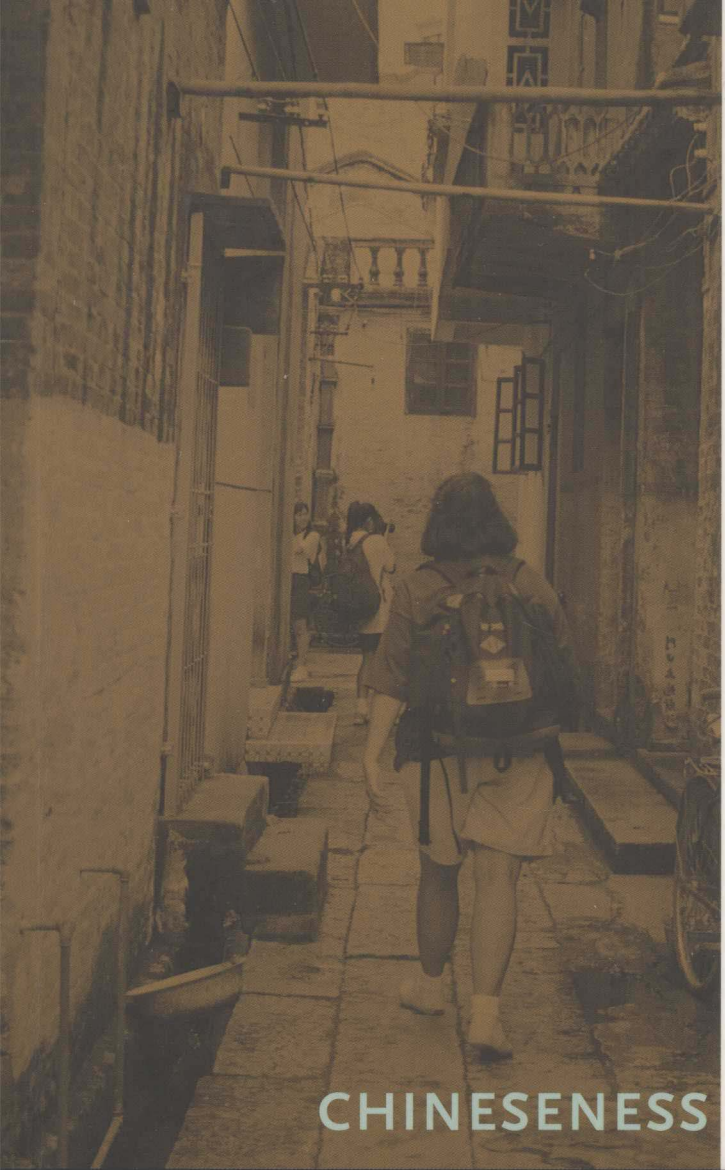

CHINESENESS *across Borders*

RENEGOTIATING CHINESE IDENTITIES IN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

ANDREA LOUIE

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For my parents

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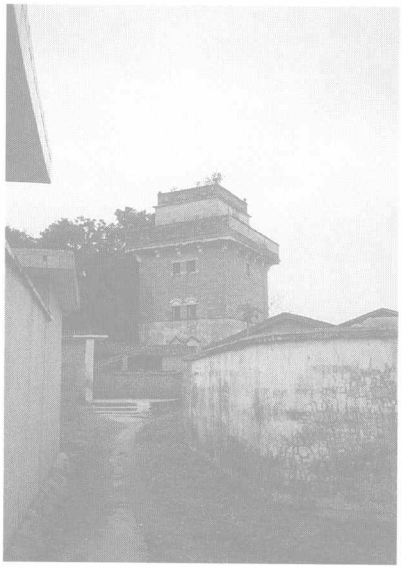
INTRODUCTION: ON BOUNDARY CROSSINGS

Village Encounters (Beginnings)

In July 1992, on summer break from graduate school, I visited my paternal grandfather's village in Heshan County, Guangdong Province, for the first time, accompanied by my fellow participants in the In Search of Roots program.[1] This program, run by organizations in Guangzhou and in San Francisco, provided an opportunity for young adults (ages seventeen to twenty-five) of Cantonese descent to visit their ancestral villages in China. My second great-uncle, Yi Suk Gung, whom I had met only a few days earlier, took the bus from Guangzhou to meet our group at the Heshan County seat and lead the village tour.

