



Diasporic Histories

Cultural Archives of Chinese Transnationalism

Edited by

Andrea Riemenschnitter and Deborah L. Madsen

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Andrea Riemenschnitter and Deborah L. Madsen



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— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

Diasporic Histories

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Note on transcriptions

Since this volume is dedicated to a transnational Chinese universe, we faced a situation where contributors used several phonetic systems, sometimes in a single chapter: pinyin for mainland Chinese, a variant of Wade-Giles for Taiwan, and the Cantonese transcription for Hong Kong Chinese. We have thus decided against privileging one system, which in other contexts might be the most reasonable choice.

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Introduction

Andrea Riemenschnitter and Deborah L. Madsen

Are we living in a “post-Westphalian” era that marks the end of the nation-state? This question is motivated by the rise of new forms of capitalist globalization and, in the academy, by new critical approaches that offer the postcolonial deconstruction of residual Eurocentric epistemologies. It is no longer feasible to view the globe as divisible into discrete, territorial nation-states with homogeneous populations and political sovereignty more or less exclusively controlled by representative governments. Instead, we witness both large-scale transnational flows of capital, goods, and people that produce structures of power that are located outside of and in parallel with the regulatory state, and formations of grass-roots resistance that appear increasingly heterogeneous, spontaneous, and violent. As the categories of East and West, Mainland China and Taiwan/Hong Kong, centre and periphery, nation and diaspora, power and knowledge, are joined in increasingly contingent relationships, our ideological, geopolitical, and metaphysical borders (like the Cold War “Iron Curtain”) are blurring, and seemingly stable “identity enclaves” like national culture or civilization begin to crumble. The cultural construction “diaspora” can be (and in fact *is*) everywhere and, accordingly, any politics of identity production becomes entangled in contradictions, compelled to engage in large-scale renegotiations (Callahan 2004, 219–29).

In response to these macro-social developments, historians paradoxically need to reorient their inquiries towards micro-history, that is, towards local and particular moments, as well as fissures and gaps, in the production of historical knowledge. Archives are now being filled with diverse counter-narratives to the modernist “master narrative”. A series of reflexive turns, particularly linguistic and cultural, have contributed further to a sense of crisis in the perception and representation of reality that can be defined as the “postmodernization of historiography”. According to Arif Dirlik, the substitution of a paradigm of globalization for the paradigm of modernization has consequences that reach far beyond the recognition of new groups and the empowerment of other groups. This paradigm shift raises urgent questions about “the nation-state as an appropriate political, economic, and cultural unit” (Dirlik 2001, 40). The disappearance of socialist alternatives to capitalism and the erosion of Euro-American political and economic power have further induced Western historians to engage in a renegotiation

of global cultural relations. In particular, multiculturalist rewritings of history seek to reinscribe “those that had been left out of it or condemned to backwardness” (Dirlik 2001, 43). However, these formerly invisible or “subalternized” subjects are now less and less willing to accommodate themselves to a version of their past narrated by Western historians. Rather, their more radical aim is to reclaim their own historical narratives and, while writing back in the postcolonial sense, to seek not only alternative modernities but also alternatives to modernity and to academic historiography.

The situation is further complicated by an emergent multiplication of pasts, an ensuing erosion of the modernist paradigm of historical progress, and the marginalization of both historians and historiography in an era when popular and commodified forms of historical representation like novels, movies, and theme parks flourish. The consequences, Dirlik warns, are not necessarily favourable for democracy. When an ideologically loaded and distorted coherence is simply replaced with a potentially more realistic but opaque contingency, negotiations for political power by globalized subjects are weakened. We are thus confronted with a phenomenon of proliferating narratives and histories, which still await meaningful integration into new visions of human dignity and liberation. It is worth quoting Dirlik here at some length:

If postmodernism in history means anything, at the very least it points to a proliferation of pasts making claims on the present. Such proliferation is liberating to the extent that it enriches the repertory of pasts to draw on in order to act in the present and imagine the future. But it can also be devastating in its consequences if it leads not to open-ended dialogue but to resurgent culturalisms that, against the evidence of history, insist on drawing boundaries around imagined cultural identities—not just to keep out what is constructed as foreign but, more seriously, to suppress the diversity within. What is constructed seems to be the more likely possibility in a world where identity is not the product of freewheeling negotiations but is still subject to the prerogatives of power of various kinds. Rather than usher in renewed hopes for alternative futures, the denial of the teleologies that have informed history instead has rendered the future opaque: As a chaotic present makes a mockery of any effort to contain the pasts it has unleashed, the future itself is caught up in the terrifying anxieties of the present, stripped of its power to inspire or to guide. (Dirlik 2001, 40f.)

