

Review Essay

Where Is Home? The Current State of Chinese Migration Studies

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Wang Gungwu. [*Home Is Not Here*](#). National University of Singapore Press, 2018. 216 pp.

Gregor Benton and Hong Liu. [*Dear China: Emigrant Letters and Remittances, 1820–1980*](#). Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 288 pp.

Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho. [*Citizens in Motion: Emigration, Immigration, and Re-migration across China's Borders*](#). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019. 184 pp.

The field of Chinese migration studies is thriving, as demonstrated by three recent publications by highly accomplished senior scholars, including pioneering historian Wang Gungwu, sociologist Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, and historians Gregor Benton and Hong Liu. Together, this trio of books significantly develops the fields of migration and Chinese overseas studies, and each articulates key aspects of these interlocking fields in a distinctive way. Ho's short monograph draws on ethnographic studies of contemporary Chinese immigrants in Canada, Singapore, and returnees to China to frame conceptual terms that enable scholars to acknowledge, categorize, and analyze complex layers of migrant experiences. These migrants participate in multiple diasporas and encounter varied practices of ethnic inclusion, exclusion, and institutional and ideological conceptions of citizenship. Benton and Liu provide a sweeping survey of *qiaopi* (remittance letters) as tensile, nongovernmental systems through which Chinese migration networks and societies circulated the finances that motivated so much of their mobility. These authors take a three-pronged approach, which makes available in English an overview of the extensive Chinese-language scholarship on *qiaopi*, descriptions of extant archival holdings of the documents, and authoritative analysis of the implications of this subfield. Wang's volume takes an entirely different approach as a memoir depicting the first two decades of the life of the scholar who established the field of Chinese overseas studies.

Wang Gungwu—one of the earliest Southeast Asian, ethnic Chinese to receive a PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies—trained in ancient Chinese history

and produced a thesis on the political history of the Five Dynasties period. Once he launched his academic career at the University of Malaya, Wang's scholarship quickly transcended traditional approaches by expanding the field of Chinese studies to include the histories of Chinese overseas and China's sustained interactions with its Southeast Asian neighbors through trade, migration, and varying patterns of settlement. His publications include *The Nanhai Trade: The Early History of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea* (1958; new edition 1998), *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (2000), *Global History and Migrations* (1996), and *Community and Nation: China, Southeast Asia and Australia* (1993). Viewed through the lens of Chinese migration, Wang's studies have demonstrated that the histories of China and Southeast Asia had to be considered as intrinsically interconnected, requiring careful attention to how Southeast Asian Chinese were positioned politically, economically, and socially as relations between these regions evolved, and as conceptions and practices of empires and nations imposed different requirements of participation and categorization for mobile Chinese seeking optimal advantage by accessing opportunities in multiple locations. Wang's scholarship has been particularly powerful in illuminating the challenges of inclusion for ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asian societies such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam gained independence and emerged as independent nations grappling with the human aftermath of empire in the form of sizable, and historically advantaged, populations of Chinese.

As described in *Home Is Not Here*, Wang's early life prepared him to observe and explicate these complex dynamics and the heightened conflicts between nation-building projects, legacies of imperialism, and demographic contradictions. He was born in Surabaya, Indonesia, in 1930 but raised from the age of two in Ipoh, Malaya, by parents who remained convinced that they would return to China. Wang studied in English-language schools while acquiring a solid grounding in Chinese language and history from his father, who worked in the Chinese school system. Along with detailed descriptions of interactions with the diverse community in which he grew up—including Malays as well as Chinese and Indians from different regions speaking various dialects—Wang includes extensive excerpts from family history accounts written by his mother, providing rare insights into Chinese women's experiences.

Although Wang's parents had prepared him to advance in the colonial system of education, they sent him to college in China at the National Central University in Nanjing in 1947. The Chinese civil war forced him to return to Malaya a year later. As with many other ethnic Chinese, the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) forced the Wang family to commit themselves to permanent settlement in Southeast Asia, foregoing long-held plans to eventually return "home." The memoir ends here, leaving its readers (at least this one) hoping for a sequel. However, subsequent events would be more politicized and fraught, as scrutinized through Wang's earlier scholarly explorations of the incompatibilities between existing ethnic Chinese practices of migration and the new Southeast Asian nation-states taking shape around them. Wang's intellectual innovations have directed attention to the diminishing accommodations for

ethnic Chinese identity formations and political allegiances of Chinese in Southeast Asia such as his parents. When Southeast Asian countries gained their independence, they confronted the problems of forging multiracial nation-states, which included millions of ethnic Chinese who had arrived to further imperial projects but resisted permanent settlement, thus remaining ethnically distinct and often at least partially preoccupied with their Chinese homeland.

