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Chinese Women

and the Global Village

Jan Ryan

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Chinese Women and The Global Village:

An Australian Site

JAN RYAN

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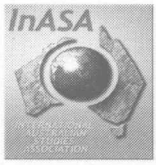

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Chinese Women and The Global Village

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A book can only select such a small amount from the wealth of information, and it cannot include or represent the views of all women of Chinese ancestry in Australia. These women come from very diverse backgrounds. The selection, errors, and interpretations are entirely mine.

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Introduction

Listen,
Listen to the women.
They are arriving
Over the wide distances
On their dancing feet.[1]

There are an estimated fifty-five million men and women of Chinese ancestry outside mainland China, and in Southeast Asia alone it is estimated they generate a Gross National Product (GNP) of four hundred and fifty billion dollars, a quarter larger than the GNP of the People's Republic of China.[2] Chinese men have been the public profile and focus of academic attention, due to the prominence of their economic successes. The agency of women of Chinese ancestry remains concealed in the current discourses of 'globalisation', the 'Pacific Rim', and the 'Pacific Century' — tropes that are gender inscribed and instruct us to view new ways of being Chinese as inseparable from transoceanic capitalist processes.[3] This book seeks to question, challenge and re-position the theoretical underpinnings of the 'Ungrounded Empire' of the Chinese and, in doing so, offer a new canon that casts the efficacy of Chinese women in the dynamics of global issues and knowledge.

Existing ethnic and migrant studies have focused on where migrants come from, settlement in a specific country, family adaptations, and the community that emerges. The emphasis is on inter-group dynamics in the receiving society, acculturation, and the uniqueness of a specific nation as an immigrant country. This book identifies the personal and discrete migrant experience within a global context. It recognises that Chinese in Australia is only one part of the story. The Chinese experience abroad has historically been global, but the new realities of contemporary international migration have contributed to its recent (re) 'discovery'.[4] There is affirmation that the transnational flow of capital, labour, technology, information, cultural motifs, and consumer habits are not simply one-way, but circulative.[5] Consequently, there is a need to address families, economic enterprises, community formation, political and social movements, and other aspects of the Asian Australian experience as transnational and global.

The end of the Cold War era and the rise of globalisation are leading to new academic pursuits, such as global and diasporic studies. Diasporic studies can expand the parameters of the Asian experience abroad from a largely regional experience to a transnational one, and serve as a bridge between ethnic studies and area studies. It can link national, gender, migrant, and Asian Australian scholars with those studying Asian Pacific experiences in Asia itself, Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the Middle East.[6] The internationalisation of these studies can contribute to the decentering of national gender and ethnic studies from a paradigm of regionality, concepts of national borders and Australian exceptionalism, to a focus on global issues and significance.

In a broad sense, the term 'global village' reflects the removal of restrictive boundaries from isolated enclaves and the development of new technologies to link people to the world. This book will engage with the meanings underscored in the symbolic idea of the 'global village' and explore how Chinese women position themselves within their personal environments, and how their perspectives connect with questions and issues of universal significance. The central question raised in this book is: How do differing birthplaces, homelands, and a sense of being 'Chinese' impact on identity formation, family construction, work environments, and cultural adaptations? How do these women negotiate East-West divides in culture and consciousness, and construct their own multiple identities in an increasingly complex global world? Such women face many directions at once — toward China, other Asian countries, and the West. Their multiple perspectives are often gained at great cost through pathways marked by sojourning, absence, nostalgia and, at times, exile and loss.[7] Importantly, their personal and collective experiences must inform, challenge and inscribe new global landscapes.

There is a nexus between the village allegiances that continue today — whether at the level of county in China, clan, dialect or extended family — and the broader global socialising forces of the Chinese diasporas. The loyalties and roles shaped by 'villages' position individuals from birth, and, in time, their own roles and distinctive circumstances impart values and cultures to their children. Dialect and broader-based Chinese Associations, in adopting social, political and philanthropic goals, also participate in this socialising role to inculcate values and perpetuate imagined cultural practices. But this is at a time when Chinese women in Australia have never been more global. With birthplaces from all points of the globe, with networks and family positioned around the world, with pilgrimages, business, education, family visits and accessibility to communications, many women network, retain and forge international contacts. This is the central and most distinctive and

significant change that distinguishes Chinese women in Australia since the 1970s from their predecessors.