Our book is certainly not the first to address these issues, and the essays assembled here draw from a wide range of interventions that deal with many of the problems which are foregrounded in our work.

The main line of argument presented here could be described as an attempt to study Chinese diasporas in their specific, historical situatedness as the most important aspect of their cultural dynamic. We do not attempt to privilege the idea of a *politics* (and poetics) of identity construction vis-à-vis the broader framework of a diasporic, cultural, or collective community consciousness as inscribed by particular realities, like traumatic events and injuries, as well as imaginings, such as memories and fictional narratives. Our approach tries to go beyond the notion of a group identity as first and

foremost a mental operation inasmuch as it acknowledges the (psychological, social, political, economic) imprints imposed by realities upon subjects. We see agency as the outcome of negotiations (however incomplete) between concrete, material conditions and locally available meanings and strategies. Therefore, diasporic histories are seminal in our attempt to retrace human experiences and ground them in the transnational cultural articulations that are circulating today. As Dirlik has cautioned, even postmodern historians need to adhere to a certain constructivism in order to envision alternatives for the future, but their vision must be sufficiently grounded in past and present realities: "History may not give us truth but it does help in uncovering (or discovering) those realities" (2001, 48f.).

The work of Rey Chow, certainly since the 1993 publication of *Writing Diaspora* but effectively since *Women and Chinese Modernity* appeared in 1991, has contributed powerfully to disciplinary moves that embrace the productively ambiguous meanings of "Chineseness". Chow's work has contributed positively to the development of a new paradigm for the study of diasporic Chinese identity as the effect of linguistic, social, economic, and cultural discourses. Other scholars from different disciplines have expressed their concerns about the conceptual stability and "theoretical respectability" of *diaspora* (Ong and Nonini 1997, 18), in view of the increasingly contested and complicated application of the term to a widening range of migration phenomena. Ping-hui Liao observes that "[a]pparently, diaspora has too many facets and does not adequately address concrete cultural issues". He goes on to list critical references to this term that range from "transnationality, the gay movement, ethnic communities abroad, consumerism, global contemporaneity, stateless and flexible citizenship, colonialisms, and alternative modernities, to return migration, foreignness, plurality, identity crisis, minority, exile, difference, exhibiting ... museum culture, etc." (Abbas and Erni 2005, 505).

From this perspective, micro-histories of diasporic Chinese experience have gained considerable significance in the fields of philological, regional, historical, and cultural studies. Well into the 1980s, Chinese diaspora communities constituted a minor subfield of migration studies, or Chinese ethnography, and were perceived by some anthropologists as constituting a "residual China", to be studied for lack of access to "the real China" (Ong and Nonini 1997, 7). Now, comparative analyses of Chinese migrational flows, in both premodern and modern historical contexts, not only explore economic, legal, and demographic conditions but also analyze diasporic subject positions, focusing analytical effort upon the ways in which modern nomadic actors tackle the fissures and boundaries between different historical times, diverse geographical regions, and distinct intellectual traditions. They also interrogate the relations between Chinese exile communities and both their native "home" and alien or "host" environments. A focus on the dynamism of minority communities within a nationalistic context, to be studied with respect to the economic and political as well as cultural processes of globalization, has considerably broadened the field of diaspora studies. In response to the intellectual expansion and disciplinary dynamism of the field, the present collection of essays offers a series of historical and theoretical interventions. In this Introduction

we want briefly to outline the issues with which our contributors engage and to indicate the nature of these interventions.

In order to gain new insights, we first need to revise our current concepts and vocabularies of displacement. It is now commonly accepted, based on a growing body of historical investigation into the various chronotopes of Chinese migration (workers in South-east Asia, the US, and Latin America, business people in cosmopolitan environments, middle-class Hong Kong families in Vancouver, dissidents, and so on), that the abstract notion of "Overseas Chinese" does not name a single and homogeneous way of Chinese minority community life (Lau 2006; Li 1989; McKeown 1999, 2000; Wang in JOC 2005). Understanding Chinese diaspora through "geographies of regions" (Ma and Cartier 2003, 385) and the diversity of historical experience and agency (Charney, Yeoh and Kiong 2003; Christiansen 2003; Pan 1999, 1994), rather than through homogenizing identity markers (as traditionally ascribed to diasporic subjects by host communities), has opened up the field to fine-grained explorations of identity formation — past, present, and future — that can only function in close relation to the localities inhabited by these transnational migrants physically and/or spiritually (Louie 2004; Chan 2006).

