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Review Essay

Writing Modern Chinese History Inside Out: New Relational Approaches to (Un)Thinking the Nation-State, Diaspora, and Transnationalism

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Abstract

Engaging with earlier scholarship that probes the linearity of the nation-state, recent works employ new relational approaches and foreground "Chinese" perceptions of "China." They approach modern Chinese history through the lens of the emigrant-homeland dynamic, advocating a localized transnationalism and exploring the implications of the transnational turn on temporality. Also, situating the nation-state within history, they argue for a "shifting" China based on questions of ethnicity and cultural exchange.

This essay discusses the following works. Shelly Chan. *Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. 264 pp. $99.95 (cloth), $25.95 (paper). Ge Zhaoguang *What is China?: Territory, Ethnicity, Culture, and History*. Trans. Michael Gibbs Hill. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018. 201 pp. $39.95 (cloth). Michael Williams. *Returning Home with*

Glory: Chinese Villagers around the Pacific, 1849 to 1949. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018. 249 pp. $60.00 (cloth).

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What is "China"? This question is not new, but it has gained urgency with China's economic and social transformation during the last four decades. How did this "rising" capitalist China—which deviated from what many scholars of earlier generations, operating within a modernization framework and denouncing a "stagnant" or Communist China, had predicted—relate to the China of Mao Zedong, Republican, and dynastic China? Apart from issues regarding historical continuity, those pertaining to spatial unity also received new impetus with the end of the Cold War and China's repositioning in Asia and the world. Under the influence of postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and the discursive and transnational turns, scholarship on China followed major academic trends that problematized continuity, linearity, and "fixed" space. Migration and diaspora became prevalent in research not only with the spread of the globalization paradigm but also with the rekindled attention to empire and colonialism. The latest academic discursive currency became that of interactions, networks, and circulations.

Diaspora's Homeland, *What is China?*, and *Returning Home with Glory* engage with these earlier shifts by probing the linearity and teleology of the nation-state and in their interrogation of established notions of boundaries, distance, and scale. Shelly Chan and Michael Williams reconsider the nation-state from the angle of migration and diaspora, whereas Ge Zhaoguang turns to history instead, exploring how territory and borders evolved diachronically. An important theoretical distinction is that, whereas both Williams and Chan

deconstruct the nation-state in favor of a relational perspective involving the emigrants and the homeland, Ge revisits the nation-state without discarding it altogether. Ge refers to Prasenjit Duara's well-known 1995 work *Rescuing History from the Nation*, in which Duara urged readers to consider "the histories of nations as contingently as nations are themselves contingent."[1] Instead, Ge argues that we need to understand "China" as a "shifting" yet stable entity and acknowledge change *within* the nation and state; if we do so, according to Ge, we can avoid the ploy "of allowing the 'nation' to kidnap 'history' in its original form" (27).

Let us first turn to Williams and Chan, who both complicate the picture of migration as a linear movement and whose main concern is not emigrants' activities at their places of destination but how emigrants connect to the homeland. In this, they both bring together the history of modern China and the history of emigration. In 2006, prominent historian Philip A. Kuhn highlighted the need for this meeting of fields, and it has been present in the work of, among others, Adam M. McKeown and Madeline Y. Hsu.[2] However, whereas Williams makes an intervention in the fields of Chinese American and Chinese Australian history, Chan seeks to integrate modern Chinese history with Chinese American history and the history of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Both Williams and Chan reject methodological nationalism, but they are equally critical of existing interpretations of diaspora and transnationalism. For Williams, transnational histories should commence from the local level and link sites of contact such as ports instead of nation-states. Here, inspired by Henry Yu's concept of the "Cantonese

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[1] Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 16.

[2] Philip A. Kuhn, "Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-Versa," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 2, no. 2 (November 2006): 163–72. See for example: Adam M. McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Pacific,”[3] Williams ties the history of the “Pacific Ports” of Sydney, San Francisco, and Honolulu to the localities of emigration in China. For Chan, the issue is instead that the implications of the transnational turn on temporality have been insufficiently explored, which leads her to redefine diaspora as a temporal concept of “moments” of interface. The accounts of Williams and Chan overlap, however, with respect to their understanding of the “homeland” as both a physical and geographical reality and a product of the imagination constructed around the idea of permanence.

