Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change

PERU, CHICAGO, HAWAII, 1900–1936

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As I complete the last revision of this manuscript, I still encounter phrases and ideas which have lingered from its first manifestation as a research paper for a seminar in American Immigration History at the University of Chicago in 1992. Much of the credit for the genesis of this work belongs to Douglas Knox, who first introduced me to the Chinese immigration documents at the Chicago branch of the National Archives and the field notes of Paul Siu at the University of Chicago.

Clara Chu and Michael Gonzales kindly provided me with initial contacts that paved the way for my visit to Peru. A year of research in Peru from 1994 to 1995 was supported by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies/Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation Fellowship Selection Committee, with funds provided by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation. While in Peru, I was affiliated with the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Humberto Rodríguez Pastor generously opened his home and collection of material on the Chinese to me. Of the many other people who helped make my stay in Lima happy and productive, Liliana Com, Joseph Cruz, Iván Hinojosa, and Walter Huamaní deserve special mention.

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My dissertation advisor, Guy Alitto, has supported and encouraged all that I have undertaken. I would not have survived the feudal environment of a large research university without his protection and attention. Prasenjit Duara consistently stimulated and challenged my thinking. Gerald Suttles offered detailed and insightful comments on early drafts of this manuscript, offering a level of attention that was hard to come by in

my graduate education. Lauren Benton, Philip Kuhn, Erika Lee, Lillian Li, Pat Manning, Sucheta Mazumdar, Vasant Kaiwar, and anonymous reviewers have also provided support and valuable comments on portions of this work. Doug Mitchell and his assistant Robert Devens have been the most encouraging of editors, making the transition from dissertation into published book a relatively pleasant process.

This book is inseparable from my own experience living in China, falling in love with my wife, Cecily, accompanying her transition to the United States, and becoming part of a transnational Chinese family. By and large, I like the isolation of research and writing, but I could not have endured it so easily without Cecily. Of course, I alone am responsible for any mistakes or confused thinking to be found in this book.

The different dialects among Chinese migrants, the unavailability of Chinese characters for some names I have encountered, and changing transliterations at different times and places have made it difficult to follow any consistently satisfactory scheme of romanization. Most Chinese words have been transliterated into pinyin, except in the following cases, where I used the most common local transliteration: (1) personal names, except for Chinese diplomats and well-known personalities; (2) names of businesses; (3) names of migrant associations whose unique local role I want to emphasize, such as the Six Companies and the On Leong Tong.

The glossary lists Chinese characters (when known) for local people, institutions, and Chinese vocabulary. Well-known Chinese people and places are not included.

FIGURES

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CHAPTER 1

Chinese Migration in Global Perspective

"Lee K. K.," a Chinese laundryman interviewed by sociologist Paul Siu in the 1930s, said, "We overseas people can find no place in China. We can only spend money when we get back to China. No matter how much money we bring home, but as soon as the money is spent, we must come back here."[1] Yet, in *The Chinese Laundryman,* his University of Chicago Ph.D. dissertation based on his interviews, Siu wrote, "No Chinese laundryman . . . has ever seriously attempted to organize his life around the laundry, saying, 'I feel at home in this country and laundry work is my life, my career, and my ambition. I hope to be a prosperous laundryman.'"[2] At first glance, these two statements seem to leave the Chinese migrant in a limbo, neither here nor there. Attempting to define himself in terms of China or the United States, he finds himself at home in neither. Although the experience of Chinese laundrymen in the 1930s as interpreted by Paul Siu is not exemplary for all Chinese migrants, these two quotations still illustrate a basic problem in talking about Chinese (or any) migrants: the difficulty of producing formulations of identity and history that are not centered in nation-states or some other territorially based sociocultural grouping. We have little means by which to describe lives and social organization that straddle those units. Even migrants who, in practice, lived lives and created institutions which spanned those boundaries were still reluctant to conceive of themselves beyond one of the territorially based anchors of their networks.[3] Nonetheless, such a global perspective is necessary to understand cultural and organizational aspects of Chinese migration. It helps us to understand how migrants could, indeed, live both here and there. Such a perspective must be carefully articulated with a context of diverse local orientations and encounters, revealing the patterns that link them and how they emerge at particular historical moments in a shifting global order.

