Transnational Social Practice from Below: The Experiences of a Chinese Leneage

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Part two:

Transnational Social Practice: Logic, Complexity and Dynamics

In Part 1, we have discussed the historical logic of trans-territorial migration as well as the emergence and shaping of a region-crossing social space. In Part 2, the major portion of our attention will be focused on how actors in the contemporary context of globalization and late capitalism, are engaged in their transnational activities.

The three cases comprising Part 2 present different types of activities, which together shape a comparatively complete picture of Chinese transnationalism from below. There are two strands of logic supporting the clarification of these three types. One is that by taking different opportunities simultaneously offered by the present era, in particular that expressed in the process of modernization of the locality in China, these three cases reveal various models by which transnational activities can be conducted. The second strand of logic is that these three cases embody three different levels of connections with China. The first one emphasizes the regional tie, whereas the second one just narrows the correlation down to a kinship tie. The third tie constructs a transnational network beyond the limitation of the ancestral hometown region or family. The vignettes I present below are those of Wenyao Zhen, who followed a historical model or exemplar in his pursuits of helping the modernization of his hometown, of Xingzhong Zheng who has grabbed the opportunity offered by current economic developments to rebuild a social field on the basis of an old donation pattern which produces a new source of social capital and, finally, of Jingxing Zheng, whose business behaviour sheds further light on the strategies of transnational entrepreneurs who invest in China.
Firstly, Wenyao Zheng's case represents a connection with the historical model of the early twentieth century. While an authoritative viewpoint claims that the model of Chen Jiageng (Tan Kah Kee), who contributed his wealth to his hometown region to build up modern schools and a university, no longer exists (Wang 1995: 21), Wenyao Zheng's case reveals the contrary. This is precisely why the local community in Wenyao's hometown, refers to him as the "Tan Kah Kee of Yongchun". And Wenyao himself took Tan as his life-long example. Like Tan Kah Kee, he endowed large and regular sums of money to support local schools and finally established an institution of higher learning in his hometown. And he did think of returning to China to live and prepared for this eventuality. The significance of this case reveals a powerful historical influence on the phenomena of the present day and the lasting function of collective memory in this social space, although as time changes, the main theme in this regard may change. For instance, the motivation of the kind shown by Wenyao Zheng may not be suitable for placement in the explanatory framework of Chinese nationalism, patriotism and national salvation issues, but other rational and sentimental factors should be taken into account instead.

While examining how cultural logic and its four relevant elements, namely: the market, the government, network and personal experience (see introduction) function in what Wenyao Zheng did, we can see that personal experience and government are fundamental forces behind Wenyao's decision making. His long-term struggle between having to live in poverty and yet being driven by his ambition to stand out above his fellows forged his impulse to devote part of his wealth to establishing a modern college in the hometown country. The great attention paid by and the encouraging gestures made by the Yongchun government accelerated the realization of those projects.
The case of Xingzhong Zheng case in Chapter 4 expresses in more detail the complicated nature of current transnational activities. Following his father’s example, he began by contributing his family house built by his father to the Zheng lineage. Later, however, grasping the opportunity offered by the regional market economic development of China, he turned the old and static donated house property into a new dynamic profit-generating object and ran it as a sort of enterprise. Therefore he created a financial and power resource for his trans-national undertaking.

It is exactly this novel way of operating a donated project that causes conflicts among Zheng lineage members in this transnational space. Hence this case provides us with an arena where activities have been conducted combining traditional themes with new interests. One can see then that donation behaviour should not only be regarded as having taken a conventional form. Accompanying the noble project of undertaking a public welfare enterprise for the lineage, there will always be a train of the different concerns of various factions and individuals. Secondly, this case discloses a scene where conflicts and contradictions within its membership have become more obvious than anytime in the past, even though a restored transnational lineage tie offers as sound basis for the identity and solidarity of the group.

In the processs of Xingzhong Zheng’ s decision making, the factor of the market has played an important role. For a small- or medium-size entrepreneur like Xingzhong Zheng, the opportunity provided by the economic construction of the hometown in China has enabled him to build up a sizeable foundation for charity purposes on a self-generating-interest basis. Xingzhong Zheng’ s personal experience, accumulated in the process of trans-territorial living, has furthermore strengthened his intention to carry on his undertaking in his father’s native place and to live the life of a commuter in the border-crossing space.
Chapter 5 presents a case that is closely related to the ongoing discourse about mobility and flexibility in the era of late capitalism. Scholars have paid increasing attention to the theme of Chinese transnational strategies of capital accumulation (Limlingan 1986, Clegg. S. & Redding 1990, Ong 1997, 1999). The delineation of Jingxing Zheng's case will show firstly, what triggers a Southeast Asian Chinese entrepreneur to take the decision to invest in China. Secondly, what transnational strategies adopted by overseas Chinese capitalists in terms of investing in the newly opened market economy of China does it reveal and what kind of network ties have been woven? Thirdly, what kind of experience has resulted from the articulations and struggles between capitalist forces and local communities?

In terms of the cultural logic behind actor's action, the case presented in Chapter 5 tries to give a full picture demonstrating that how the four elements: the market, the government, networks and personal experience interweave together and influence the operation of transnational entrepreneurship.