

# Asian Diasporas

Cultures, Identities, Representations

Edited by Robbie B. H. Goh and Shawn Wong

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*Edited by*

*Robbie B. H. Goh and Shawn Wong*

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— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

Asian diasporas are all too often seen in terms of settlement problems in a host nation, where the focus is on issues of crime, housing, employment, racism and related concerns. The essays in this volume view Asian diasporic movements in the context of globalization and global citizenship, in which multiple cultural allegiances, influences and claims together create complex negotiations of identity.

Examining a range of cultural documents through which such negotiations are conducted – literature and other forms of writing, media, popular culture, urban spaces, military inscriptions, and so on – the essays in this volume explore the meanings and experiences involved in the two major Asian diasporic movements, those of South and East Asia.

# Asian Diasporas

Hong Kong University Press thanks Xu Bing for writing the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy for the covers of its books. For further information, see p. iv.

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## Introduction

### The Culture of Asian Diasporas: Integrating/Interrogating (Im)migration, Habitus, Textuality

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*Robbie B. H. Goh*

The claim that Asian diasporas are cultural phenomena would in all likelihood meet little or no objection — except, of course, for the problem of what precisely is meant by “culture”? In what ways can an understanding of cultural influences, transformations, and representations affect the study of those major transnational human movements that are the foci of diaspora studies? What kinds of relationships can be posited between the “hard” data of migration statistics and histories, housing and employment analyses of migrant workers, and the like, on the one hand; and the “soft” data of literature written by diasporic writers, representations of race in the context of immigration, the psychology or mentality of diasporas, and related material, on the other hand?

The present volume attempts to argue for the importance of a wider range of cultural documents — “high” literary texts, popular writings and public discourses, film and media texts, architecture and spatial design, the various cultural elements that shape identity politics and consciousnesses — in the analysis of diasporic movements. As Chuh and Shimakawa (2001: 5) observe, “In order to understand the phenomenon of globalization, it is necessary to ‘globalize’ academic practices by thinking across disciplinary and areal boundaries.” Such

cultural documents play a crucial role in acknowledging the complexity of diasporic identities, particularly in the present age of “global citizens” who face, and represent, a multiplicity of competing allegiances, claims, rights, and duties (Holston and Appadurai 1999; Sassen 1999). Until very recently, diaspora studies arguably did not pay sufficient attention to issues of global claims and rights, in part because these are often regarded as the privileged domain and condition of the “corporate and media elites” of global capitalism (Sassen 1999: 100). In turn, in the popular conception, immigration is regarded as the influx of lowly qualified members of a workforce who, it is commonly assumed, will take on low-paying jobs (if they are at all successful in gaining employment), live in abject conditions, and contribute to urban problems like crime and the creation of ghettos. Thus a recent article on “Who Gains from Immigration?” in *The Economist*, which considers the impact of immigration on Britain’s economy: while acknowledging that immigrants to Britain are “both more and less skilled,” the article in the main pursues the argument that immigrants “are generally prepared to work at lower wages” (*Economist* 2002: 56). Consequently, immigration adds supply pressures in those less desirable occupations for which immigrants compete and lowers those wages; the net result is that “immigration makes business and most people a bit better off, and some of the poor poorer” (*Economist* 2002: 56).

While this argument is hardly surprising in an article concerned with the economic results of immigration, it is representative of a type of discourse and consciousness which reifies transnational human movement in terms of labor and wages; social effects, where they are considered at all, usually focus on ills such as the loss of “public safety” and “cultural identity,” an increase in crimes, and an overburdening of welfare systems and provisions in the receiving nations (Sung 2001: 11). This reifying tendency is not merely a discourse of the popular press and media, nor is it merely a result of immigration-centered analyses and accounts. As Van Hear (1998: 5, 13–6) observes, scholarly accounts of “diaspora” tend to cluster around notions of “forced dispersions,” memories of the homeland and a desire to return there, socioeconomic “disparities between places of origin and destination,” laws and policies that prohibit or permit migration/immigration, “macropolitical economy,” and the like. Despite the differences between these accounts, and their usefulness for scholarly analysis, they nevertheless tend to