Wang's lived experience, educational training, and competence in multiple languages—including English, Chinese, Malay, Hakka, and Cantonese—prepared him to establish the field of Chinese overseas study as an ethnic Chinese who was also resolutely Southeast Asian. Moreover, his exceptional intelligence and capacious thinking positioned him to claim authority in bridging multiple national histories, thereby foregrounding migration and transnational forms of community and identity formation as key aspects of Asian, and global, histories. Wang's professional résumé captures his stature and influence far beyond his specific areas of research and publications. He served as vice chancellor/president of the University of Hong Kong for about a decade and is currently University Professor, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, at the National University of Singapore, Emeritus Professor at Australian National University, and Foreign Honorary Member of the History Division of the American Academy of Arts and Science. In 2018, the Queen's Birthday Honours List recognized Wang for his services to Australia-Asia relations. For such an outstandingly accomplished individual, publication of such an evocative and detailed memoir carries tremendous weight in the burgeoning field of Chinese overseas studies.

In *Dear China: Emigrant Letters and Remittances, 1820–1980*, Gregor Benton, professor of Chinese history at Cardiff University, and Hong Liu, chair of the School of Social Sciences and director of the Nanyang Center for Public Administration at Nanyang Technological University, offer a broad-ranging and widely researched overview of the rich subfield of *qiaopi* studies. Their authoritative survey of 160 years of Chinese remittance letters is a singular contribution to the English-language scholarship on Chinese migration, as acknowledged in the preface provided by Wang Gungwu. They emphasize the primary functions of *qiaopi*—bundles of money and letters—as serving to maintain family and communal networks by enacting the financial relationships and goals that comprised the core motivations for much Chinese migrant activity. Although in qualitative terms the enclosed letters might seem the more valuable focus for research, Benton and Liu argue persuasively that it was the money that the *qiaopi* contained that carried out their primary function of reinforcing formal relations, rather than the expression of emotional and personal connections between individuals. *Qiaopi* functioned as “institutionalized and cross-national mechanisms [that] not only helped sustain the ties of families separated by oceans and political regimes, but also contributed to the sending regions' economic development” (1). Accumulated from these specific and localized networks, they performed “an important role in the making of a transnational China characterized by extensive flows of people, capital, ideas, and social practices across different sociopolitical and cultural domains in East Asia” (1).

According to Benton and Liu, the Chinese nation's claims on the loyalties and resources of Chinese overseas were superseded by attachments to family, clan, village, and region. Although international migration is often associated with modernity and globalization, *qiaopi* illustrate that traditional practices and socioeconomic systems provided Chinese overseas with the foundations for managing the business of their globalizing lives and maintaining relationships and communal belonging across long distances.

Qiaopi emerged "as a specialist trade in the remitting of letters accompanied by money [that] grew out of a rudimentary system" (6), a practice that initially relied on China-bound kin or friends to serve as couriers and grew in complexity with the emergence of merchants and other business concerns that handled regular communications and exchanges on behalf of Chinese overseas and their transnational communities. Although closely related to China's modern development as a participant in international economic and political systems, *qiaopi* developed from traditional practices of trade and mobility that proved so effective and attuned to the needs of its users that the system resisted the encroachments of modern banking and postal systems until the 1950s. Even though the heights of Chinese emigration coincided with the experiments in Chinese modernity that paralleled the utter collapse of the dynastic political and social order, *qiaopi* mainly served highly localized interests, rather than the emerging nation-state. Benton and Liu foreground this reality in their chapter on *qiaopi* geography, including the diversity of networks or grooves marked by family and clan structures, different dialect groups, native-place loyalties, employment and business niches, religious organizations, and migrant circuits.

