-operations from Singaporeans. These cultural activities indeed bonded lineage members in China and Singapore together, fostering common lineage identity.

In the concluding chapter of the book, Kuah-Pearce provides a theoretical analysis and claims that it is necessary to re-conceptualize the Chinese lineage as a cultural network in the contemporary society. In other words, kinship relations were embedded within a complex international network that was accompanied by the backdrop of globalization. She states that overseas surname associations participate in the networks as “nodes”, bringing individual kinsmen together and connecting the “source” (qiaoxiang) to the rest of the overseas Chinese communities. She also highlights that the overseas associations (surname and territorial) and lineage institutions in China not only existed as a stand-alone organization but as the connecting centres of the international network. Such a conclusion advanced the state of academic understanding in relations to the studies of Chinese overseas and Chinese lineage studies.

It is obvious that Kuah-Pearce pays more attention to the clout of Singaporean Chinese on their kinsmen in Anxi. She briefly mentions the Pengli Temple in Singapore that is co-owned by the Kes and Anxi Singaporean Chinese. Similarly, the presence of Ke Clan Association in Singapore was not