Nation-Based Research

The disjunctions in migrant experience suggested by the opening quotations are mirrored in much academic work on Chinese migrants. Rather than dropping the migrants into a limbo, however, these works tend to assert one side or another as the proper center from which to understand migrant lives: either as immigrants who settled and helped create a new land, or as sojourners and *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese nationals) oriented toward China. Consider, for example, the following two quotations. The first is from a work of Chinese American history by Sucheng Chan:

> Contemporary observers charged the Chinese with a refusal to assimilate to American ways, and many scholars have stressed how the Chinese have adamantly preserved their culture in the United States. Many Chinese values, practices, and patterns of social organization were indeed transferred to American soil, but the fact remains that Chinese communities that developed in America were by no means replicas of those in China.[4]

The second is from a *huaqiao* history published in Taiwan in 1993 by Huang Jianchun:

> By and large, the social organization and customs of overseas Chinese . . . were all carried abroad from rural life in China. In the long term, the transference and preservation of Chinese culture abroad led to mutual development and an unbreakable bond between overseas Chinese society and the Chinese homeland. Much evidence shows the difficulty of severing the Chinese soul within those living abroad. Precisely because of this, the great majority of overseas Chinese had a great concern for the security of their country. This sentiment did not depend on the existence of the Qing or Republican governments, but mostly emerged from the natural disposition to cherish one's home.[5]

Each of these statements is taken from an exemplary work of primary research. While not entirely exclusive—potential for overlap appears in the ideas of "mutual development" and "transfer" of culture—they each emerge from very different research agendas that result in competing narratives of the history of Chinese migration. Chan's work is part of a larger project in contemporary Asian American studies to incorporate Chinese as important actors in American history. It emphasizes the adaptations of Chinese social organization in the United States, and explains them as necessary and unprecedented responses to unfamiliar challenges. Although Chan pays more attention than many Asian Amer-

ican historians to Chinese nationalism, transnational families, and continued links to China, she does not follow the implications of these descriptions so far as to reformulate her narrative of migration as a monodirectional relocation followed by locally conditioned transformation.[6] In their most strongly America-centered versions, Asian American histories have treated continued links beyond America and the persistence of Chinese culture abroad as little more than by-products of exclusion and racism, and have seen Chinese Americans primarily as exemplars of longstanding American ideals of freedom, democratic principles, and individual struggle.[7]

Huang Jianchun, on the other hand, is firmly embedded in a tradition of Chinese-language scholarship that goes back over ninety years, emphasizing the enduring love, patriotism, connections, and contributions of Chinese to their homeland. Most original research has focused on participation in revolutionary movements, the restrictive and unsupportive policies of the Qing government, remittances, investment in and contributions to China, and economic success and recognition abroad.[8] In its most extreme version, this scholarship may even talk of the patriotic resistance of Chinese emigrants against assimilation.

This disjunction is especially clear in debates over the idea of the Chinese immigrant as a sojourner. Scholars trained in Chinese studies tend to support some version of the sojourner concept as a useful approach to understanding Chinese migration.[9] Asian American scholarship, on the other hand, rejects the sojourner concept, arguing that it is used by anti-Chinese agitators and immigration scholars to "exclude [Chinese] categorically from American immigration history."[10] Attempts to bridge these opposing views of Chinese as either settlers *or* sojourners have ended up as weak compromises. They usually assert that some were settlers, some were sojourners, and others changed their orientation over time.[11] The dichotomy between these two perspectives could be multiplied and complicated by examples from other places and disciplines. Taken together, however, they do not amount to a coherent panorama of the networks and processes of Chinese migration. Rather, the conflicts between competing nation-based claims regarding the histories of Chinese migrants serve to obscure and confuse the transnational activities of those migrants.

Another consequence of nation-based histories of migration can be seen in the way Hawaii has been enveloped by Asian American history at the expense of perspectives centered on the activities of migrant networks. Sucheng Chan treats Hawaii as an example of regional variation. Even preannexation Hawaii is teleologically projected as part of American history, as in the 1880s when Hawaii and California "led the nation" in the de-

velopment of capitalist agriculture, and "neither region was a frontier any longer."[12] This perspective would have fit the agendas of white Americans in Hawaii, but it would have been problematic to Chinese merchants and rice planters, not to mention native Hawaiians. Chinese in Hawaii may have taken advantage of the American market, but they were more directly linked to the Hawaiian royalty and business networks tying them back to China than to California. To be sure, Chan's primary purpose in making the link between nineteenth-century California and Hawaii was to underline the importance of economic transformations in shaping the flows of migrant labor. Nonetheless, a history written from the perspective of Chinese networks and economic expansion would have to cross contemporary political boundaries, by linking California more strongly with Mexico and Canada before the 1920s, rather than with Hawaii. It would create a vision of economic growth as something other than (albeit closely linked to) the political expansion of nations.

