Adrian H. Hearn


Adrian Hearn, an Australian-educated scholar who currently holds a professorship in anthropology in a Canadian university, has written an original and much needed book on China’s contemporary relationship to Cuba and Mexico. *Diaspora and Trust* takes a refreshing look at China’s rise and the promise it holds for greater economic integration in both Cuba and Mexico. While Cuba and Mexico stand at opposite ends in terms of their openness to free markets and political ideology, they may find mutual benefit in less-top down approaches that helped to punctuate China’s late-twentieth century economic ascent. In Cuba, China’s approach re-emphasized connecting large state-owned enterprises with emerging private businesses. Pragmatism, rather than stark adherence to socialist principles, leveraged both state and market forces in a mixed economy. Similarly, Mexico’s support of its small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) through greater access to loans, information, and logistical support parallels China’s arrangement with modest-sized firms, a configuration that led to robust productivity especially in manufacturers. But Hearn pulls no punches about what lay behind the motivations of Cuba and Mexico in rebalancing their economies: in his estimation, Cuba and Mexico adopted these approaches not as a result of neutral modeling on the part of China, but rather as a necessary response to China’s global expansion. China’s historical ties to Cuba, especially in the post-Soviet era, fostered significant linkages to the long-standing Cuban-Chinese community. In Mexico, a somewhat different approach to reformulating the balance of power between state, market, and society took hold that would also tether Mexico’s financial and trade markets to China, and not predominantly to the United States. Mexico’s Chinese community and liberal democracy stand as instrumental in achieving more diverse economic options with China. With nuance and a keen sense of the past, Hearn’s work is genuinely a rethinking of twenty-first century Latin American-Sino relations that link future economic promise to both Cuban and Mexican stakeholders and long-standing Chinese communities in those nations.

Hearn’s insights about sea changes in Sino-Latin American partnerships rely on a new formulation of trust. His approach begins by distilling the concept of *guanxi* (relationships or connections) by linking it to western notions of trust. *Guanxi*, as Hearn correctly notes, encompasses a wide range of formal and informal practices of exchange that involve both *bao* (reciprocity) and *ganqing* (affection). Reciprocal relationships vary widely in intent and purpose, but most *guanxi* relationships are based on cultivating the actual...
interpersonal connection while the potential for exchange is pursued second-arily. Guanxi, Hearn writes, were especially efficacious in promoting confidence among Chinese investors and middling-businessmen in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, and home-based markets at the onset of China’s rise. But Hearn is quick to note that the same instrumental ties that had catalyzed transnational markets for Chinese diasporic communities in southern and eastern China run counter to Western forms of reciprocal relationships in business. While these partnerships may have critically assisted in the opening up of foreign markets for China, the actions of gift giving and forging affective bonds rouse suspicion of graft and nepotism in free-market, liberal democracies. Social capital, like guanxi, is a near empty signifier because Chinese communities in Cuba and Mexico could neither orchestrate ties locally nor synergize with public and private stakeholders simultaneously. For Hearn, trust, rather than guanxi or social capital, is the most fitting if not promising force to catalyze vertical notions of state-society engagement and horizontal relationships at the community level (p. 4). Trust, for Hearn, is also aspirational belief, one that recognizes promise as well as the attendant activities necessary to fulfill that promise. It is at the intersection of the past and present where Hearn places trust in sharp relief.

From a historical point of view, trust is a tall order. In Cuba and Mexico, the Chinese diasporic communities have been the subject of ongoing discrimination and racialized violence since the mid-to-late nineteenth century. In Cuba, the first Chinese immigrants supplemented African slaves as indentured servants in the cane fields, making that island colony (later a nation, starting in 1898) the world’s foremost producer of sugar by the mid-nineteenth century, far outdistancing competition in Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Brazil. Abuses of Chinese indentures racialized them as social poisons, and decades later, during the Castro revolution, Chinese Cubans were perceived suspiciously and as somewhat ambivalent supporters of socialism, although ultimately official revolutionary discourse included them. This was not the case for Mexico’s Chinese communities. The silencing of people of Chinese descent was especially apparent in Mexico, which for the most part upheld the view that national identity was forged from the racial mixture of European criollos (creoles) and indigenous peoples. The Chinese were neither the one nor the other and, despite holding citizenship, intermarrying, and establishing successful businesses, were never considered rightful Mexicans. Unlike in Cuba, the Chinese in Mexico, particularly in the north, were subjected to official expulsion, displacement, and dispossession. Currently, the discourse of the “China Threat” is alive and well and is no less destructive than in the past. The portrayal of Chinese by national and local media as “pernicious