Introduction

Chinese Migrants in Latin America/Caribbean and Africa, Then and Now

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In the past, South East Asia and North America were the two most common destinations for migrating Chinese. With China’s integration into the global economy, migration flows both to and from China have intensified as well as diversified (on migration to China, see Pieke 2013; on Africans in China, see Bodomo 2012, Mathews and Yang 2012, Haugen 2012, Castillo 2015, Lan 2017). As a result, numbers of Chinese migrants in the Global South, particularly in Africa and in the Latin America/Caribbean (LAC) region have increased spectacularly in the last two decades. Acknowledging the importance of these two regions for the study of overseas Chinese and attempting to put scholars of overseas Chinese in the two regions in conversation, I organized a double panel for the July 2016 gathering of the International Society of the Study of Chinese Overseas (ISSCO). ISSCO has been one of the few international conference organizations open and welcoming to those of us straddling two or more global regions in our studies of overseas Chinese. The double panel focused on Chinese migrants in these two sites in an effort to start examining the similarities and differences in historical and contemporary migrations, communities of overseas Chinese, local perceptions, and issues of identity.

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Historically, flows of Chinese to the Latin America/Caribbean region and Africa were significantly smaller than those to South East Asia and North America. Most of the earliest flows of Chinese to the Americas and Africa were linked to colonial projects and indentured labor. Reception and subsequent processes of integration in different countries varied greatly. Today, in an era of a Rising China, China’s “going out” has involved renewed flows of Chinese state and private capital and Chinese people. As in earlier times, independent migrants often follow state projects and contract labor, although these days most of the labor is voluntary rather than unfree. Despite the similarities, it can be argued that the socio-economic context of the Global South today, as a site of migration, is significantly different from that of North America in the late 19th and 20th centuries. And China’s “arrival in” (Armony and Strauss 2012) these regions is greatly impacted by local perceptions of China’s global rise as well as their previous encounters with foreign powers, specifically the United States and various European countries. In two back-to-back panels, exploring both the past and the present, papers addressed the question: has Chinese migration to the Global South played out, and is it still playing out, differently from in the “West”? This special issue of the Journal of Chinese Overseas stems from this double panel.

Growing Bodies of Literature: “China-Africa” and “China-Latin America”

This special issue is informed by my thinking around the tremendous growth in the China-Africa field, challenges facing area studies, the possibilities of greater collaborative and comparative study, and lessons that might be learned from cross-regional, cross-time perspectives. The media and scholarly attention on “China-Africa” seems to be undergirded by assumptions that we are witnessing something unique and unprecedented. While the linking of these two unevenly matched “partners” — one a country, and the other, a continent — has elicited scholarly attention since the 1960s when China was actively supporting African independence movements and engaged in building anti-hegemonic solidarities (Yu 1966 and 1970; Larkin 1971; Ogunsanwo 1974; Hutchinson 1975; Snow 1989), writing on China-Africa really exploded in

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1 Because of relative proximity, cultural and ethnic ties, the longue durée, and a significant body of literature on Chinese migration to South East Asia (see Wang 1999; Suryadinata 1997; Tan 1988 and 1993) overseas Chinese in and new migrations to that region are not covered here.