

Diaspora' s homeland : modern China in the age of global migration

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2018

van Dongen, E. (2020). Diaspora' s homeland : modern China in the age of global migration. *Journal of Social History*, 53(3), 868-870. doi:10.1093/jsh/shy095

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/146445>

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shy095>

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The final version of this book review appeared in *Journal of Social History*, online first 6 December 2018.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shy095>

BOOK REVIEW

Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration. By Shelly Chan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. xiv plus 264 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), \$25.95 (paperback)).

In a 2004 lecture entitled “Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-versa,” the renowned historian Philip A. Kuhn made the case for the intermingled processes of modern Chinese history and the history of Chinese emigration. Continuing these efforts of cross-fertilization by Philip A. Kuhn and, among others, Madeline Y. Hsu, Adam M. McKeown, and Glen Peterson, in *Diaspora's Homeland*, Shelly Chan puts in dialogue the fields of overseas Chinese, Chinese American, and modern Chinese history. Unlike in other accounts, however, the book's starting point is the overlooked question: “How did it change China?” (p. 1). This question goes beyond earlier approaches that Chan characterizes as “the sum of parts,” namely mapping distributions of Chinese in “fixed” countries and regions, or “interactions between parts,” namely outlining transnational connections at various levels (pp. 7-8). Instead, the book is preoccupied with the emigrants' influence on China and how diaspora-homeland dynamics transformed China into an invented permanent “homeland.”

Engaging with how the “transnational turn” affected all three fields mentioned above, and building on approaches from postcolonial, literary, and cultural studies to criticize the nation-state and linear time, the book is really multiple books in one. At its heart lies the reconceptualization of diaspora—denounced by critics across disciplines because of the dangers of homogenization or the lack of localization—by way of de-privileging the spatiality in migration and diaspora studies in favor of temporality. In other words, instead of seeing diaspora as “dispersed communities,” we should also conceive of it as “fragmented temporalities” (p. 11). The book zooms in on five “diaspora moments,” or the interaction between temporalities of migration and other temporalities at local, national, and regional levels that create “unexpectedly wide reverberations” (p. 13). A different set of actors populates each of the five “moments” covered in the five main chapters of the book, which are set against the background of imperial, Nationalist, and

Communist China respectively. This diversity in terms of actors, time periods, and geographical interconnections certainly enhances the envisioned sense of “fragments,” but the approach also partly resists their integration into a single narrative, as Chan duly acknowledges: “After a messy, complicated history of encounters, how is it possible to remake disparate entities into a single whole?” (p. 196).

Starting in the late Qing dynasty, the first “moment” revolves around the lifting of the 1893 emigration ban, the meaning of which is reinterpreted, and situates China’s nation-building against the background of indentured “coolie” migration and broader themes such as sovereignty and diplomacy. The second “moment” is concerned with the writings of a group of scholars at Jinan University in Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s. Drawing on Western and Japanese discourses of geography and history, they re-envisioned the maritime trade region referred to as *Nanyang* (South Seas) and discussed Chinese emigration as settler colonialism. The third “moment” revisits the story of Lim Boon Keng (Lin Wenqing), a British-educated Chinese from Singapore, and debates on Confucianism and Chinese identity, through the lens of colonialism in Southeast Asia, its connections with China, and the spread of education in the region. The effects of land and marriage reforms on stay-behind wives of emigrants in South China during the 1950s constitute the fourth “moment.” Here, the author reveals the tensions between official policies and local realities through archival records such as petitions against land reforms and marriage reports, as well as the contradictions within policies and their evolution over time. The fifth “moment,” finally, is that of returnees (*guiqiao*) during the 1950s and 1960s in the context of decolonization and anti-Chinese sentiment in Southeast Asia. Drawing on internal documents from the Guangzhou Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau, Chan reads official narratives against the grain to expose the various frictions and encounters involved in returnee integration as a site of ideological struggle between capitalism and socialism.

The attempt to redefine diaspora along temporal lines addresses the important neglected aspect of how the transnational turn overlaps with questions of temporality, but this leads to the apparent location of “diaspora time” outside of other temporalities, with which it intersects only at certain “moments.” “Diaspora time,” “a slow-moving and silent condition,” refers to “the diverse, ongoing ways in which migration affects the lifeworlds of individuals, families, and communities” (pp. 12-13). Whereas “national time” is marked by linearity and *telos*, “diaspora time” is a mode of living centered around kinship, village life, local customs, patrilineage, circular movement, and maritime trade networks that resists “linear national time” (p. 16). However, emigration was also closely interlinked with the dynamics of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and nation-building, all of which

arguably manifested “linear” tendencies. Similarly, the temporalities of Nationalist or Mao’s China were certainly not exclusively “linear” given the realities of war, revolution, the rural-urban divide, and other forms of domestic fragmentation. If “diaspora time” functioned as “rupture,” “transformation,” and “recombination” (p. 187), then so did the other temporalities with which it allegedly intersected. The author does recognize these complexities and tensions, but their implications merit further elaboration.

Diaspora’s Homeland sets out to raise new questions by bringing together three separate fields and in this, it certainly succeeds. Conceptually, it reverses the directional flow of homeland-emigrant influence to emigrant-homeland influence and of diaspora-as-space to diaspora-as-time intersecting with space. Geographically, it transcends earlier integration efforts in that it includes both overseas Chinese studies, centering on Southeast Asia, and Chinese American studies. Beyond these aspiring macro-objectives, at chapter level, the book is based on meticulous research, including a wealth of multi-archival primary sources. In sum, the book not only offers a sweeping birds-eye view of modern Chinese history from a new perspective, but it also provides solid in-depth research on some less explored topics. Scholars and students of modern Chinese history and the history of Chinese emigration will no doubt see their field through different eyes upon reading this bold work.

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