

***Opportunity in Crisis: Cantonese Migrants and the State in Late Qing China.***

By Steven B. Miles. Harvard East Asian Monographs 441. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021. Pp. 358. \$65.00/£52.95.

The study of Chinese diaspora in the West, also known traditionally as overseas Chinese studies 華僑研究, has long focused mostly on the Chinese minority in countries in Southeast Asia for obvious reason: overwhelming majority of Chinese abroad in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth centuries, about eighty per cent, were found in European and American colonies in Southeast Asia, from the American colony in the Philippines to the east to the British colony in Burma to the west. In-between were Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), Portuguese Timor (East Timor), British Malaya (Malaysia), British Borneo (Malaya and Brunei), Spanish East Indies, and French Indochina (Vietnam, Lao, and Cambodia). Chinese migrants in this part of the world came predominantly from Fujian and Guangdong, two important maritime provinces known historically for their ancient maritime trade in Nanyang 南洋 or the South Sea 南海 and as far west as east Africa and the Persian Gulf. During the European colonial era, they were encouraged and recruited to work in the colonial plantations and mines. They played important roles in the development of business and industry during the late colonial and post-colonial eras and in the movements toward national liberation in the second half of the twentieth century.

In China, Chinese overseas 華僑 received little or no political and intellectual attention from both the Chinese government and scholars before the twentieth century. Neither traditional Sinology nor the International and Area Studies (IAS), a product of the Cold War in the West, treated the study of Chinese overseas as an integral part of their research interest. Chinese overseas were viewed as “orphans” of China at best and “rebels” and “traitors” at worst. But to their loved ones in the ancestral villages and towns, they were “lifelines” for a decent income and security for most and stepping-stones to wealth and luxury for the lucky ones. They finally caught the attention of the Qing government toward the end of the nineteenth century because both the political reform advocated by Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) and the revolutionary movement led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866–1925) posed a direct challenge to the authority of the already weakened and incompetent government in Beijing, if not an existential threat to the survival of the Manchu regime. Both movements, not accidentally, were based in and supported by rising Chinese nationalist sentiment among Chinese overseas. No wonder after the success of the 1911 revolution, in recognition of the support his movement received from Chinese overseas, Sun’s government established the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission 僑務委員會, a cabinet-level department in the

Nationalist government to oversee the affairs of Chinese overseas at home and abroad and to promote Chinese diaspora studies to this date by the government of Taiwan.

I briefly mentioned this history to highlight the uniqueness and significance of Prof. Steven B. Miles's Chinese diaspora study. To be sure, it is still a study that focuses on the migration of a group of Cantonese from the Zhujiang (Pearl River) delta 珠江三角洲 in Guangdong to another area within China, Guangxi, not far from their homeland. This internal migration rather than migration overseas, nevertheless, shares many similar patterns and characteristics as the same Cantonese who migrated to other areas in China and, indeed, to many areas throughout the world. To be precise, the domestic Cantonese migrants moved upriver from the Zhujiang delta to the Guangxi province along the western tributaries of the Xijiang (West River) 西江 of the Pearl River 珠江. The Cantonese migrants covered in the book originated mostly from the Sanyi 三邑 district that includes three counties, Nanhai 南海, Shunde 順德, and Panyu 番禺 of today's Guangzhou City. The people from the Sanyi district speak a branch of the Cantonese dialect, popularly known as Sanyi dialect, quite different from another branch of the Cantonese dialect, the Wuyi 五邑 spoken in neighbouring five counties: Taishan 台山, Xinhui 新會, Kaiping 開平, Enping 恩平, and Heshan 鶴山.

It was the Sanyi merchants and peasants that migrated westward up the Xijiang and established themselves in Guangxi, in an area called the West River basin or corridor, during the turbulent years in the middle and the second half of the nineteenth century. At around the same period, as Miles points out, the same Cantonese people were also seeking economic opportunities northward to Hankou, Hunan, and Shanghai, southward to Hong Kong, and overseas in Nanyang, the Americas, and the Oceania. In short, it was a period of internal disruptions and unrests and a period as well of international and global migration for the Sanyi-speaking people.

The major theme of Miles's book is quite straightforward: social and political crisis in the early and middle of the nineteenth century, most notably the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) and Triad Uprising (1854–1855), not only destabilized existing patterns of commerce and migration but also provided new opportunities for Cantonese emigrant community, including both the elite and underclass, from the Sanyi district in the Zhujiang delta to move up the Xijiang river corridor in Guangxi where they made economic and social advancements and reinvented themselves with the cooperation of government officials. In the process, they transformed themselves and the cultural, economic, and political geography of Guangxi.

