Book Reviews


Students of overseas Chinese have been waiting for this book for years. Since the mid-1990s, the news that Philip Kuhn, a distinguished historian with an international reputation, had “switched” his attention from the Qing dynasty to the overseas Chinese has surprised many historians of China. As the author of the well known books, Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China and Soulstealers, among others, Kuhn is greatly admired by his Chinese colleagues. In 2001, at a public meeting of the CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) to which he was invited, Kuhn was asked about his research plans. When he replied that his ongoing research was focused on the history of overseas Chinese, he was met with a strange silence. After quite a while, someone in the audience politely commented, “Oh, this is an important issue. They once supported Sun Yat-sen by sending him a lot of money.” Kuhn was surprised by the response: Why do Chinese historians look at this topic of world-wide dimension from such a narrow perspective? However, I believe all students of overseas Chinese in China could fully understand the comment, in view of the fact that overseas Chinese studies had never gained a firm foothold in traditional academic enquiry. The fact that a famous and, moreover, a non-Chinese scholar like Kuhn, has ventured into this “marginal field” is itself testament to the importance of the subject and should be seen as a great encouragement to students with an interest in the area.

The book is made up of one brief introduction, eight chapters and dozens of interesting quotations in boxes. As the exordium of the whole book, the Introduction presents the author’s definition of three key concepts that run through the book — the meaning of “modern time,” the implications of “ecology,” and the significance of “others” among whom Chinese migrants have settled — which will enable the reader to comprehend the importance of Chinese emigration from the perspective of macro-history. It is proof of the impressive effort of the author that the Chinese emigration experiences all over the world in the last five centuries have been interwoven into a complex whole and then properly fitted into the macro framework of world history.

The book speaks to both the general and scholarly audiences. Chapters Two to Eight discuss the respective ecological regimes within an historical framework. Since modern times, the world outside China has undergone changes from the early colonial regimes, the surge of imperialism, the postcolonial movement, to the current globalization. Within China itself, different generations of migrants have experienced life under the dynastic empire, embattled republic, Mao’s socialist-revolutionary nation-state and the new period of socialism with Chinese characteristics. No matter how the ecology has
changed, Chinese emigration has continued and successive waves of Chinese migrants have reached the world outside. The book's perspective of macro history helps the general readers especially to become familiar with the history of Chinese emigration which is a relatively isolated topic. At the same time, the book reminds all readers, particularly the scholarly, that “neither Chinese history lacking emigration nor emigration lacking the history of China is a self-sufficient field of study” (p. 5).

Academics, who are interested in delving deeper into the subject, will undoubtedly pay attention to the theoretical model that the author has created. The distillate of this macro research is discussed in the first chapter in which the author carefully puts forward the model of “corridor + niche” to characterize the Chinese emigration landscape. According to the author, “corridor” refers to a cultural formation in which emigrants and their home communities participate jointly; and “niche” refers to the way migrants fit into the human ecology of the venue society while their kin-groups back in the original village fit into their own regional ecology. The type of “corridor + niche” culture, moreover, shows that the essence of Chinese emigration is “not the separation but the connection”; and that the Chinese long-practiced strategy of migration should be seen as “a system of labor distribution that assumes a continuous connection between migrants and their home communities…” (p. 4).

In building up the model, the author analyzes the factors that have led to the persistence of the corridor and those for its erosion. First, the principal elements of the corridor include the sojourners' guilds and lodges, the branch temples, and the regional brotherhoods that exist both at home and abroad, or to put it differently, that function at both ends of the corridor. Under favorable conditions the two-way passage of people, money and culture are conducted via the corridor thereby sustaining the distinctive identities. Second, the “corridor + niche” model has been modified by the treatments of the “others” and the Chinese migrants' responses characterized by self-sufficiency. With the help of modern technology and the ease of travel, the Chinese migrants are, consciously or unconsciously, making the “corridor” more profitable and sustainable. On the other hand, the “corridor” and “niche” may have been damaged by certain factors, such as the political barriers to trade and migration put up by the home or destination states, the full acculturation of the local-born generations, etc.

Nevertheless, the author stresses that the model of “corridor + niche” is now still visible and functioning well for the Chinese emigrants. It not only constituted an adaptive device for the early migrants, but can be discerned in the migrant life of later generations. More to the point, it seems that the “corridor + niche” culture is rather flexible and has kept evolving in different times and circumstances, producing a complex, long-term pattern in the history of Chinese emigration. The “corridor + niche” model, therefore, is not simply a zone of spatial transition from one place to another, but a zone of ongoing cultural transactions. It is a collective symbol of “Chinese transnationalism,” and a salient feature of cultural China protruding into the world. This is a convincing argument that will attract wide attention.

Finally, mention should also be made of the research methodology. Although the book is written with a historical framework, the author has organized the rich data to flesh out the new theme, rather than devoting a separate chapter to the discussion of each historical period. To put it differently, unlike what he did in his well known book, *Soulstealers*, which is filled with new-found data dug out from the immense historical