While international connections may mean more pragmatic outcomes — in business, communications and educational opportunities — there is a second link that is far less tangible: A sense of 'Chineseness' that transcends the village and constructs a mode of belonging far beyond family and business, and disguises all boundaries and differences between Chinese of contrasting backgrounds and lifestyles. This Chineseness is not always tied to the geo-physical space of the Chinese mainland, but it can be linked to an imagined Chinese classical heritage and culture. The representations of Chineseness vary, as do the displayed rituals, but the dominant discourse focuses on perceived distinctive attributes that include a spirit of hard work, a dedication to study and education, a strong sense of family, and a respect for elders. The created sense of Chineseness is sustained by rituals that display ethnic distinctiveness and encourage people to join in common celebration. Chinese Associations in Australia, like their counterparts around the globe, have become brokers in both the public celebration of culture, and in a global bonding that stimulates family and business connections, encourages the acceptance of these perceived distinctive values and makes claims to the positioning of authority in the future. Issues relating to the nexus between the 'village' or local and personal life of Chinese women and the creation and maintenance of a global 'Chinese' identity and culture will permeate this book.

The analyses in this book will unveil a gendered view of the ongoing struggle over the definition of being Chinese. Cultural identity will be analysed within the context of émigré countries, immigration, settlement, and transmigration, and grounded within the historical framework of Western cultural hegemony.

A. Reid and C. Reynolds[8] explore the difficulties inherent in the term 'Chinese':

> In the everyday usage of most languages outside China, the word 'Chinese' is seen as commonplace; the least in need of exegesis. Yet the inadequacy of this single word to cover an extraordinary multiplicity of meanings is the source of both psychological tensions and political danger.*

Reid and Reynolds claim the words China and Chinese represent colossal

* Reid and Reynolds offer the example when the word *Cina*, (Chinese) daubed on shop houses in Jakarta in May 1998, was something like a death sentence. 'The Indonesians thus fatefully labelled were not asked whether they felt the label appropriate'.

simplifications and they caution that, even in the era of nationalism, Chinese-speakers cannot confuse the range of meanings in the way English-speakers are almost compelled to do by this single term:

> this term in the mouths of others can close off options and create pressures. We regularly use the term for a single language, and for a group of languages; for an ancient civilization; for two modern countries; for the citizens of those countries; and for an enormous range of citizens of other countries, some of whom speak one or more Chinese languages among others, but many have nothing in common with 'China' except a distant line of descent, usually in the male line.[9]

Despite these difficulties, the image and reality of 'Chineseness' create a host of fascinating interactions with all the peoples of Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim. Wang Gungwu[10] admits, 'Between sojourning and settling down in one place, [he] discovered that being Chinese was not a handicap but an anchor'. He contended that:

> many Chinese have always hoped for renewed and closer links with China. On the other hand, many others, especially in North America, are ambivalent about new Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong. They are concerned that these new migrants seem too eager to live outside China, acquire foreign passports and still play their China cards. The range of responses to external stimuli and internal opportunities has grown so varied that, instead of becoming simpler as many had expected, the subject has become rich with contradiction and changeability.[11]

There is no single Chinese Diaspora, and the word 'Chinese' is becoming less and less appropriate for the pluralistic nature of peoples bounded by this discourse. Wang argues that 'we need more words, each with the necessary adjectives to qualify and identify who exactly we are describing. We need them all to capture the richness and variety of the hundreds of Chinese communities that can now be found'.[12]