When talking about Chinese in Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii, it is certainly desirable to use vocabulary that recognizes their engagement in local sociopolitical relationships. Yet, the very act of putting all three locations in a single book implies the existence of links between these locations. Those links should certainly include China but should not be understood solely in terms of China-based assumptions. Moreover, a recognition of those links should not imply that Chinese experiences in all three locations were essentially the same. How can we recognize the particularities of each migrant community while simultaneously drawing attention to the extra-local connections of those communities, and to the physical movement, networks, and discourses that embed them within a much wider web of relationships that includes China, Hong Kong, and global orders of economic activity and status?

A Global Perspective

A global approach to Chinese migration can help overcome the disjunctions between nation-based approaches. Such an approach might begin by describing the institutions, flows, and sentiments that made up a global circulation of people, goods, and money. To leave it at that, however, would merely add one more perspective to those that already exist. Thus, we must also understand how transnational activities articulated with more locally defined activities and identities. How did concerns particular to villages in South China, to overseas Chinese communities in non-Chinese nations, and to businesses, families, and networks that stretched across oceans come together as a single phenomenon? How were these

concerns entangled with economic and ideological shifts on a global scale?[13]

An emphasis on global patterns should not merely assert the primacy of global forces over local. Too often, local and global histories have positioned themselves in opposition to each other, with each side suspicious of what it sees as the other's claim to be the site of all social change and significance. Proponents of local perspectives often criticize global histories as totalizing narratives, offering programmatic schemes and excessively broad generalizations that marginalize the significance of local knowledge and agency. Unfortunately, this criticism is often justified. Even the more nuanced and sophisticated global perspectives tend toward reductionism, such as Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, which claims that most social phenomena, from national development to family structure, are determined by their position within the capitalist world-system.[14]

Critics have countered this overdeterminism by describing how local societies are more complex than these master narratives can account for and by arguing that the effects of outside influences are mediated by local cultural and social structures. In short, global flows do not determine local social structures, but are appropriated and transformed by them.[15] These localizing arguments are often convincing, but the empirical cases are usually limited to a narrow scope in time and place. Brought together, they offer only a disconnected hodgepodge of local variations. Eric Wolf has criticized this as a "model of the world as a global pool hall in which entities spin off each other like so many hard and rounded billiard balls."[16] This metaphor is graphic, but perhaps somewhat exaggerated. The image of rounded sponges is probably more appropriate for more nuanced depictions of local perspectives, such that fluids and "influences" are transferred and absorbed by the balls. These sponges may be structurally altered or even dissolved by these influences, but in the aggregate they still do little more than bounce off of each other. Thus, they offer little contribution or challenge to the wider generalizations of global narratives, be they highly structured world-systems accounts of global economic polarization or accounts of the more generally appreciated but still poorly understood process of how the world has come to be organized into the nation-state system.

Ideally, a useful global perspective would see the world as a field for historical understanding, in the same way that nations, cities, and ethnic groups have already become arenas for the production and contestation of historical narratives. It would provide a stage from which to understand geographically dispersed activities, such as migration, which thread through and straddle territorially based units. Thus, a global perspective

would have to pay careful attention to how different scales and platforms of analysis articulate with each other, yet it would also challenge visions of the world order as a mosaic of discrete sociopolitical entities that are the primary units from which meaning and history are created. It would center attention on "links" and "connections," rather than marginalize them as secondary phenomena that occupy the interstices between nations or civilizations.

This articulation between different platforms of analysis can already be seen in the production of local histories. For example, the history of a village does not merely take the biographies of everybody who ever lived there, place them next to each other, draw out some similarities and differences, and describe a few examples of interaction between them. Villages also have institutions, patterns of land development and economic growth, demographic trends, and other features which are better perceived through generalization, statistical agglomeration, and histories of groups and issues written from perspectives other than those of individual participants. At the same time, none of these other perspectives necessarily obviate the insights provided by biographies. Similarly, the history of a nation-state such as the United States does not just take histories of smaller entities like Boston, Alabama, the Columbia River Basin, Ford Motor Corporation, and the Hopi Indian Reservation, put them next to each other, draw out some similarities and differences, and describe a few examples of interaction between them. Topics like presidential actions, federal legislation, foreign relations, war, and population movements can only be well understood at a national level. Other topics, like industrialization, ethnic relations, and cultural histories depend on local case studies, but such studies are meaningless if not set in relation to each other through an understanding of national (and global) patterns.

