Voluntary Organisations in the Chinese Diaspora. Edited by KHUN ENG KUAH-PEARCE and EVELYN HU-DEHART. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006. x + 295 pp.

Based on a broad range of in-depth case studies drawn from Asia, Europe, Australia and North America, this book aims to deepen understanding of the transition of the “Chinese in diaspora” to “post-diasporic communities” through an analysis of the changing morphology and functions of Chinese voluntary organizations. By adopting a primarily historical approach, the various chapters in this edited volume discuss the central characteristics of these organizations, including their roles in identity politics, cultural brokerage, political mobilization, business networking and religious activities of Chinese communities outside China. In its conclusions, the book comes up strongly on the side of the continued relevance and significance of these organizations, arguing that they have successfully fulfilled the needs of Chinese communities through both localizing and globalizing strategies, the former by negotiating new identities and brokering social and political relationships in engaging multiethnic or plural societies, and the latter by drawing on economic networks and social capital accumulated prior to the “post-diasporic moment” (p. 13) to facilitate transnational linkages to gain business advantages.

While this volume is a useful stocktaking effort which helps us monitor the state of Chinese voluntary organizations in a variety of settings around the world, its contribution to scholarship would have been further enhanced had there been a more consistent effort in pursuing central conceptual threads which could potentially link the material presented in each of the empirical chapters into a more powerful response to intriguing questions. It is disappointing that the editors at the outset deliberately sidestep the task of engaging conceptual issues in this volume. At least twice, they state that the book will not tackle the basic questions: they make it clear that they will not “explore and debate the validity of the Chinese diaspora as a phenomenon in this volume — we accept it as a given” (p. 2), and they step back from taking a hard look at the question of whether there is “just one Chinese diaspora, or many diasporas” (p. 22). There is no doubt that many of the issues discussed in this volume have a bearing on these fundamental questions; it is a pity that the editors have chosen not to take these important insights into the workings of the Chinese diaspora one step further to sharpen conceptual tools with which to make sense of multiple mobilities, transnationalisms and identity politics at a more general level.

One effect of the lack of conceptual questions as connecting threads is that the individual chapters remain largely solid, empirically grounded case studies
which do not clearly “add up” to more than the sum of independent parts. There is a missed opportunity here in making the most of a comparative analytical framework. For example, while the chapters on Chinese voluntary organizations in Malaysia (Chapter 2) and Singapore (Chapter 3) both address questions relating to the relationship of these organizations with the postcolonial state in the task of nation-building as well as their roles as cultural brokers within multiethnic societies, there is no attempt to apply a comparative frame in discussing the relevance and centrality of discourses of diaspora and post-diasporic politics in the two nation-states with a shared history, where similar-yet-different formulae are employed in the task of turning sojourners into citizens. Indeed, more can be done to compare the nature of diaspora and diasporic institutions in different socio-political contexts. For example, while communities in Indonesia (Chapter 4) and Mexico (Chapter 7) have to contend with nationalisms and xenophobia targeting their relative prosperity and visible success, those in Singapore (Chapter 3) and Australia (Chapter 9) are inserted into multicultural discourses offering a different set of opportunities and constraints. In the United States (Chapter 10), Chinese communities negotiate the countervailing pressures of assimilation on the one hand and ethnicization on the other, while in the Czech Republic (Chapter 12), weak ties and a failure to find common ground among post-1990s mainland Chinese migrants have resulted in the lack of community, or what can be described as “a community of loose sand” or at best “a cloakroom community.”

The failure to question the concept of a Chinese diaspora, and to interrogate the variability of phenomena encompassed by this term, also blunts the conceptual edge of the analysis. Clearly, the editors are well aware of the diversity of what is encompassed within the “diasporic” population. In fact, on p. 18, they provide a useful typology including “old migrants from the first wave of migration,” “new migrants who have migrated in the last few decades,” “migrants who migrated out of mainland China into the diaspora,” “migrants who migrated from one community into another within the diaspora,” “descendants of the early migrants in the diaspora” and “returned migrants from the diaspora to mainland China.” They even suggest a pecking order in terms of status differentiation among the Chinese: “American and European Chinese have the highest status, followed by Hong Kong Chinese and Southeast Asian Chinese, the mainland Chinese having the lowest status” (p. 19). However, in the analysis of case studies, these differentiations tend to remain muted and “diaspora” appears to be taken for granted as a monolithic concept in most of the chapters. My concern is not so much with whether one agrees with the substance of the typologies and hierarchies suggested, but with the failure to apply some form of conceptual framing in understanding diversity and tensions within “diaspora” and the ensuing complexity of post-diasporic politics.