regard diasporas as mechanistic, static, and divisive. The emphasis on migratory flows and their various parameters narrows the notion of "diaspora" to a set of systemic causes not unlike the machinery of a global "invisible hand" (admittedly a complex one, incorporating interventions by various agencies and authorities) moving counters from a "push" area to a "pull" one. It is in turn tempting to see such migratory flows as divisive bipolarities set up between the original and host countries, played out in various oppositional terms such as "home" and "alien place," "self" and "other," "crisis spot" and "asylum," "poor" and "rich," and so on. Studies and anthologies such as *Ideas of Home* (Kain 1997) and *Narrating Nationalisms* (Ling 1998) are thus perhaps unfortunately titled, since they seem to hypostasize notions of a "homeland" or a discrete "national boundary" — notions which come under the most pressure in contemporary transnational conditions.

Van Hear's review of the scholarship is part of his argument for a more inclusive understanding of "New Diasporas," one which accepts more complexly fluid, multiple, and recurrent movements, which result in "transnational communities" rather than in relatively static displacements of laborers and asylum seekers (Van Hear 1998: 1, 6). To this necessary call for a more fluid notion of diasporic movements may be added a call for more fully textured studies of diasporic lives and lived experiences. As Yeoh and Huang (1998: 584) observe, scholarship on "Third World female migrants" has tended to view these individuals "first and foremost as *workers*," to the neglect of issues pertaining to their "lives beyond their work." This equation of female migrant workers with labor tends to skew research in the direction of "macroperspective" topics such as the role of remittances as "measures to overcome deficits in [national] balance of payments," the "structural causes" of growth in the supply of such workers, the "productive relations" and "work conditions" within which they work, and so on (Yeoh and Huang 1998: 584). Yet these conditions of labor and employment are also affected by, and affect, not only the workers' engagements with and movements in public space, but employers' attitudes to their domestic servants, the public image and representations of the latter, spaces and praxes, dialectical negotiations of freedom and power between employer and servant, cultures of consumption formed by these migrant workers (Yeoh and Huang 1998), and other related factors pertaining to the social identities, movements, and discourses by and of such groups.

Nor can diasporic “lived experience” simply be equated with housing and the related politics of space – with the main tropes that often emerge in studies of “race and ethnicity in the city.” Pinderhughes’s (1997: 76) survey of recent scholarship notes that the pressure on American cities of “immigrants in larger numbers and from all corners of the globe” has resulted in a focus on the “complex and ... conflictual” nature of “urban politics” among increasingly “bifurcated and differentiated” racial groups. Pinderhughes’s indication of future research directions moves away from the “limitations of the socioeconomic status model” toward an increased awareness of the complex developing “institutions” and “experiences” among the different racial and ethnic groups, and of the asymmetrical experiences that often arise within a single group as well (1997: 85, 86). A different analysis of the existing scholarship, by Ratcliffe (1997), notes the “inability of the literature” to convincingly theorize race and housing in urban Britain, particularly in light of the often imprecise racial and ethnic terms employed in census-based analyses, and the tendency to focus on relatively simple data categories such as housing tenure, dwelling type, location, number of occupants, and household income. While there may be “little disagreement about the *existence* of major inequalities in the housing market” (Ratcliffe 1997: 87) and the racialized bases for such inequalities, there is certainly a need to add substantially to the fronts on which research on race and urbanism is conducted.

Racial segregation, either in housing or in more generalized spatial politics and policies, continues to be a dominant area of research. Thus, for example, Goldsmith (2000: 49) sees a pattern of the segregation in European cities of “dangerous classes” of “darker skinned” immigrants either in “city centers” or “on the outskirts” — a pattern which reproduces the racial segregations of American cities. Other studies do not only indicate existing spatial and power patterns, but also contest the rigidities of racial segregation by importing notions of changing social identities, representations, and praxes in the lives of minority groups and their interactions with the white majority. Starting with spatial tropes such as the “Chinese takeaway” small business (Parker 2000), the “Asian gang” zone of violence (Alexander 2000), or Miami as a city characterized by “Cuban immigration” (Croucher 1997), these studies are not content with reconstructing patterns of racial segregation and confinement, but typically invoke a wide range of cultural documents — media and public

discourses, popular music, architecture and spatial symbolisms, food culture, and others — to argue for the “constructed” and “negotiated” nature of ethnic social identities and spatial interventions.