On first impression, the village could have come straight out of the nineteenth century. To the Chinese American visitors, the village was a maze of narrow alleyways, old brick houses, and open sewers, surrounded by rice paddies. However, a closer look revealed electric power lines, radio cassette players, and three-story homes of gleaming ceramic tile. Yi Suk Gung took us to the ancestral home that my great-grandfather had built on returning from the United States where he worked to build the railroad[2] along with a village watchtower (c. *lau jai, pao lau*)[3] constructed jointly with his four brothers for protection against bandits. My great-grandfather's picture remained on the wall of the house, somehow having survived years of Communist reform. I paid respects at the house's altar, made special note of the open window (*tianchuang*) in the ceiling of the house that I remembered my father mentioning, and had my picture taken innumerable times by fellow interns helping me to record "the moment." The group proceeded by van to a hillside that was a fair distance from the village, then hiked up



The village watchtower in my ancestral village of Tiegang, in Heshan County, Guangdong Province. My great-grandfather's picture on the wall of our ancestral home.

through tea bushes and small pine trees until we reached a clearing that contained the horseshoe-shaped graves of my great-grandfather and his wives.[4] After Yi Suk Gung and I paid our respects (c. *bai san*) he lit an amazingly long and loud string of firecrackers and we returned down the hill. Later, we toured a blanket factory that proudly displayed the colorful fleeced acrylic blankets produced there, a special product (*techan*) for which the area was well known, and attended a banquet hosted by local officials from the village and from the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs (Huaqiao Shiwu Ban).

I returned a second time to the village in February 1993 while on break from teaching English at a Chinese high school, this time with Yi Suk Gung and his daughter as well as with my parents who were visiting for a couple of weeks. It was the first time my father had been back to the village since he had lived there as a boy for a year in 1948. His father had sent his American-born children to China in two waves. The first group left in 1931 from Akron, Ohio, where the family ran a hamburger joint. The six children, ranging in age from a few months to seven years old, lived in the village for nine years, accompanied by their parents for the first two years, and later taken care of by close relatives living in the village. My grandfather wanted

The ancestral grave of my great-grandfather.

Yi Suk Gung (my great-uncle) setting off a string of firecrackers during my first visit to the ancestral village in 1992.

them to receive a Chinese education (without which one could not be considered truly Chinese).[5] However, the Japanese invasion in 1939 cut their visit short, and the group fled to Hong Kong and returned to the United States through the immigration station in Seattle, Washington. Although they were U.S. citizens and still had the birth certificates and certificates of identity that their mother had sewn into the backs of their clothing, they were interrogated in Chinese (they had forgotten any English that they had known) and temporarily detained by immigration officials, as was common under the Chinese Exclusion Acts. Racial identification as Chinese alone was grounds for interrogation. In my family's Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) files obtained from the Seattle archives there are records of the process of interrogation. The system was designed to identify those trying to enter the United States under false identities. However, the detailed questions that immigration officials asked the detainees were difficult to answer "correctly," even if one was telling the "truth." The group of six children was detained because one had insisted that their kitchen table was round, instead of square. It turned out that the family ate around two tables, one round and one square.

The second group, consisting of the children who had not yet been born when the first group departed, was sent to China in 1948 in another instance of unfortunate timing, only to return a year later when the Communists took the area. My father, twelve at the time, was part of that group. As a young child in Easton, Maryland (the family had relocated there and now ran a laundry), he had not even realized that he had a group of older siblings in China until one day his mother told him to wash his hands because they were having guests for dinner. The "strangers" piled out of the laundry truck, one of the older sisters chasing my understandably afraid aunt, then two years old, around the block in an effort to pick her up. My father recalls his surprise that they never did leave after dinner.