In *Returning Home with Glory*, Williams starts from family life and the villages from which emigrants departed (侨乡 *qiaoxiang*; or ancestral hometowns).[4] More specifically, the book centers on about 80 villages in the Long Du District of Zhongshan County, situated in the Pearl River Delta area. Setting out from “*qiaoxiang* links,” the author underscores the interplay of local and personal factors and motivations—such as family relations, wealth, prestige, and shame—with broader structural changes—such as national conditions or restrictive immigration laws—in emigration decisions and outcomes. This approach serves to challenge “the border-guard view” (9), which stresses immigration laws and settlement in the destinations and to replace it with a narrative of “multigenerational mobility” and “circular journeying” (12, 14) that includes the perspective of those based in the *qiaoxiang.*

The book covers the span of a century, starting in 1849 with the Californian gold rush and ending in 1949 with the foundation of the People’s Republic of China. Apart from the

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[3] Henry Yu, “The Intermittent Rhythms of the Cantonese Pacific,” in Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder, eds., *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 393–414.

[4] The term *qiaoxiang* is mostly translated as a combination of the adjectives “ancestral,” “sojourner,” or “emigrant” and the nouns “villages,” “hometowns,” or “homeland.” *Qiaoxiang* is a combination of the words *qiao* (sojourner; to sojourn) and *guxiang* (native place).

introduction (chapter 1) and the conclusion (chapter 9), it contains seven relatively short chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 expand on the framework and set the wider strokes of the study. Chapters 4–7 outline the main aspects of the *qiaoxiang* links from the viewpoint of the *qiaoxiang* itself, whereas chapter 8 reexamines the destinations from the perspective of the *qiaoxiang*. More precisely, in chapter 2, the author expands the concept of the border-guard view and elaborates associated approaches in American and Australian scholarship that perceived the Chinese presence as a "problem," foregrounding the history of racism, immigration restrictions, and adaptation instead. Furthermore, he criticizes diaspora studies for having been preoccupied with merchants and business networks in the contemporary period and transnational approaches for generally having not sufficiently brought in the *qiaoxiang* factor.

Chapter 3 starts with a macro overview of changes between 1849 and 1949 and the general traits of the *qiaoxiang* links. Here, much detail is provided regarding the distribution of emigrants by *qiaoxiang* and by port, return migration from the three main ports of Honolulu, San Francisco, and Sydney, and the bigger chronology of migration. The chapter contains valuable comparisons among the destinations regarding labor regimes and legal restrictions. Williams then shifts attention to the Long Du District, and chapter 4 examines tangible aspects of the *qiaoxiang* links, including family life, investment, and politics. The chapter delves deeper into the experiences of the wives of emigrants who remained behind in the villages and the role and function of remittances. Chapter 5 looks into some of the mechanisms of the *qiaoxiang* links, such as the sending of remittances and letters, communication through Chinese-language newspapers in the destinations and overseas Chinese magazines produced in the emigration areas (侨刊 *qiaokan*), visitation patterns, the return of the bones of the deceased, regional associations, and stores and businesses. In chapter 6, the author investigates the role of less tangible factors such as prestige and shame

and the desire for clan and family status—as expressed in the title phrase "returning home with glory"—in the motivation to preserve *qiaoxiang* links. Chapter 7 covers "success" and "failure" from a *qiaoxiang* perspective, including the complexity of choice and the relation between outcome and original intentions. External factors in China such as poverty, natural disasters, political upheaval, banditry, and restrictive laws and their administration in the destinations also contributed to shaping outcomes. The author returns to the Pacific destinations from a "*qiaoxiang* perspective" in chapter 8, comparing the communities and organizations in the three Pacific Ports and addressing assumptions behind stereotypes of the Chinese in these ports, such as that of their "refractory" nature.

Advocating a bottom-up approach, *Returning Home with Glory* relies on less commonly tapped sources produced by the *qiaoxiang*, such as local history journals, magazines, Chinese-language newspapers, works on overseas Chinese history, and *qiaokan* or magazines intended for emigrants. These sources are complemented by oral history interviews conducted by the author. While this reliance on locally produced sources is laudable and provides a much-needed micro angle, the corollary is the creation of an artificial binary between the nation-state and the *qiaoxiang.* This distinction obscures the fact that "locality" was in effect a multilayered concept and that events at a local level did not exist in isolation from those at the national level. The area where various modes of identification intersect most clearly is in voluntary organizations, which also connect the destination areas to the *qiaoxiang* but are only briefly covered by Williams. At the same time, looking at the relevance of these organizations in emigrant communities, one could also argue that "home" extended beyond the *qiaoxiang*, as these organizations represented various forms of belonging in the host societies. Dialect group and surname were key identity markers in addition to place, and the three overlapped, as reflected in Lawrence W. Crissman's term

"segmentary structure."[5] A more detailed coverage of how the locality of the *qiaoxiang* intersected with these other markers and other ideas of "place," including that of the nation-state, would have added a more nuanced portrayal.