The key theoretical strand contributed by many of these newer studies of diasporic and ethnic identities thus seems to be the dynamic acts of cultural construction involved in social processes, and consequently the necessarily fluid, multiple, and often overdetermined nature of diasporic conditions. The replacement of divisive and static notions of diasporas with an acknowledgment of the recurring movements, conflictual desires, and mixed and multiple loyalties and affiliations that actually characterize such human transnational processes, is an important step in this new theoretical orientation. So too is the gradual balancing out of the predominant emphases on migration-as-labor, and housing and spatial segregations and exclusionary “power geometries” (Parker 2000: 75). Yet the movement toward a theory of dynamic diasporic cultures and social identities still requires the crucial input of theories of textual, discursive, and symbolic negotiation and contestation. Much of this theoretical ground is inextricably bound to the critical theory of poststructuralist and postmodernist culture and society — to the awareness of the constitutive role of multiple and complex narratives in contemporary social identities and positions (Lyotard 1992: 149).

A number of major strands in this textual and theoretical ground become vital to diasporic studies: firstly, the “dialogical” nature of social identities, as reflected in textual forms and structures (Bakhtin 1981: 3–13); this not only allows for an understanding of the ways in which political and social identities are contested via narrative forms, but also confers a terminology and theoretical framework for plural social identities coexisting and interacting with each other. Contemporary diasporic conditions are indeed akin to a “polyglossia” (Bakhtin 1981: 12) in which there are undoubtedly dominant majority voices, but ones that do not silence or invalidate a multiplicity of more marginal positions whose narratives constitute a challenge to the dominant. The polyglossia is not merely an allegory of ethnicity in the global city, but an actual model of diasporic relations; developments in communications technology, such as e-mail, webpage services, desktop publishing, digital filming, inexpensive and accessible long-distance telephoning and mobile phone networks, constitute new media narratives through which a

multitude of new social identities and positions may be voiced. These proliferating voices constitute a more pragmatic challenge to social dominants than the more overt avenues of policy, political power, and economic control.

Secondly, postcolonial literary and cultural studies add a particular set of nuances to the understanding of diasporic conditions by their insistence on the necessarily mixed and “hybrid” nature of newly independent nations in the new world order, as well as by their theorizing of the diachronic dimension of cultural influence. Bhabha’s (1994: 2) well-known formulation of the “location of culture” as an “interstitial” space, where “the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated,” is fundamentally dialogical in that it blurs the hard and fast distinction between dominant and marginal cultures, colonizing and colonized positions. This condition is not only true of the formerly colonized nation, but also of migrants, immigrant societies, and global diasporic contexts, as Bhabha himself observes (1994: 139). Hybridity thus becomes a “metaphor” not merely for the modern nation, but for a complex “form of living” which is constituted by “social and textual affiliation[s]” (Bhabha 1994: 140) — a form which can be found beyond the nation, among the ethnically diverse, transnationally oriented citizens of contemporary global zones. From this perspective, formerly colonized nations are critically hybrid due to the diachronic development of their “institutions at the core of culture”: their architectural and spatial forms, their social and political institutions, their terms and phrases, above all their consciousness and modes of thought which are infused with the language structures of the former colonial masters (King 1976: 41–66).

Space and time thus intersect in multiple and complex ways in the logic of postcolonial cultures, making it unremunerative to identify definitive moments of social influence and transformation. The production of a specific spatial trope — the church, the public square or garden, the town hall, the ghetto, the red-light district — is not confined to the period of actual physical construction, but incorporates the entire span of cultural influence and cultural production. This once again has a bearing on the question of diasporas: historical transnational movements, and indeed historical cultural influences of a broad variety, play their part in more recent diasporas and the construction of social identities. Diasporic space and time cannot be regarded as isolated phenomena

(the marginalized ethnoscape, the crisis moment of mass emigration, and the like), but must be seen as an interactive “critical space” (Virilio 1998: 58, 59) in which the speed, volume, diachronicity, and diversity of multiple subjective transactions and interventions (in travel, communications, media and commodity consumptions, and other acts) constantly recreate and renegotiate the social sphere and its significance.

