Book Reviews


This set of essays analyzes the intensifying transnational discourse of Chinese migrant communities, in order “to interpret the heterogeneous enunciations of diasporic subjects” within them (p. 8). The book seeks to build intellectual synergy among specialists from a variety of disciplines, bringing literary, film, and ethnic studies together with history and anthropology in common cause to the study of Chinese diaspora. Diaspora offers a strategic theme, of course, because it offers such a fruitful means to understanding a greater phenomenon: the unbounded, networked, decentralized, and outsourced world of global capitalism, along with its instruments, effects, and experience. Few subjects are better suited for this endeavor than the Chinese Overseas who have been so instrumental in its making.

The book is organized into three sections. “Diasporic Negotiations” offers interesting vantages on new “incantations of Chineseness” and the shifting solidarities they reflect. Ping-kwan Leung’s essay — part history, part literary memoir — provides a glimpse at efforts by the author and his literary cohort to re-imagine community in the face of ever-changing contexts, improvising from the cultural archive “in order to organize, reconstruct, negotiate, or adapt their pasts to the present” (p. 8). Leung and his fellow post-1949 exiles struggled to reconcile themselves with the “tossing and turning” (p. 41) of revolution, global capital, political change that compelled new interpretations of society and self, and the “constant drift” (p. 36) that hindered the translation of old worlds into new cultural syntax. Perhaps this drift explains the lingering sense of migrant anxiety that prevents sojourner from transforming into migrant, according to Deborah Madsen. Such rhetoric produces an existential crisis of double exclusion—one can never go “home,” yet never truly settle beyond it.

Not all diasporic subjects languish in the limbo of this “neither-nor” identity, however; others have turned the definition on its head, turning ambivalent identity to their advantage, as Helen Siu demonstrates in her study of Hong Kong’s Victoria Park protests in 2003. Here, middle-class professionals marshaled the resources of their global, transnational networks while simultaneously declaring their affiliation with the imagined lineage of a singular Chinese nation. Similar strategies could secure a stake in unpredictable or even dangerous host societies as well, as Siu-Lin Wong’s study of African American images in Sinophone Chinese American literature shows. Comparing two very different sets of stories, Wong finds “the same dehumanization of black characters” used in order “to underwrite the protagonist’s idealized Chinese diasporic identity…” (p. 90). This maneuver is not only racialized, but gendered and sexualized as well.
Section Two, “Historical Legacies,” suggests that these maneuvers are nothing new to Chinese Overseas. Prasenjit Duara borrows Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the “state of exception” in order to show how Peranakan communities of the Dutch East Indies applied this negative, “neither-nor” label in order to create a “third culture” between Chinese and host societies. Such alienation was hardly peculiar to Chinese at sea, however, as Nicolas Zufferey’s study of the literature of Han Dynasty exiles indicates. Resettled in the western regions, these exiles remained within the political bounds of China, but only in a political sense. Technology imposed scales of physical distance upon these exiles that we can only imagine today. The same applies to Jeffrey Altenburger’s study of the 18th-century scholar-official Ji Yun, and his literary recollections of exile in Xinjiang. Looking at the literati’s complete writings, Altenburger discovers a polyphony that reflects contingent textual strategies aimed at diverse and drifting exigencies, utilized in ways that appear little different from diasporic descendents.

Chinese diaspora continues to grow in scales and complexity, intensifying the strength of its global reach. As it evolves, efforts to redefine identity and worldview continue to diversify as well, as seen in Section Three, “Re-Storying Diaspora.” Discursive constructions of Mainland migrants as a threat to Hong Kong society give lie to the “the rhetoric of eternal fraternity” among Chinese, according to Pheng Cheah’s analysis of the film Durian Durian. Although firmly set within the political bounds of China, the film’s characters come to inhabit an “aporia of exile” (p. 166) reminiscent of Zufferey and Altenburger’s banished literati. This dystopia is reinforced, exaggerated, and diversified in multicultural environments, even in the same location, as Andrea Remenschnitter argues in her attempt to map out the queer cultural space created by the eternally “internal outsiders” moving through the hyper-modernized contact zones within Taiwanese and Hong Kong societies. Yet others found the means, however painful, to reconcile the dissonances and contradictions “emerging from the divergent expectations toward the diasporic individual,” and to assert a new agency “that provides opportunities … to establish a new subjectivity and thus to strive for emancipation,” as depicted in Kathrin Ensinger’s study of Zhao Shuxia’s emancipatory fictionalization of early 20th-century courtesan Sai Junhua (p. 201).

Who constitutes these subjects, and the parameters of their field of action, makes this book most interesting. By dispensing with geography as a subject marker, the articles transcend the Westphalian worldview that naturalizes inside-outside, homeland-diaspora, China-Chinese Overseas discriminations that continue to belie the transnationalist pretentions of so many diasporic studies. As a result, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore feature centrally as both products and progenitors of successive generations of diasporic networks. Even the mainland makes a guest appearance as a site of diasporic circulation and identity construction, rather than simply as a fetishized homeland. This achieves a more appropriate context within which to address the complexities of subject formation.

Structurally, the book is not without its problems. The book does not quite achieve the narrative ease and continuity it deserves. A few of the individual essays could have been more fully formed. Greater investment in editing would have proven worthwhile; whether the fault lies with the book’s academic editors or the sad state of university presses is a matter I will leave to the reader. In terms of content, emphasis on printed texts gives the volume a slightly outmoded feel, because so much of this diasporic discourse occurs in