The use of 1949 as an end date for the study implies a recognition of the role of the nation-state in these local advances, but this reference to interdependence coexists with the tendency to privilege the local. For example, the author states that the chronology of the book "is built not around destination laws or major events in the nation-states but on developments in the *qiaoxiang* links themselves" (192). While the author acknowledges that these links contain the crossing between the locality and larger structural economic, social, and political factors, he also states that "developments in the *qiaoxiang* always predominated" (65). Since the author's goal is to portray the overseas Chinese (华侨 *huaqiao*) "as participants in history with legitimate aims" (199) and to move beyond "racist and nationalist" (200) accounts, he is at times too consumed by "rescuing" the *qiaoxiang* and the *huaqiao* from the nation-states to which they emigrated.

Whereas Williams gives precedence to the empirical and puts microhistory and data in dialogue with more traditional existing scholarship on the Chinese in the host societies, Chan is a more theoretically inclined scholar who builds on findings from postcolonial, literary, and cultural studies. Her work also reflects the influence of the so-called temporal turn that occurred in response to globalization and the earlier spatial turn.[6] For Chan, those who "bend space" "often recommit to the hegemony of time" (193). Responding to this, in *Diaspora's Homeland,* Chan reenvisions diaspora not merely as "dispersed communities" but

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[5] Lawrence W. Crissman,"The Segmentary Structure of Urban Overseas Chinese Communities," *Man* 2, no. 2 (1967): 185–204.

[6] See Robert Hassan, "Globalization and the 'Temporal Turn': Recent Trends and Issues in Time Studies," *Korean Journal of Policy Studies* 25, no. 2 (2010): 83–102.

also as “fragmented temporalities” (11). The chapters consider five “diaspora moments,” a term that here refers to a process of exchange between the temporalities of migration and various local, national, and regional temporalities. Each of the five moments, situated in imperial, Nationalist, and Communist China, orbits around a different group of protagonists. This approach suits the deconstruction of linear history, but it also exists in conflict with the construction of an alternative but coherent historical narrative. As Chan writes: “Seen through a global lens of diaspora, the nation is multispatial, polyrhythmic, and always incomplete” (195).

The book starts in the late Qing period, with the first “moment” at the lifting of the 1893 ban on emigration. Rereading existing interpretations of the ban, Chan analyzes the process of nation-building in relation to indentured “coolie” migration and issues of diplomacy and sovereignty. In this sense, Chan’s first moment connects directly to Ge’s concern with the relation between territory, identity, and sovereignty, which will be covered in detail below. For Chan’s second moment, she proceeds to the 1920s and 1930s, when scholars at Jinan University in Shanghai wrote about Chinese emigration and maritime Southeast Asia as part of what was envisioned as a “Chinese settler colonialism” (62). In this, they drew on Western and Japanese debates on geography and history. Continuing an analysis of scholarly writings, the third moment revolves around Lim Boon Keng (林文庆 Lin Wenqing 1869–1957), a British-educated Chinese from Singapore. Chan traces exchanges on Confucianism and Chinese identity from the angle of colonialism in Southeast Asia relative to regional educational expansion and its connection to China.

After this intellectual twist, the fourth moment turns to the wives of emigrants in South China during the 1950s. Chan locates the impact of land and marriage reforms on women who remained in the home villages when their husbands emigrated. Here, Chan shares a concern with Williams, who also argues for the inclusion of the experiences of those

left behind in accounts of migration. Using archival records, Chan deftly exposes a set of tensions relating to policies, such as inherent contradictions and variations over time. Here, she highlights the gap between policies on paper and realities on the ground, or between "a socialist ideal and a huaqiao practice" (112). Further challenging the linearity of migration, Chan's fifth moment is that of returnees (归侨 *guiqiao*) finding their way back to China amid Cold War hostilities and anti-Chinese sentiment across Southeast Asia. Basing her research on documents from the Guangzhou Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau, Chan once more reveals the multiple frictions involved in this process of reintegration into the "homeland" as an ideological site of struggle between capitalism and socialism.

The main contributions of *Diaspora's Homeland* are the new conversation among three fields and the novel theoretical and methodological queries that emerge from this cross-pollination. As does Williams, Chan seeks to reverse simplistic and unilinear views of migration, as well as the emphasis on the influence of the host society on the homeland in analyses. Here, however, the rescuing of history lies not in the spatial but in redefining diaspora temporally and in revisiting moments that shaped "China" through mutual contact. Like Williams, Chan reads existing scholarship and archival documents against the grain, but, whereas Williams combines this with oral history, Chan also incorporates Chinese scholarly writings. Her account of multiple groups of actors is hence matched with rich and varied primary source materials, ranging from British parliamentary papers to archival documents, newspapers, and writings of intellectuals.

Chan's effort to combat reductionism paradoxically also produces some new binaries that obliterate hidden complexities and intricacies. The temporal reinterpretation of diaspora leads to something she calls "diaspora time," and this concept seems disconnected from other temporalities. For instance, whereas "national time" is characterized by linearity, diaspora time is somehow framed in a cyclical way defined by kinship ties, the village, patrilineage,

circularity, and networks (12–13, 32, 109–110): in fact, the very way of life that reminds us of the locality aspect in Williams's *qiaoxiang* ties. Williams's attempt to rescue the emigrant from the destination country, however, emerges from the very entanglement of the dynamics of migration with those of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism, and it is these very dynamics that Chan also seeks to expose. The association between "linearity" and the Chinese state hence obliterates both the linearity of other overarching processes and the nonlinearity of processes on Chinese soil. As such, we are left to wonder what "linearity" and "temporality" truly mean in this context.

Gender and class elements challenge the image of a predominantly male and homogenous diaspora in the accounts of Williams and Chan, but the factor of ethnicity is not pronounced in their accounts. This is where *What is China?* adds to the conversation about "China" in relation to movements across space and time. The latter is the English translation of *He wei Zhongguo: jiangyu, minzu, wenhua yu lishi* (何为中国：疆域, 民族, 文化与历史)[7] by the prominent Chinese intellectual historian Ge Zhaoguang (葛兆光). Translator Michael G. Hill provides relevant context in the introduction by outlining the discussions surrounding the sensitive topics covered by Ge. For example, Ge engages with the debate on the New Qing history in which scholars employed Manchu primary sources to challenge "Sinicization" and to analyze the Qing period (1644–1911) as one of empire.[8] Critics of

[7] *He wei Zhongguo: jiangyu, minzu, wenhua yu lishi* [What is China?: Territory, ethnicity, culture, and history] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2014). Many of the questions addressed here are also discussed in Ge Zhaoguang, *Here in "China" I Dwell: Reconstructing Historical Discourses of China for Our Time*. Trans. Jesse Field and Qin Fang (Leiden: Brill, 2017). This is a translation of Ge Zhaoguang, *Zhai zi Zhongguo: Chongjian youguan "Zhongguo" de lishi lunshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011).

[8] In this debate, Evelyn Rawski argued against the so-called "Sinicization thesis" as advocated by Ping-ti Ho and others. Since the term "New Qing History" was coined by Joanna Waley-Cohen in the late 1990s, other historians have challenged the "Sinicization

Sinicization denounced such views as being unidirectional, ahistorical, and static and as ignoring questions of ethnicity and cultural exchange in favor of a civilizational narrative. Ge joins this exchange by emphasizing the two-way nature of cultural interactions: both the Mongols of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and the Manchus also transformed Han culture.

However, Ge is also critical of some aspects of this and other debates. Ge manifests "impatience" with regard to the application of Western theory in research on China ("Translator's Introduction," xi). In Ge's own words, this would consist of "fashionable Western theories" and "empty talk" about empires, nation-states, postmodernism, or postcolonialism (2). Ge's book is also a response to cultural trends in contemporary China, such as the so-called national studies (国学 *guoxue*) revival.[9] For Ge, this trend is worrying because it "might narrow into the study of the Han nation," or tradition could "narrow Han Chinese culture into one form of Confucian learning or another" (95). Instead, Ge emphasizes the plurality of Chinese culture. Finally, Ge also responds to contemporary disputes about "all under Heaven" (天下 *tianxia*) as a model for a new world order that transcends the nation-state, as advocated by Zhao Tingyang (赵汀阳) and other Chinese scholars and as widely disputed among scholars of international relations and Chinese scholars across

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thesis" based on Manchu sources, among them Pamela Crossley and Mark Elliot. See Evelyn S. Rawski, "Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (1996): 829–50; Ping-ti Ho, "In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 123–55. For more recent Chinese additions to the debate, see Mario Cams, "Recent Additions to the New Qing History Debate," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 47 (2016): 1-4.

