Huifen Shen


Research works on emigration from China and the challenges faced by Chinese migrants abroad have focused almost exclusively on male experiences — a point Shen notices in her study and points out in her book that “there is a substantial literature on the socio-economic and political aspects of migration between China and Southeast Asia, but the subject has generally been studied from a male point of view” (p. 7). Most of the archival materials available tend to look into issues faced by Chinese male migrants, such as their arrival at the ports of call, the harsh working conditions, any business and trading networks, vices and secret society activities. This is perhaps not surprising as those were issues that caught the attention of the colonial authorities as they tried to maintain law and order in far-away colonies. However, very little is known about female migration and their experiences in Southeast Asia and even less about the women left behind in China as their husbands went abroad to eke a living. How did these wives react to their husbands going abroad? How did they cope with life without their husbands? How was the relationship between the wives and the husbands’ families? What did they do with the remittances from their husbands? How did they react when they learned that their husbands could have remarried in Southeast Asia?

Shen Huifen’s excellent study of the fankeshen (‘left-behind wives’) provides the answer to the above questions. She not only used records from different archives and libraries in Fujian province, but also made an effort to interview 18 surviving fankeshen to get a better perspective of their experiences. Shen’s work is based entirely on empirical research. It reveals the impacts of migration on the fankeshen and the struggles the women faced as China went through political upheavals under the Guomindang’s rule in 1930s, the wars years from 1937 to 1945, and the Chinese Communist Party’s rule after 1949. Through newspapers, government records and oral history interviews, Shen has brought to life the joys, pain and frustration faced by the ‘left-behind wives’ who usually had no knowledge of how their husbands were doing overseas. Shen’s work made it clear that the only way these wives knew about their husbands were through letters, remittances and family members. The suspicions laid on them by their husbands’ families were also clearly articulated as they were closely monitored for possible adultery and other misdemeanors. Shen acknowledges the role played by her interviewees and that “most of them spoke freely, although they were describing experiences and situations that were deeply personal, and in many cases their memories were painful” (p. 11).
The book is very well organized. It is separated into two parts. Part I deals with the lives of the fankeshen. It examines why they had to remain in China as their husbands left for Southeast Asia. There is also a chapter on the relationship between the Chinese governments and Chinese migrants (or overseas Chinese), the family connections with the overseas Chinese, and the emergence of the qiaojuan (family of overseas Chinese) as a privileged group. Issues such as arranged marriages, long-distance relationships, remittances, a culture of surveillance, ties with the natal families and the daily lives of the fankeshen are also explored. In particular, Shen examines the husbands’ second marriages in Southeast Asia and the impact it have on the fankeshen. In a later part of the book, Shen also examines the uneasy relationship between the fankeshen and the fanpo (‘foreign wives’) when the husband introduces them to each other.

Part II of the book examines the lives of the fankeshen from the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia in 1941 to the early years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The chapters in this part of the book reveal how difficult it was to maintain contact with their husbands during the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia from 1941 to 1945 and the financial difficulties they faced as remittances (which had been sent regularly by their husbands before the war) were no longer sent to them due to the cut in communications between China and Southeast Asia. Shen has shown how the early years of the PRC brought some relief to the fankeshen and their children but as the 1950s wore on, and political upheavals such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution occurred, their lives were turned upside-down again. Shen also explores the migration of the fankeshen out of Fujian province and the creation of ‘little Fujian’ in North Point in Hong Kong as a consequence. The chapters are interspersed with biographies of some of Shen’s interviewees and that added a personal touch to it.

Finally, Shen concluded that “the experience of ‘left-behind wives’ who sought autonomy and eventually achieved greater empowerment adds a new element to the larger understanding of Chinese women and gender studies, and both complicates and enriches the story of Chinese migration” (p. 216).

Another interesting aspect of the book, is the recording of uniquely Fujian (or more accurately, Quanzhou, the area where many Fujian migrants came from) sayings in Mandarin or in Minnanhua (the predominant dialect of Quanzhou). These sayings capture a historical moment when it was common for husbands to leave their wives behind and start a new life in Southeast Asia. Migrants who left for Southeast Asia were Nanyang fanke or “guests in Southeast Asia” (p. 15). The image of emigrants among local Chinese people was that they were very wealthy as evident from the saying “lüsong bo, wu yiqian ye you babai” or “for an older migrant in Luzon (now part of the Philippines), if he does not