Who, then, is a Chinese woman? This is a vexing question. The simplistic answer is a woman with ancestral links to the geophysical mass of China. Invaders and shifting boundaries make even this explanation problematic. But the narrative must push forward as people from where we loosely call mainland China spread to become transnational peoples, particularly during the period relevant to this study — the late twentieth century. But time, community and personal exigencies, and political purposes have encouraged some people to appropriate more complex terms to describe their personas. These created identities include birthplaces, adopted countries, and allegiances to a perceived common ancestry or sense of ethnicity called Chinese. Women, like their menfolk, have multiple loyalties, particularly to their

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birthplace, that may have been part of their family story for generations. Canadian, Malaysian, Singaporean or Australian may be the preferred identity assumed by many of Chinese descent. Others adopt more complex couplings to uphold divided loyalties — Malaysian Australian, Chinese Australian, Singapore-Chinese-Australian, and so forth.

Birthplaces evoke imagined and sentimental senses of beginning and being despite rebirths in new countries. Return voyages to birth regions are testimony to memories forever etched in the minds of these migrants. Economic or political exigencies may prevent physical pilgrimages, but alliances of the mind may remain forever. For those long departed, or descendants of travellers, imagined allegiances are perpetuated to greater or lesser degrees by families or communities through sites of culture, language or economic and political networks.

The unwieldy terms of women of 'Chinese descent', 'Chinese ancestry', and 'Chinese extraction' are interwoven to reinforce the meaning underscored in the generic term 'Chinese women'. There is perhaps an irony in the pragmatic use of the generic term and the aims of the book to deconstruct the homogeneous expression 'Chinese' and to raise a sense of difference. The book seeks to go beyond labels, to seek and understand the contrasts in the lives of women of Chinese ancestry. While overviews are examined to find commonalities and patterns in these women's lives, there is sensitivity to the personalised experiences of women of Chinese descent, and their need to adopt and express their subject positions.

Although a range of archival sources have been consulted for this investigation it is difficult to access the personal thoughts of women of Chinese descent, especially given their reluctance to air their views publicly. Oral interviews, then, provide a significant source to hear their personal reflections. Their voices provide a sharp articulation of deeply sensitive issues — points of view rarely heard before. Clearly their reflections cannot represent the opinions of all women of Chinese descent in Australia. However, the diversity in age, length of stay in Australia, ethnic background, birthplace, and socio-economic standing of the participants does inform the research with rich and illustrative viewpoints that have not previously been accessible. In many ways they are disarmingly candid. It is important for Chinese women to define their own needs and identity, to create their own subject positions and to be emissaries of their remembered past.

Luisa Passerini suggests that memory presents different levels during an oral-history interview, one being what she refers to as an ' "all-ready" memory, stereotyped, revealing general views of the world'.[13] Interviewees were multiple-positioned in relation to these life narratives. On the one hand, they

were co-producers of the narratives. On the other hand, they were observers, both of their environments and of themselves as they retold and reevaluated their remembered past. Interviews are 'self-reflexive, and they confirm as well as contradict other accounts of the social world' outside the project.[14] In a wider sense, they intersect with other local and global histories.

Persuaded by the methodologies, and inspired by the theoretical underpinnings of Ruth Frankenburg's influential work *White Women, Race Matters*,[15] women interviewed for this study were asked to consider their relationships of 'closeness or distance, equality or inequality with people around them'. Although Frankenburg attests that 'racial and ethnic mapping of environments in physical and social terms ... enables the beginning of an understanding of the conceptual mappings of self and other operating in white women's lives',[16] these understandings can also be extrapolated from the lives of women with colour. Race was lived in as many different ways as there were women interviewed.

The interviewees interpretative craft was like *paper toile*, where the artist pastes layers of pictorial images onto a scene to create a picture with three dimensional effects. They pasted the narratives of their daily life onto old vistas, crafting and re-fashioning themselves as, with each layer, they moulded and framed new landscapes of their lives. The depths of their panoramas assumed more multi-dimensional effects as they forged and re-created the genealogies of their mind.