My father's return to the village in 1993 unfolded with much less fanfare than my own visit the previous summer. We rented a van in Guangzhou and drove to the village for the day. The weather was quite cold (for southern China) and very few people were around, perhaps because it was during the Chinese New Year period, the busiest travel time of the year, rather than harvest season. We walked around the small village, took pictures, and listened as Yi Suk Gung showed a three-story "modern" style house in the village built with US$20,000 donated by people from overseas. He encouraged my father to consider pitching in with his ten siblings to do the same ("then you'll have someplace to stay when you come back"). In actuality, members of my father's family had visited the village only a few times since

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they lived there as children. During the years between 1949 and 1979 travel to China was nearly impossible. One group of siblings returned in the early 1980s for a tour of China, stopping by the village on their way back to Hong Kong. Another group visited in the early 1990s. However, they would have never considered actually spending the night in the village, and the family did not visit the village (or Yi Suk Gung) at all in subsequent trips to other tourist destinations in China.

We peered into the windows of the thick-walled fortress, where my father and his brothers had slept after the family received a mysterious ransom note intended to preempt a kidnapping that had not yet taken place.[6] The key to the building had been lost long ago. I remember as a child asking my father about his memories of his year in China, and they were few and select: how dirty the village was; how much he missed playing baseball, eating Hershey bars, and reading comic books; and how his pet dog "disappeared" (into a dish on his aunt's dining table, he discovered later) while he was away in Guangzhou. He recalls struggling to learn enough Chinese to write a letter home to his father—the benchmark indicating that he had become sufficiently educated in Chinese to return to the United States—and hoping that his older brothers, aged eighteen and nineteen, would heed their father's wishes and find wives so that they could all go home.[7] He remembers the culture shock he experienced on arrival at the village: his baseball glove was mildewed, there were no flush toilets, and the village children made fun of him by chanting "ABCD."[8] He recalls being scolded by relatives for stubbornly standing on the stoop at the entrance to the house, and not understanding why they thought this would bring bad luck. He also remembers fondly the kindness of his village relatives, playing near the fish pond, and going to school.

When I asked him later what he thought about during his 1993 trip back, he said that the brief visit had evoked memories of his earlier time there. He had been surprised to see that after forty years very little had changed. When I inquired whether he would like to go to China again to spend more time in the village, he replied that although he would not resist going back again, it would be mainly because seeing the village evoked his past experiences there. There were no longer any people that he knew in the village, and the physical structures themselves had no meaning apart from these memories.

My own visit as part of the In Search of Roots program had been characterized by an emotional intensity carried by the group as a whole throughout our journey to ten ancestral villages. An expectant air, created through months of research on family history and genealogy and magnified through youthful energy and curiosity, permeated the atmosphere at each partici-

pant's village visit. Would we be able to find the village? Would the ancestral house still be standing? Would there be any relatives, or perhaps a geneaology book, left in the village? This mood was not diminished by the lack of firsthand connections and memories that characterized the experiences of our parents' and grandparents' generations who had spent time in the villages. In many ways, the power of experience that was necessary to give these old physical structures meaning was derived from our sense of anticipation coupled with the careful orchestration and preplanning by both the mainland Chinese and the Chinese American organizers. One of the Chinese American organizers remarked once to me that "unless someone tells you what connection this place has to you, all you see is a dirty old place." Indeed, a fellow intern and I mused that we had no way of telling for sure whether or not these places were really our ancestral villages.

Rethinking the Experience

I have realized that the family history that brought me to China as a participant in the In Search of Roots program, with a subtext of anthropological curiosity, reflects the multiple ways that people craft relationships with China and the multiple formations of Chineseness that I have come to examine as a central part of my research. For each generation described above—mine, my father's, my grandfather's—"returning" to China carried very different significance, and the "return" experience itself was shaped by the particularities of the social and political events of the time. My grandfather, who was born in China, thought nothing of sending his children "back" for a Chinese education in the village, and he traveled to China numerous times himself in the continuation of a pattern of return migration that had long characterized life in emigrant villages in southern coastal China (see Hsu 2000; Watson 1975).[9] My father's generation, although raised speaking the village dialect at home, found themselves temporarily uprooted from their lives in the United States, only to be placed into an unfamiliar village setting during a dramatic period of change in China. Still, a number of continuities—family connections, a basic knowledge of the language, and participation in local educational institutions—marked the relationship of this generation to their ancestral homeland.