The key point is that national histories have become successful arenas for the formulation of historical narratives and issues. The relationships between national histories, local histories, and biography, while sometimes debated (perhaps not as much as they should be), are rarely seen as problematic. Scholars challenge and change national narratives, and even try to undermine the legitimacy of the nation by describing it as an ideological construction, but the politics and identity of nations still remain the arenas that have given shape to these debates. This sense of comfortable articulation is lost, however, when we move up to world history. Modern historical scholarship has its origins in the legitimization of the nation-state, and historians have been slow to move beyond those roots. The quest to delimit and elaborate the particularities and heritages of specific nations and peoples understandably makes many historians mis-

trustful of approaches that can potentially flatten and engulf the subtle details of local experience under global generalities. At a more practical level, the demands of archival research and commonly accepted standards of professional competence also make claims to expertise at a global level seem dubious.

Despite these reservations, some themes and issues are still not easily contained within national histories, such as the environment, urbanization, and economic relations. Subjects like industrialization, migration, and ethnic relations cannot be adequately addressed until nationally based studies are put in a global context. The establishment of such a context, however, entails more than just extending the net to capture more data. For example, a person writing on Lowell, Massachusetts, is not expected to have a detailed knowledge of every person, ethnic group, factory, and event originating in Lowell. Rather, she is expected to have enough knowledge to be able to draw out patterns that fit the data that she does have. Thus, rather than seeing national and local histories as ends in themselves, a global approach will integrate localized research with knowledge of transnational activities and global patterns.[17]

Siu's Sojourners and a Global Perspective on Migration

Migration is a topic that obviously spans different regional and national histories and appears readily amenable to treatment from a global perspective. In practice, however, the concepts and vocabulary regularly used to describe and analyze migrants are deeply embedded in nation-based perspectives. A global perspective on migration has yet to be well articulated.

Many migration studies establish a polarization between concepts like push and pull, emigration and immigration, sending society and host society, or tradition and adaptation, which privilege the perspectives of nations that frame the two ends of migrant journeys. Metaphors like the "uprooted" and "transplanted" serve to describe migration as a kind of break, characterized by monodirectional movement and relocation in a new land. Ideas like assimilation and integration underline how interest in migration is usually justified by an ultimate interest in the inclusion of migrants into a national identity. Return migration, global patterns, and institutions that facilitate the transnational circulation of goods, money, and people are recognized and even researched by immigration historians, but such topics are rarely incorporated into the stories of particular groups in any meaningful way. The return migrants are people who drop out of the story, and the networks of circulation are of interest primarily

as the causes that pushed people into the new nation.[18] Immigrants are seen as either here or there, and no room is left for more complex orientations and circulation.

The conceptual force of nation-based analytical categories is evident in the way they shaped Paul Siu's 1952 article, "The Sojourner." This article was an attempt to fill in the disjunction between the United States and China, to create a transnational space for migrants such as those described in the quotations at the chapter opening. Siu ultimately failed in this task, however, because of his dependence on the conceptual vocabulary of assimilation. He started with a conventional definition of sojourners as people who travel abroad to complete a job as quickly as possible before returning, but went on to describe how this ambition was rarely fulfilled. A sojourner's trip was often more permanent than originally expected, and the sojourner built a life in which he seemed to exist simultaneously in two different lands. When he did manage to return home, his relationships were no longer the same as before he left: "When [the sojourner] gets home he finds it hard to stay and wants to go abroad again."[19] Thus, the sojourner's lack of orientation to his country of residence did not merely imply a more fundamental orientation to his country of origin. Both the new expectations developed abroad and the expectations of the people at home about what a person who had made such a journey was supposed to have become made a return to the past impossible. "As time goes on he becomes, unconsciously perhaps, more of a sharer in the racial colony, developing a mode of living which is characteristic neither of his home nor of the dominant group."[20]

Even trips home gained much of their significance in the context of sojourning fellows: "The return trip is the result of a social expectation of members of his primary group as much as of his individual effort; their sentiments and attitudes make his trip meaningful. The trip shows that he is a person to be admired, to be appreciated, to be proud of, and to be envied."[21] Whether or not a sojourner actually returned to his home country, or whether he even wanted to, was not so significant as the existence of a general discourse that constantly drew attention to the possibility of returning: "The sojourner may make several trips back and forth, he may make only one trip, or he may not make any trip at all. . . . The mere fact that one has never made the return trip is by no means proof that he is not a sojourner."[22]

Siu tried to construct a migrant space as a focus of analysis in its own right, rather than as mere movement from one site to another. He was only partially successful, however, because his work was deeply embedded in the assumptions of assimilation. As an explanation of social