In the Chinese context, such an understanding of diaspora may constitute what Aihwa Ong and others refer to as a "new" diaspora of global post-nationalism in contrast with the "old" diaspora of indenture. Lily Cho, for example, notes that "Aihwa Ong's discussion of flexible citizenship...invests in a sense of urgency around the need to separate old and new diaspora subjects....This appeal for a consideration of a new migrant subjectivity divorced from the old one of indentured and migrant labour movements hopes to fend off contemporary racism by arguing against archaic representations of Chineseness that are not representative of contemporary Chinese diasporic populations" (Ng and Holden 2006, 58). Just what the implications might be of this perception of "old" and "new" diasporas is explored in the essays that follow.

Transnational players occupy regional, national, and international zones of cultural contact that are inscribed as increasingly complex transnational locations of belonging (Clifford 1994, 303). Yet, as the essays collected here demonstrate, the experience of displacement, whether that be voluntary migrancy at one extreme or exile at the other, has always been a complex business. Under the conditions of severely asymmetrical power relations produced by late capitalist, globalized regimes of "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1989) that are not only economic and political but also cultural, agency must be revised in order to address adequately diverse new social arrangements. Thus, the dominant disciplinary gaze has turned inward, and the academic concept of diaspora is now instrumental to the theoretical analysis of subject positions that are posited as oscillating between home/s and host/s. As Liao argues, it "is above all about difference, cultural, socio-economic, political, religious, sexual and gender"; diaspora can and should be employed to analyze:

the psychosocial experience of defeat and re-adjustment, of the arts of survival the characters (*of historical, anthropological, fictional, or aesthetic inquiries*) deploy in the face of huge obstacles to success. ... In response to dislocation, distanciation, and difference, diasporas tend to form disjunctive

subjectivities, often in the almost unrecognizable form of what Jacques Lacan terms “anamorphosis”, of a contorted projection of hopes and fears into a distorted field of vision. Diasporas desire to belong while tortured by lack; their worldviews and discursive practices are informed by fetish desires to reproduce or to fill in the gap between the home and the new world. (Liao in Abbas and Erni 2005, 507; emphasis added)

This kind of observation characterizes the discourse used by transnational diaspora scholars like Ping-hui Liao to express their uneasiness towards approaches that continue historically to map, or sociologically to define, diasporas as locally and demographically stable communities. These communities are not necessarily neatly situated within the borders of alien host nation-states. They share grievances that arise from one-way mobility as well as from the division of loyalties between a host nation and a distant nation-state conceived as “home”.

After the last mass exodus of Chinese from mainland China on account of political turmoil, the second half of the twentieth century offered a continuously diversifying choice of overseas economic opportunities, ranging from the most ruthlessly exploitative forms of industrial labour to relatively comfortable white-collar professionalism in Hong Kong, Singapore, and other cities around the Pacific Rim. Even after the watershed of the Second World War and well into the 1980s, the majority of Chinese migrants from the Mainland experienced modernity as Western “otherness”, to be painfully embodied through a double bind of racial discrimination and low incomes “here” and high expectations of financial support “there”. Nevertheless, the living and working conditions of migrant groups are always locally as well as historically specific and need to be studied according to circumstances.

As a way to circumvent the fallacies of narrow definitions of diaspora that do not adequately allow for historical change and cultural dynamism, James Clifford proposes a “currency of diaspora discourses” (Clifford 2005) that establishes a fundamental difference between “tribal” and diasporic cultures. The “sense of rootedness in the land”, characteristic of tribal societies, becomes for Clifford a crucial marker of the difference between diasporic and other kinds of communities. However, he does acknowledge the fundamental instability of diaspora as a descriptive concept, conceding that, in “the late twentieth century, all or most communities have diasporic dimensions (moments, tactics, practices, articulations). Some are more diasporic than others” (Clifford 2005, 532). This very flexible model of diaspora allows us to shift our attention from the culturalist assumption of homogeneous “old” diaspora communities to a more dynamic, functionalist approach that analyzes various forms of strategic (or tactical) position-taking — by individual subjects or groups — within a “new” diasporic referential matrix.

While extending the possibilities for postmodern diasporic identifications, Clifford reminds us also of the historical realities that provide the blueprint for William Safran’s model. Safran had suggested a catalogue of six basic criteria for the definition of diaspora, which he and other scholars later revised and supplemented. He defined the concept of diaspora as applying to expatriate minority communities that share several of the following characteristics: