

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ANDREA LOUIE, *Chineseness Across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2004.

Migration seems to inevitably generate an allegorized yearning for home: the “myth of return”. Andrea Louie gives us a nicely detailed ethnographic study of the myth’s partial realization for a group of Chinese-Americans who visit ancestral villages as part of organized trips (sponsored by China and Chinese-American groups) for the purpose of “genealogical tourism” and roots-searching. The journey allows participants to rework their identity into what Louie describes as Chineseness “negotiated across locales” (p.7). Various forces have a hand in this transformation, including China’s growing interest in its diaspora (and in “reterritorializing” overseas Chinese), rising Chinese emigration, the combined forces of globalization, and the emergence of transnational modes of belonging.

The book is a nice illustration of some of the contradictions of postnationalism. Both China and returnees in effect seek to re-particularize the Chinese diaspora. China has been engaging in a deliberate “reethnicization” of its émigrés and in the construction of a global notion of “cultural citizenship,” driven by real economic and political interests. Roots-searchers yearn for a reconnection with lost social and geographic roots. All seem to operate on the basis of the immutable strength of common descent. But Louie challenges this myth of shared origins by showing the continually “fluid, contested” (p.21) identity practices of Chinese-Americans through their connections with spheres above (Asian culture), below (village, family), and outside of (Chinese-America) China.

The increasing porousness of national borders is also yielding unlikely outcomes for the Chinese diaspora. The banality of movement seems to have dulled the exotic shine of “overseas Chinese” and of their adoptive countries in the eyes of mainlanders. Instead of fervent global citizens, the multiplication of points of contact is producing blasé postnational cultural consumers. Likewise, Chinese-Americans, many still unsure of their social and political location and feeling a real sense of precariousness, find it difficult to resolve the tension between being fluently modern and maintaining communal and ancestral traditions. The fact that “race” is as intractable a product of nation-statism in China as it is in other parts of the world does not help. Fluid postnationalism still seems to have a few phenotypic skeletons in the closet. And preposition-free nationalism is never far from the surface. China is actively competing with Taiwan, which has been organizing similar, and very successful, summer camps for overseas Chinese since the 1970s (p.61). Both countries have extensive networks of “overseas Chinese affairs offices” that try to rally people of Chinese descent to their side.

But what is the real significance of these emergent, translocal, conflicted “contrapuntal identities”? Are they but a new iteration of an ancient human trope, the search for real or imagined roots, or is there more to it? Louie argues that the activities she describes result in something less than the full transnational connections depicted in some of the literature on migration, but in something more complex than a simple reconnection with a lost heritage. Participants engage not just with the static, somewhat mythic traditions of China, but with its larger place within popular culture, within Asia in general. And they do so not just as Chinese immigrants, but as Chinese-Americans, or Asian-Americans, whose culture and history was shaped by the United States as much as by their national origin. What remains to be seen is whether this new constituency will transform this identity shift into social, political, or economic action. Louie does not address the question, but the potential is clearly there for future research.

Some of the book’s weaknesses are common to many qualitative inquiries. Empirical claims are tantalizingly general, but only supported by impressionistic evidence (e.g. that different generations of overseas Chinese migrated for different reasons and with different outcomes). Findings sometimes fall in the “tell” rather than “show” category, with many instances of the author stating that “my fieldwork shows” instead of letting the evidence show. Some of these minor flaws could have been remedied with the addition of aggregate numerical, documentary, or historical material (which the author does only sparingly). But quibbles aside, this is a lively, timely book on a topic of global interest.

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