Benton and Liu's major contributions can only be partially summarized in this review. Scholars of modern China, Chinese overseas, and migration studies should read the full volume for the detailed empirical reporting the authors provide on a wide range of topics. This reporting covers such topics as the historiography of *qiaopi* studies and history of archival collecting of *qiaopi*, how the *qiaopi* trade operated and the transnational networks that enabled its effectiveness and resilience, the *qiaopi* trade as a distinct manifestation of Chinese capitalism, the considerable contribution of remittances to China's foreign balance of trade, charitable projects and the growing reliance of sending communities on overseas Chinese for remittances, and comparisons with European migrants' practices of letter writing. Each of these topics is accompanied by useful overviews of major scholarship and empirical findings, followed by authoritative statements of the authors' analytical conclusions.

In contrast to the empirical breadth of *Dear China*, Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho's *Citizens in Motion: Emigration, Immigration, and Re-migration across China's Borders* draws on targeted ethnographic reporting in support of ambitious conceptual language intended to capture the complexity of contemporary Chinese migrations and the capacities of (particularly elite) migrants to claim simultaneous inclusion in multiple national frames through their "contemporaneous migrations." Ho is Associate Professor of Geography and Senior Research Fellow at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore. Her research encompasses ethnic Chinese in Singapore, the Chinese-

Burmese border region, Canada, and different areas of China. She asserts four main principles regarding multidirectional migration and practices of inclusion and exclusion that complicate the integration of such mobile people: ideologies of alterity and fraternity by which migrants become categorized into insider and outsider statuses; co-ethnic tensions between different immigrant cohorts; remigration, which can generate new claims on new sites of settlement; and the realities of partial acceptance, which underscore the enduring contradictions between established migrant presence within a nation and the failure of established migrants to gain integration as full participants in nations or ethnic communities (2–3).

These complexities are perhaps most evident in the experiences of remigrants, return migrants whose multiple migrations and resettlements complicate and undermine the narratives of onetime relocation and permanent resettlement that comprise classic narratives of immigration. Among Chinese, these high levels of mobility are most readily practiced by elites with capital and globally accepted professional and education credentials. Despite their privileged ability to migrate and resettle in multiple societies, their mobility to immigrate legally and gain citizenship in multiple states limits full participation and does not secure acceptance.

As a sociologist, Ho is careful to delineate her terminology and attending conditions. She distinguishes among old *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) outflows that predated the founding of the PRC, descendants of *huaqiao*, and post-1978 migrants. In partial rebuttal of Shelly Chan's emphasis on the temporality of diaspora moments in *Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration* (2018), Ho emphasizes both temporality and spatiality by drawing out the implications of multidirectional Chinese migrations and the multiple national configurations through which migrants might claim inclusion and, in turn, be claimed by various diasporas.

Such multiply relocated migrants illustrate the strengths of Ho's approach. Although they are privileged to have the capacity to settle in multiple countries, such migrants often gain only partial acceptance, with suspected loyalties that mark them as targets for alterity, rather than fraternity, as co-ethnics. In Singapore, Chinese immigrants arriving since the 2010s experience higher levels of suspicion and resentment because they are seen as too chauvinistically Chinese by not putting down roots and adapting to life as Singaporeans, in contrast to immigrants who arrived in the 1990s and have gained acceptance. In parallel, remigrants to China from Canada might participate in both the Chinese and Canadian diasporas to seek social services and other benefits of citizenship from either country, even as they might be simultaneously enfolded into the national frames of both. Practices of alterity vary depending on circumstance and have longer histories. Ho notes the example of the partial acceptance of Chinese who returned from Malaysia and Indonesia during the 1950s and 1960s but continue to be marked by their histories of departure and return and have never gained full acceptance as equal members of the Chinese nation.

In combination, these outstanding monographs highlight the considerable heterogeneity of Chinese migrant experiences, networks, and outcomes and the

necessity of research that is grounded in the specific temporal and regional contexts and connections that have the greatest influence in shaping migration flows and the adaptations that ensue. Even as such details are vitally formative, it is possible to discern from these ethnic Chinese examples broader patterns that characterize migrant dynamics and populations more generally. Such patterns include migrant motivations and priorities; factors shaping modes of integration, limited inclusion, and outright exclusion; and the economic and institutional structures that direct migrant flows and options for permanent resettlement and claims on various states. Migration studies has always been a moving target, no pun intended, with subjects whose activities intersect with and often contradict many critical aspects of ongoing, strenuous efforts to fortify the sovereignties and borders claimed by nation-states. The three books reviewed here make substantial and significant contributions to our ongoing struggles to attain better understanding of migration as a most human, yet greatly disruptive, element of our global society and economy.

References

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