Interviewers from the preferred dialect, language, or birthplace of the interviewee carried out interviews. This design enabled women with English language difficulties to converse freely in the dialect/language of their choice. These tapes have been translated. The selection of quotations and the analyses remain with the author, thus creating a complex over-lay of potentially incongruous translations; selectivity; and created texts. Their daily lives became an active resource for analysing society, just as understanding their personal life experiences 'can only be adequately understood by "mapping" them onto broader social processes'.[17]

The majority of migrants do not move to societies devoid of values, norms, and expectations about newcomers. Sharon Lee reflects that today's Asian women migrants to the US and Canada encounter societies that have formal laws against racial discrimination, but the legacy of a history of anti-Asian attitudes and actions has not been eliminated.[18] This censure also applies to Australia. Racism shapes people's lives and identities in a way that is inseparable from other facets of daily life, and there is a profound difference in experience between individuals differentially positioned in relation to systems of domination.[19] Gender, race, and ethnicity, social class, cohort and

history focuses on structuralist or contextual considerations in research on women migrants and labour. Also important are age, marital status and family situation, and other life-cycle related characteristics that play an important part on the individual variables on women.[20]

How Asian women as migrants to such societies are perceived, and how they respond, must, therefore, be examined against the host society's history of immigration. These histories are inextricably linked to global economics, philosophies and politics.

Transnational migrants

The study of the Chinese diasporas over the last two centuries and the subsequent changes in Chinese political, economic and cultural activities created within specific historical and regional settings, point to the necessity of reconceptualising the relationship between the study of Chinese identities and the place-bound theorisations implied in such terms as territory, region, nationality and ethnicity.[21]

Old migration paradigms centred on the nation-state as the unit of analysis need to be revised and replaced by a global approach to international migration processes. It is important not to homogenise the migration experience. There is a need to go beyond the nation-state and take more seriously the world system as the unit of analysis.[22]

What is missing in the debates on transnationalism, as a set of abstracted dematerialised cultural flows, is an interest in describing the ways in which people's everyday lives are transformed by the effects of global capitalism, how their own agencies are implicated in the making of these effects, and the social relationships in which these agencies are embedded.[23]

Linda Basch defines transnationalism as:

> The processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships — familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political — that span borders we call 'transmigrants'. An essential element of transnationalism is the multiplicity of involvements that "transmigrants" sustain in both home and host society.[24]

Transnationalism is not a new phenomenon. Chinese, like other migrant communities, have connected between countries for centuries. There are significant differences, however, between the transnationalisms of the last three decades. First, the complexity of the transnational phenomenon has

increased. Chinese migrants are negotiating between differing birthplaces, and multiple homelands, and host countries. These changes are in response to, and impact on, the economic and political transition of Asia in the global economies. Broader and increasing commercial enterprises, and more scattered family connections, are further encouraged by the concomitant development in the infrastructure of communications and technologies that make transnationalism more accessible and more essential. Within this context is the significant transition, that was seeded in the post-World War Two period, of the spread of women refugees and migrants and the growing development of cheap female labour requirements for the developing post-war global economies. Women now outnumber male immigrants to the major immigration countries of Australia, the United States and Canada, and this shift is due to the increased migration of women from Asian countries. Yet their position in the trinity of transmigration, settlement, and identity formation has largely been ignored.

This book focuses on the post 1970s, a time of significant global re-configurations and change including the end of the Cold War period; the opening up of China; the closure of the 'White Australia' policy; and the acceptance of Chinese migrants into Australia, the United States and Canada at a time when they were forced to leave countries in Asia where they were brutally, demonstrably, or implicitly targeted.

