Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama.

At the heart of Lok Siu’s engaging, well-researched book about Chinese Panamanians is the question of what it means to be Chinese in a diaspora. Siu makes a major contribution to international migration and Chinese overseas studies by developing the theoretical concept of “diasporic citizenship.” Rather than taking for granted a coherent, homogenized “Chinese diaspora,” Siu demonstrates its complexities and disjunctures through detailed ethnographic research on people who self-identify as Chinese, including those of mixed descent. The Central American nation of Panama offers a particularly rich context for such a study, as its history includes a neocolonial relationship with the United States, formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and more recently, economic and cultural exchanges with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This ever-shifting geopolitical configuration has influenced the sense of belonging among Chinese in Panama who must choose, for example, to ally with Taiwan or the PRC, or to attempt to balance ties to both.

Organizationally, the book opens with an introduction and a brief history of the Chinese in Panama, followed by five thematic chapters that illuminate different aspects of Chinese diasporic citizenship: transnational organizations, migration patterns, geopolitics, new immigrants, and globalization and the China-Taiwan conflict. Owing to different migration flows, the Chinese Panamanian community is highly diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, class, occupation, gender, generation, religion, and language ability. This very diversity engenders discussions about which China should be officially acknowledged and how Chineseness is defined.

Passionate debates erupted during the 1996 annual meeting of the Convention of Chinese Associations of Central America and Panama and its related beauty contest, the subject of Chapter 2. Siu examines the “masculinization” of formal participation in the meetings (dominated by men) and the “feminization” of informal interactions, such as shopping and tourist excursions, as well as the beauty contest (p. 63). In 1996, the two finalists were the Taiwan-born Miss Costa Rica, whose flawless Mandarin and more traditional Chinese appearance appealed to recent Chinese immigrants, and the locally-born Miss Honduras, a contestant of mixed descent who struggled with Chinese, but spoke proficient English. Siu comments, “What is at stake in the beauty contest involves not only who gets to represent the Chinese diaspora, but also what qualities are deemed to be idealized characteristics of that diaspora” (p. 75). At that particular juncture, who could best embody Chinese beauty, femininity, and diasporic community for the Chinese of Central America?
The acts of migrating and remigrating, while commonly associated with rupture from the homeland, can also help to shape a sense of diasporic belonging. Through four richly detailed life stories, Chapter 3 reveals how “serial migration” produces a sense of home and identity among diasporic Chinese. Moving beyond traditional studies of immigration and assimilation and building on recent works on transnationalism, Siu defines serial migration as “a circuitous and open-ended process that entails crossing multiple national borders over an extended period of time and often over generations…” (p. 86). We meet Fernando, a Panamanian of mixed descent who describes himself as “part Chinese, part white, part black, and part indigenous” (p. 91). His paternal grandfather immigrated from China to Jamaica, where he opened a store and married a black Jamaican, then moved on to Colón, Panama, during the late 19th century. Fernando’s father, who had been sent to school in Jamaica, returned to work for the United Fruit Company. Fernando followed this pattern by also attending school in Jamaica, but went to Chicago for his university degree. He eventually came “home” to Panama to become an English teacher in Canal Zone schools. Despite Fernando’s mixed heritage, he actively participates in Chinese social networks and diasporic activities (pp. 91–95). For others, such as Victoria, forced migration from China in 1949, class and gender struggles in Panama, and marriage to a non-Chinese have contributed to a sense of alienation from the larger Chinese Panamanian community (pp. 103–108). Siu skillfully reveals how narratives of migration work to shape one’s sense of identity: “For most, the repeated relocations entailed in serial migration appeared more like normal changes than the traumatic disjunctions often associated with migration” (p. 111).

Chapter 4 takes the reader back to the decade of the 1940s to demonstrate the domestic circumstances in Panama and in China that propelled multiple migrations and brought about changing conceptions of diasporic citizenship. Three processes, the nationalist movement in Panama that ultimately disenfranchised Chinese (along with non-Hispanic blacks), the Communist revolution in China that made return to the homeland impossible, and the expansion of US military bases in Panama that provided sanctuary and employment for displaced Chinese, altered notions of belonging for that generation of Chinese Panamanians.

Today, Chinese Panamanians face challenges from new migrants from southeast China and from the PRC’s increasing role in the region, detailed in Chapters 5 and 6. Although maintaining official recognition of Taiwan, Panama, like other nations in the region, has also been receptive to dialogue and exchange with the PRC. A tremendous growth in Chinese investment in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past decade, alongside increased migration since the 1980s, has made the study of the Chinese diaspora in the region particularly pertinent. Thousands of new migrants, among them large numbers of undocumented Hakkas, have “sparked fresh debates about Chinese belonging in Panama” (p. 30),