Throughout the book, the author makes good use of family genealogies (家譜), county gazetteers (縣志), and commemorative steles from both Guangdong and Guangxi to reconstruct compelling biographies that graphically and convincingly

illustrate the personal histories of involvements in the migration process, career trajectories, and personal transformation. Also used are records of Cantonese district associations (會館) and temples they built for themselves away from home. From the introduction of the young man, Cui Bin 崔贊 of Shatou 沙頭, Nanhai, who eventually moved up the river, in the opening sentence of the book to the successful business career Zhang Zhende 張振德, originally also from Nanhai, in Luorong 離容, Guangxi, in the closing chapter of the book, the author introduces the actors, mostly business people, military officers, peasants, bandits, pirates, triads, and civil servants, at every turn, using the lives of these individuals and clans to show how they seized opportunities in times of wars and social unrests and made both fortune and history from the delta in Guangdong to the West River basin in the Guangxi. Unearthing relevant bits and pieces of biographical information from arcane sources and, at times, difficult texts is challenging, but the outcomes are always rich and rewarding. Also used are records of the district associations, *tongxianghui* 同鄉會, and temples built by Cantonese migrants away from the delta. Whenever available and pertinent, he also takes advantage of personal writings, such as diaries, poems, essays, correspondence, and travels to enrich the biographical and historical narratives.

Finally, the study points to a new and exciting approach to the study of Chinese diaspora both at home and abroad. In his concluding chapter, Miles proposes a new transnational approach “that encompasses both internal and external trajectories as an alternative to the empire or nation.” He rightly sees the simultaneous expanding and emerging upriver (Guangxi), coastal (Hong Kong and Shanghai), and overseas (Southeast Asian, the Americas, and Oceania) Cantonese trajectories linked through the emerging mass media and new technologies in transportation and communication. Also in these Cantonese-speaking communities, we find the same institutions, such as, the *huiguan* 會館, *tongxianghui*, temples, and charitable organizations, as in the Xijiang basin in Guangxi.

In short, Chinese migration is a global phenomenon and it should be studied from a global and transnational perspective, even if a study, such as the Cantonese migrant community in the Xijiang basin, is limited to and focused on a geographic location. An excellent example of this approach is Adam McKeown’s insightful study on *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900–1936*.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the same transnational approach is used by Wing Chung Ng in his seminal study on the proliferation of Cantonese opera in the book, *The Rise of*

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<sup>1</sup> Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900–1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

*Cantonese Opera*.<sup>2</sup> In his book, Ng writes about not only the rise and history of the Cantonese opera in Guangdong province but also its spread along the Zhujiang and to Hong Kong and Macau whose *lingua franca* was and still is Sanyi Cantonese, and eventually to the Cantonese-speaking communities throughout Southeast Asia and to the Americas and the Oceania. In other words, it was performed wherever Cantonese-speaking immigrants settled throughout the world. For example, during the Gold Rush period in the middle of the nineteenth century, San Francisco Chinatown had as many as five theatres that provided live performances for the Cantonese immigrants.

As mentioned above, the study of Chinese overseas that emerged in the early twentieth century had long concentrated on the Chinese immigrants as indispensable cheap labour when needed, but unassimilable aliens to be excluded by racist and inhumane laws when they ceased to be useful. The rise of ethnic and political consciousness among racial minorities in the 1960s and 1970s in countries in the West gave rise to civil and political rights movements and stimulated interests in self-study on the historical and contemporary experience, known in the US as ethnic studies, among the Chinese minority in many countries across the globe. In 1992, scholars in Chinese diaspora studies from all continents came together and founded the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas (ISSCO) 世界海外華人研究學會, a professional international scholarly organization devoted to the advancement of Chinese diaspora studies.

For a number of reasons too complicated to explain in this review, the People's Republic of China (PRC), in stark contrast to the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan, had shown very little interest in the study of Chinese overseas in the first three decades of its founding. It was not until the 1980s that both the PRC government and universities in China decided to revive their interest in the field they called 華僑華人研究, the study of Chinese overseas, including the study of their ancestral homes (華僑研究) and their connections with their diasporas in various countries throughout the world. The accelerated pace of globalization in the late 1980s and 1990s further generated interests in the study of Chinese diaspora from both transnational and comparative perspectives and led to the establishment of the ISSCO in 1992.

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<sup>2</sup> Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015).