My own "return" occurred in the context of China's reopening to the outside world, during a period of massive social, political, and economic change in which overseas Chinese were cast in a central role by the People's Republic of China (PRC) government.[10] It was also framed by a politics of multiculturalism in the United States that celebrated diversity and a return

to cultural origins. Many American-born Chinese Americans, like myself, felt ambivalent toward China because it was both a place to which we were often attached (both voluntarily out of interest in family heritage and involuntarily when we were racialized as Chinese) and a place that we knew little about. We were not culturally Chinese enough to be considered Chinese by many people in China, yet also not American enough to be seen as Americans by many people in the United States. Even if the links of my generation to our ancestral villages had been firmly entrenched in our family histories, what we hoped to see there had been created primarily through our imaginations and facilitated by media images.[11]

I chose to begin this book at this very specific time and place—a visit to my ancestral village in China as part of the In Search of Roots group—because while this ethnography focuses on Chineseness as negotiated across locales, ideas about place remain essential to these very conceptualizations of Chineseness. This ethnography takes as its core a set of multistranded and often diffuse relationships around which people of Chinese descent in China, the United States and other locations negotiate identities across national borders. Increasingly, complex and multifaceted flows of media, information, capital, and migrants create new connections between peoples and places around the globe. These linkages are changing the ways that "Chineseness" becomes salient as a social, political, and cultural identity in today's world. But rather than focusing on mobile transmigrants who easily negotiate national borders, I explore the highly mediated and indirect relationships between two populations that have been separated across generations and seldom interact directly: mainland Chinese and American-born Chinese Americans. These two communities are linked not so much by contemporary social networks and shared cultural or political beliefs as by myths of common origins that define Chineseness as a mixture of racial, national, and territorial identities. Within these interactions exist possibilities not only for varied connections and relationships based on shared heritage but also new forms of difference.

Indeed, as I will discuss later, genealogical and historical connections to ancestral villages provide the basis through which transnational formations of Chinese identity are crafted over time and across space. That both Chinese Americans and the mainland Chinese government are invested in producing territorialized Chinese identities in this era of globalization is a question that is central to this book. But perhaps even more interesting than the ways in which these discourses of Chinese culture are created based on shared history and ancestry are the new forms of identity that are produced out of these contemporary interactions. Whether through inclusion or ex-

clusion, these constructions of Chinese identity are mediated by both U.S. and PRC state projects of cultural citizenship that shape Chinese identities. However, rather than producing firmly rooted and unambiguous Chinese identities, these transnational interactions more often result in encounters with unfamiliar ways of being Chinese. Ironically, transnational connections reveal disjunctures that are created in part by other conjunctures created by global flows between Chinese and Chinese Americans. The interaction between state constructions of identity for its citizens (and sometimes noncitizens) and transnational flows circulating more broadly has implications for transnational theories that discuss the role of the state within transnational projects.

The Mobile Anthropologist: Piecing Together a Study of Chineseness

The themes in this book have emerged ethnographically. My exploration of productions of Chinese identity has required a mobile, multisited ethnographic approach that provides insight into the complex and ever-changing nature of the diffuse relationships through which meanings of Chineseness are being renegotiated. However, it would be misleading to imply that the project unfolded neatly and methodically because anthropological fieldwork almost never does. Below, I present three narratives focusing on overlapping experiences in China that were integral to the development of my project in a way that could not have been preplanned: my research with the In Search of Roots program in the San Francisco Bay Area and in China (from 1992 to 1995); my year teaching English and conducting fieldwork in Shenzhen from 1992 to 1993; and the fieldwork period I spent in various places throughout the Pearl River Delta region in 1995. The process of developing my field site and research problem brings out some of the methodological and theoretical difficulties of taking on the transnational question of Chinese diaspora identities. The cohesiveness of the concept as an academic or intellectual construct is betrayed by the actual diversity within it, making it nearly impossible to study the Chinese diaspora as an undifferentiated whole. Yet both the academic frameworks and the identity-making projects I studied worked within a transnational framework that sought continuities between homeland and diaspora populations.