[9] On the *guoxue* revival, see Arif Dirlik, "Guoxue/National Learning in the Age of Global Modernity," in "The National Learning Revival," ed. Arif Dirlik, special feature, *China Perspectives*, no. 1 (2011): 4–13, and other contributions to the same special feature.

disciplines.[10] Ge expresses concern about this advocacy of regionalism because of its hidden nationalist pretensions. However, Ge nevertheless returns to a Confucian order and beliefs of imperial and civilizational sovereignty to challenge the nation-state and Western conceptions of sovereignty in favor of a regionalism sui generis.[11]

Ge's book reads well in dialogue with the works of Williams and Chan because his criticism of the nation-state does not lead him to the local or transnational but to the notion of a "shifting 'China.'" First, this concept implies both continuity and change. The continuity aspect is that "a China with political and cultural continuity" stretches back to the third century BCE, which saw unification under the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE). The Song dynasty (960–1279) was another crucial period in the shaping of a "consciousness" of "China," of a Chinese identity, and of the "early modern Chinese state" (5, 20). Also, there was permanent change in the form of fluctuating borders and challenges presented by the Mongol and Manchu rulers, the rejection of cultural subordination by China's neighbors, and the arrival of Western civilization. Second, Western theories and concepts do not suit the Chinese experience because it was marked by the idea of a "limited state" that nevertheless carried the remnants of the idea of a boundless empire (10). Hence, as early as the Song

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[10] For Chinese advocates, see, for example, Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia tixi: shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* [Tianxia system: an introduction to the philosophy of a world institution] (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005); Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, ed. Daniel Bell and Zhe Sun, trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). For different perspectives collected in edited volumes, see William Callahan and Elena Barabantseva, eds., *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center Press, 2011); Ban Wang, ed., *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). For an intellectual history approach to the subject, see Marc André Matten, *Imagining a Postnational World: Hegemony and Space in Modern China* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[11] See, for example, Wang Hui, *The Politics of Imagining Asia*, ed. Theodore Huters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

dynasty, "China" had traits of both a civilizational community and early modern nation-states.

The six chapters in the book revolve around the keywords of worldviews, borders, ethnicity, history, peripheries, and practical questions. In chapter 1, Ge turns to the Chinese worldview of *tianxia,* according to which a civilized Han core stretched out in four directions, with less civilized barbarians at the margins. Early challenges to this worldview were posed by Buddhism during the Eastern Han dynasty (25 CE–220 CE), or by the findings of travelers who ventured beyond known territories. Later, cracks in the view emerged with world maps brought to China by missionaries such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). Because other civilizations never truly challenged China, the worldview of *tianxia* persisted until the modern period. Chapter 2 addresses the strain between borders as defined by politics and "China" as a cultural space. Using dynastic records, Ge argues that there was an awareness of borders and of "equal foreign relations between states" (57) as early as the Song dynasty. The transformation process into a modern state with well-defined borders was, however, "considerably complicated" (63) by the "foreign" rule of the Mongol Yuan and Manchu Qing dynasties, with which China became a multiethnic empire. Ge further argues in chapter 3 that the transition from empire to nation-state, as famously argued by Joseph Levenson, was different for China because it consisted of "bringing the 'Four Barbarians' into China" (纳'四裔'入中华 *na si Yi ru Zhonghua*) with expansion under the Qing.[12] Here, Ge draws on late Qing Chinese intellectual exchanges and on scholarship of the 1920s and 1930s on archeology, anthropology, and history that was intent on establishing that Chinese culture was unique and that ethnic groups in border regions shared origins with the Han.

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[12] Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1958–1965), 3 vols.

Ge also draws attention to the role of Japan and its imperial ambitions in arguments about Chinese territory during this period. In chapter 4, Ge argues for a historical understanding of Chinese culture as a plural culture, but he singles out Han culture because it "has served as the mainstream and core of Chinese culture" (96). "China" is nevertheless more than "Han national culture," since exchange with outside cultures had occurred already during early antiquity. With the migrations between the eighth and tenth centuries, this mixed and "multilayered state" underwent a transition during the Song dynasty, when Chinese culture was "recreated" as Han Chinese culture (105–109). Two other transformations of Chinese culture followed with the "foreign" rule of Mongols and Manchus. In chapter 5, Ge compares mutual understandings of China, Korea, and Japan since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through historical writings in the languages of each. The transitional period in self-perception was the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), which saw the arrival of Westerners in the region. The Ming and Qing marked the "collapse of 'Northeast Asia' as an identity" (124), evidence for which Ge finds in, among others, records, letters, and documents on diplomatic visits. Finally, in chapter 6, Ge returns to debates in contemporary China and the subject of the nature of Chinese culture. In the end, Ge asks: Can Chinese culture be creatively reinterpreted in a rational and selective manner? Can it be global and yet Chinese?