The signature of Australia-born Chinese became quite suddenly a complex mixture of Chinese from differing birthplaces and variable migrational patterns. The template of Chinese culture and its link to the soil of China, changed with vastly differing loyalties to place and space, and even the term 'overseas Chinese' became a sensitive discourse of conflicting power allegiances. For the Australian-born Chinese whose insularity from years of a closed China, and who were bounded by continuous subjugation from their host country, difference was focused on their dialect backgrounds, which were grounded firmly in the distant soils of China. These differences were translated to the sounds of a new dialectic, and a new discourse — tropes of the Asia Pacific, the Pacific Rim, the place of Asia in the new world of global capitalism. Complex global interdependence and economic integration impacted on the growing global populations of migrants, displaced persons and refugees. A new narrative of 'Chinese' in Australia had to be etched onto the old, and re-created. This book will not ignore past perspectives so important to contemporary readings of societies' adjustments and discourses, nor will it neglect the part of Australia-born women of Chinese ancestry, whose perceptive perspective informs much of this narrative.

Old migration paradigms centred on the nation-state need to be revised

and replaced by a global approach to international migration processes. Chapter One investigates the Western models of migration and identifies the specific nature of Chinese migration, and the historical context in which migration has occurred. Chinese interpretative paradigms on migration are also rigorously scrutinised. This chapter positions Chinese migrant women in new global configurations and calls for a new discursive framework that recognises the unique and the shared experiences of migrant women in a global world.

Chapter Two examines the traditional roles of the Chinese family, and asks how women adopt and adapt these roles to their changing environments. The multiple worlds of customs, countries of birth or emigration, the host country and their personal life experiences give shape to a new way at looking at the universal 'Chinese family'. The chapter identifies the way family is inscribed in their daily lives. The chapter maps out the personal approaches to family that are adopted by Chinese women and investigates these strategies within the context of their broader views of gender and ethnic ideologies.

Chapter Three raises the question of how Chinese women create their identity, when these identities are always gender and ethnic specific. Their lives are proscribed from birth by the different expectations of being a woman and being Chinese. They live as an ethnic minority, and a female minority, in a country that has historically cast their difference. There are different layers of identity that come into play within the broader diasporic identity and the chapter analyses the way women of Chinese ancestry perceive and appropriate these strata in their self reflection. As vessels of strength, women of Chinese ancestry can be advocates of change and/or upholders of tradition; they may challenge, accommodate or be submerged in the differing needs and demands of new settlements and transitions. There may be human frailty and failure; unfulfilled promises; newfound life experiences; or joyful celebrations of personal and family achievements. Some or all of these emotions could be experienced in a fluctuating lifetime. There is a rich diversity of life experiences in what it means to be a woman of Chinese heritage.

It is important to chart the ways in which people's everyday working lives are transformed by the effects of global capitalism, and how their own agency impacts on the very structure in which they are embedded. Global capitalism has generated forms of labor regulation, subcontracting, outsourcing, employment of large numbers of temporary, part-time and seasonal workers, and 'home work' arrangements.[25] Ong and Nonini contend that for 'women and semi-unfree labourers, modes of labour regulation extend beyond the capitalist workplace per se to domestic units and to capitalist

nation states — the latter engaging in forms of discursive inscription and control'.[26] Chapter Four investigates the consigned work-spaces for women migrants, particularly those from the Asian regions. The chapter asks how women negotiate the blocked opportunities in the workplace; how they position and re-position their perceived cultural distinctiveness within an alien working environment; and how they personally engage with questions of culture, authority, power and practice in the workplace.

Importantly, Chapter Five attempts a synthesis of the main arguments presented in the earlier chapters and demonstrates the different ways in which gender is played out in the personal, yet global, dynamics of Chinese Associations. This chapter investigates how Chinese Associations are constructed as an intersection not only of the personal and international environments, but also of the private and public worlds. On the one hand, the Associations claim an historical heritage, and are a symbol and public assertion of their presence in a 'multicultural' society. On a larger stage, Associations, like their counterparts around the world, serve to re-incarnate a spiritual and cultural sense of what it means to be Chinese. On the other hand, they act as a surrogate extended family, offering a socialising environment for the daily rituals and celebrations for personal spiritual renewal, guidance and acquaintance. Complex cultural practices are uncovered and the meanings of leisure and cultural 'traditions' reveal sensitive and intricate ways women of Chinese ancestry concede and conceive their personal lives within their broader worlds.

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