Each of these experiences illustrates broader themes or questions that I wish to emphasize in the study. All are to various degrees informed by my positionality as a Chinese American ethnographer within a multisited exploration of Chineseness, in which at times I am the only consistent feature. Each illustrates various processes through which Chinese from abroad are contex-

tualized as "Chinese" in China, and how this relates not only to the ways that mainland Chinese conceive of overseas Chinese but also of their own changing identities in the context of China's opening up to the outside world.

A Note on Ethnographic Methods

My fieldwork on Chinese identities employed a type of mobile anthropology aimed at examining various parts of a "relationship" being forged anew across national boundaries that draws on metaphors of shared heritage and place.[12] In my investigation of "Chineseness" I conducted participant observation and interviews in San Francisco with Chinese American participants of the In Search of Roots program, as well as later in China when they visited their ancestral villages and participated in government-sponsored Youth Festivals. I conducted fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay Area; in the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong, China; and in Hong Kong, all sites of Chinese (particularly Cantonese) cultural production. In China, I researched from a number of bases the shifting attitudes of Chinese living in the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong, including a village in the emigrant region of Zhongshan County, the Taishan region, and a middle school in the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen. I interviewed people in their homes, dorms, and apartments; in cafés, culture centers, and McDonald's restaurants; and in rural Chinese villages and on jet planes, focusing on various moments and contexts of interaction within which multiple and often discrepant discourses of Chineseness are brought together. Given the fluid nature of transnational processes, and the fact that identity is always situated, under negotiation, and never complete (Hall 1990), the exploration of identity at specific sites and at specific moments of contact was to become more important to me than delineating a fixed geographical site. It was necessary to trace connections, following the contours of ideas and social actors by moving among these people and ideas that were also in motion. Through conducting fieldwork from multiple sites and on multiple Chinese subjectivities, I used my own privilege of mobility to investigate from a number of angles the numerous and flexible ways of identifying and being identified as Chinese. By positioning myself and being positioned within a number of different contexts—as a former participant in the Roots program interviewing a friend about their experiences, or as an American-born Chinese (*mei ji hua ren*) teaching English in China—I investigated the question of Chinese identities (as a relational concept) from different and changing perspectives. Willingly or not I was a subject of my own research, if only in the ways that others perceived and interacted with me.

The In Search of Roots Program: Beyond "Buffet-Style" Chinese Culture[13]

The Roots program is a product of China's reopening to the outside world in the post-Mao period as well as an effort to reach out to the Chinese community abroad for economic and political support. It is jointly sponsored by organizations in the San Francisco Chinese American community (the Chinese Culture Center and the Chinese Historical Society of America) and by the PRC's Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs (Qiao Ban, the state apparatus for relations with the Chinese abroad).[14] The program's Chinese American and mainland Chinese portions are connected only during the two-week journey to China, where Chinese American participants visit their ancestral villages in the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong, China. Their agendas correspond only to facilitate their village visits and to meet the shared goal of helping participants search for their ancestral roots (*xungen* is the Chinese name of the program used both in China and by the Chinese American organizations).

The program's Chinese American portion has its origins in the shifting demographics of the Chinese American population in the San Francisco Bay Area, catering to the second-, third-, and fourth-generation descendants of Cantonese immigrants. It was formed as part of an effort by Chinatown cultural organizations to reconnect to the suburban Chinese community, and it was designed for Chinese Americans who know little about China or their family heritage. Prior to their participation in the In Search of Roots program, many of these Chinese Americans had not given much thought to their origins in China. The majority of participants belonged to families that had moved away from Chinatown, and whose children had gone to college and entered professional positions. Many lived in the Richmond district of San Francisco, or in the East Bay, South Bay, or Marin County areas. Although some spoke Cantonese or a village dialect quite fluently, having learned it from their parents or from living in China or Hong Kong as small children, most did not know how to read or write in Chinese, and the majority had never been to China and did not speak Chinese well or at all.

For example, Adam Chan, a fourth-generation Chinese American who grew up in Marin County, had been active since he was a child in a lion dance troupe organized by his father. However, when he was growing up he had never thought much about being Chinese or about China. For him, China was "the place that Bugs Bunny dug through to if he kept digging from here." He, like many other participants in the program, had become involved in the year-long In Search of Roots program as a young adult curious about his heritage.

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