Ge's breadth of scholarship and use of sources is astounding, adroitly combining primary sources in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Ge is also known for moving beyond conventional intellectual history sources, drawing on materials such as legends, archeological evidence, calendars, records of diplomatic missions, maps, manuals, and travel records. This openness to source types is blended with a "middle road" position of continuity amidst change that does obscure a number of underlying conflicts. First, although Ge argues that the nation-state does not need to be "rescued" from history, much effort is dedicated to

demonstrating that "China" existed before the Western nation-state, albeit in a different form. In addition, Levenson's empire-to-nation-state thesis was not left unchallenged (among its critics was Prasenjit Duara), and the clear-cut transition between empire and nation-state is by no means a consensus in the field.

Second, many ambiguities remain regarding how Chinese culture can be at once both unified and plural or be at once stable but changing. For Ge, under foreign influence, Han culture evolved, but it nevertheless became "a clear and distinct cultural identity and cultural mainstream" (19). Here, we should note that, in spite of Ge's reference to ethnicity, culture remains central in his analysis. Regarding this point, it is useful to bring in the observations of Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton on the "margins" of the early modern Chinese empire. Together, their works seek to bring attention to the "historical processes" of interaction and the "conditions" and distinct "ecological settings" in which these interactions took place.[13] Also, referring to James C. Scott's work on the role of the state in categorizing and objectifying subjects and creating "state spaces,"[14] they argue for an analysis of how state discourses were appropriated, resisted, and rewritten, with consideration for the agency of those being categorized.[15] If we apply this to Ge's work, the intricacies of cultural negotiation processes and the tensions of empire are absent.

Ge does acknowledge the role of the state and interaction, but he discusses culture mostly in the form of attributes rather than processes. "Han culture" is characterized by: the use of Chinese characters; the family, clan, and state structure; the coexistence of Buddhism,

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[13] Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, introduction to Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, eds., *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley; CA: University of California Press, 2006), 17, 18, 20.

[14] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

[15] Crossley, Siu, and Sutton, introduction to *Empire at the Margins*, 10–11.

Taoism, and Confucianism; the notion of the "unity of Heaven and man" (天人合一 *tianren heyi*); and the idea of "all under Heaven." Discussing how Han culture underwent change under Mongol and Manchu rule, Ge refers to modern and capitalist developments such as urban commercialization, entertainment, and new lifestyles, which reflect the decline in Confucian ethics and the Confucian validation of rural life (114). This emphasis on culture obscures contextual minutiae and also leaves little room for the agency of those subjected to Han expansion and possible acts of what James C. Scott calls having "'self-marginalized' by migration."[16] Ge's sweeping account is nevertheless vital not only because it provides much-needed Chinese and Asian perspectives on "China" but also because it accentuates the role of exchange in the formation of Chinese culture. As such, Ge also serves to remind us that Chinese voices in the debate on the New Qing history can argue for (partial) de-centralization and de-Sinicization, whilst at the same time still envisioning "China" as extending beyond "Han China."[17]

Together, the three books discussed here demonstrate how the unmaking of "fixed" space and time and the angle of interactions can lead to the creation of exciting new histories. Whereas, for Williams and Chan, this unmaking occurs through the lens of those who migrate and those who stay behind and the relations between them, for Ge, it happens through the study of contacts across territories that render borders fluid. In addition, all three authors are convinced that we need to move away from "Western" answers to the puzzle of "What is China?" and turn to "Chinese" perceptions of "China," with Ge also emphasizing

[16] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 23.

[17] For a detailed discussion of nuances in positions on both sides of the debate, see Guo Wu, "New Qing History: Dispute, Dialog, and Influence," *The Chinese Historical Review* 23.1 (2016): 47-69.

the role of changing perceptions of neighboring states such as Korea and Japan. In Ge's words, up to the Ming dynasty, the Chinese self-understanding process was marked by the absence of a mirror to look into. From then on, it was distinguished by what he calls "searching for the self in one mirror," or the use of the West as an Other (123). Instead, now it is time for China to enter the process of "rediscovering oneself through many mirrors" (123). Apart from the mirrors of migration, shifting boundaries, and new relational perspectives used in these three works, other mirrors will undoubtedly follow.

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