In many ways this dynamic and fluid notion of diasporic culture is exemplified by contemporary Singapore: the former British colony, which gained independence in 1965, has a fundamentally diasporic population and society, with the majority of its inhabitants descended from Chinese, Indian, and other immigrants who came to work in the late nineteenth century and thereafter. While modernization and nationhood have resulted in many signal successes, a number of recent factors and developments contribute to create conditions of multiple “pulls” and allegiances: firstly, Singapore’s policy of emphatic “multiculturalism” paradoxically stresses racial and linguistic differences among its citizens (Chua 1998: 190), thus in some ways recalling the different migrant origins of different groups of citizens. This is exacerbated by cultural mechanisms which divide along the different vernacular lines: religions and rituals like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, ancestor worship/veneration; media texts like Bollywood films or Hong Kong television and film; and the language, literature, and popular writing of “mother” countries like India and China. Secondly, legacies of British colonial rule — the use of English as the language of education and government, a heavily exposed English literary tradition, media influences, elements of British education (such as the dominant influence, until very recently, of the Cambridge G.C.E. ‘O’ and ‘A’ Level examinations), colonial architecture, and so on — engage dialectically with vernacular social identities, exerting a diachronic influence from a different cultural source. These conditions are of course heightened by Singapore’s present push toward “world city formation,” and its economic and cultural engagements with global cities, markets, and centers (Perry, Kong, and Yeoh 1997: 18). The result is not only a fundamentally and inextricably hybrid culture and society, but also in some ways an “unsettled” nation whose population is constantly reminded of migrant pasts and present transnational possibilities and affiliations.

Singapore thus exemplifies similar forms of “unsettled settlements” in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific — in the former colonies (or otherwise



subjects of colonial interventions) whose historical mandate of imperial trade and commodity production resulted in significant diasporic movements and racial-cultural hybridity, and whose brief histories as independent nations have been marked in many ways by a perpetuation of significant past influences and the uncertainties of global competition. Certainly the diasporic particulars (the periods of mass diasporic movements, origins and destinations, languages and cultures involved, media influences, and so on) pertaining to Kuala Lumpur, Lagos, Manila, Hong Kong, Johannesburg, Mumbai, Sydney, Jakarta, and other such cities differ from those of Singapore and from each other. Yet they share a particular historical affectedness — a characteristic marking by external political and economic forces, and by fundamental cultural influences — that makes them markedly conscious of and subject to transnational movements and patterns. Where the consciousness of a discrete national identity, a heritage of the past, a sense of “rootedness” and “home” are often missing or problematized, as they are in many of these places, then an essentially diasporic culture prevails, whether manifesting itself in actual large-scale migrations and immigrations, or else in national or group imaginings of some other home, or in other dislocating phenomena.

It is thus not untimely for the appearance of a volume such as the present one, which seeks not only to interrogate some of the *idées fixes* which often dominate diaspora studies, but in the process also to turn the focus away from immigration and ethnicity problems in North American and European locations toward an examination of the endemic and persistent diasporic cultures of Asia-Pacific zones. By the same token, it is not inappropriate that the genesis of this volume lies in an international conference on “Asian Diasporas and Cultures” held at the National University of Singapore in September 2001. It was perhaps the conference’s sense of place — the history, institutions, spatial logic, languages, and cultures of Singapore — that contributed something to the fundamentally dynamic and multidisciplinary sense of “diasporic culture” that these select papers attempt to analyze. Most, if not all, of the contributors have lived and worked in the unsettled and hybrid places that are the logical subjects for studies that rely on newer definitions of diasporas and transnational communities. Diasporas are by nature wideranging and far-flung subjects of study, and no one volume can lay claim to being an exhaustive study. Yet the range of papers in this volume