Transnational Social Practice from Below: The Experiences of a Chinese Lineage
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Conclusion:

The Cultural Logic of Southeast Asian Chinese Transnational Social Practice

The migration from the southeastern coastal area of China to Southeast Asia is a social phenomenon which as lasted as long as a thousand years. The study on this migration movement and of the migrant groups first emerged about a century ago. Keeping step with the transformations in the international political and economic fields, the focus and discourse of the study have varied from period to period. In my opinion a re-examination of the study yields three basic problems. First of all, as a research subject, the Chinese migrants have been treated as two discrete objects: they were seen either only in the context of host society or they were immutably fixed in the sending area. Researchers of the former have almost all been from Western backgrounds. They have focused on the Chinese migrant communities in the receiving countries, discussing questions referring to the social organization, economic institutions and cultural customs as well as turning their attention to assimilation and amalgamation (De Groot 1896; Day 1904; Hoi 1913; Vileming 1926; Cator 1936; Purcell 1965; Barton 1983). The latter, who are basically Chinese scholars, have devoted themselves principally to the issue of the social impact the Chinese migrants had on their area of origin (Chen 1938; Wu 1937, 1938, Lin and Zhuang 1985, 1989; Lin 1994). A second, very pertinent problem which skews the issue is that the studies on Chinese contemporary transnational activities tend to regard them merely as a direct product of the accelerated process of globalisation. Such a view overlooks the historical base which is an ineluctable part of transnational practices (Lever-Tracy, David Ip and Noel Tracy 1996).
The third fly in the ointment with regard to the choosing of this object of study is that most research has stressed the pursuit of economic profit by the actors. The upshot is that they neglect the diversified subjectivities of migrants.

Having identified these flaws, this dissertation tries to break through above-mentioned limitations. The first step towards breaking down this impasse is to try to locate the study subject in a trans-territorial context which geographically speaking takes south Fujian as one end and Malaysia as the other, covering the intervening area of South China Sea. Analogous to this geographical space is a transnational social space. Against this geographical background, we discuss such questions as: How has an imagined community been pursuing border-crossing social practices? What is Chinese transnationalism from below? What is the connection between it and Chinese modernity?

The second step is a historical one. To investigate this historical dimension, this study chose a lineage as the object of its case-study. Cogently this lineage has had at least a hundred-year history of trans-territorial migration and experience of border-crossing activities. This dissertation intends to demonstrate that Chinese transnationalism is a phenomenon which indubitably is closely linked to globalisation in the late capitalist era but simultaneously is just as ineluctably deeply rooted in Chinese migration history across this area in the colonial and post-colonial period.

The third step transcends the bounds of geographical confinement. Ethnologically speaking, this study does not restrict itself to one particular place. Instead, it has followed the tracks of the principal actors, carrying out the fieldwork by crossing back and forth across borders in the geographical space between Yongchun, the native place/ancestral home of the actors, and various places in Malaysia-Hong Kong- South Fujian, where the protagonists have been moving about,
living and acting. The purpose of this peripatetic fieldwork was not simply to collect fieldwork data however essential, it was also to achieve a closer understanding of the actors' practices and of their own value judgements relevant to these.

More importantly, the purpose of this study is to try to discover the cultural logic that informs and structures the process of transnational practice. In my view, the cultural logic pertains to four key elements, namely, market, social networks, government and personal experience. By drawing a conclusion from the observations made in the previous chapters, this section will discuss some features of the subjects' practices to demonstrate the cultural logic embedded in it in more detail.

When talking of the intensity of current transnational phenomena happening on a global scale, scholars who study Chinese transnationalism tend to focus on Chinese Diaspora business networks or on entrepreneur groups (EAAU 1995; Lever-Tracy, David Ip and Noel Tracy 1996). Others opt to look at similar groups like the international managers and professionals who ride the trans-Pacific shuttles between Hong Kong and the west coast of North America (Aihwa Ong 1999:112-136). Should profit-seeking activities of the business sector be regarded as the only reigning theme of Chinese contemporary transnationalism? In the transnational social space we have been talking about, among the Southeast Asian Chinese quite a considerable number, like the principal figures presented in this study, have thrown themselves into the challenges raised by border-crossing practices with enthusiasm and interest. All the evidence shows that their activities cannot be convincingly classified as being interest-driven from a purely economic point of view. The chief significance of the cases discussed in the study lies in the fact that they unfold aspects of overseas Chinese transnationism, other than profit-oriented activity. The study has confirmed that transnationism is not confined to one single dimension. There are various kinds of
practices and various types of subjects in this regime which should be taken into account in forming a full picture of the truth.

The three principal figures in the text represent three types of contemporary transnational practices in terms of the scope and of content as well as their approach to the way they act. This is despite the fact that the actors face the same background of globalisation and the same institutional environment. All the border-crossing practice of Xingzhong Zheng was confined to affairs intimately concerning the Zheng lineage. It concentrated on the dispute over the property rights to the Jujing Hall, which was built by Xingzhong Zheng’s father in 1930s and rebuilt by Xingzhong Zheng in 1980s. In contrast to Xingzhong, Wenyao Zheng’s major interests did not fall only within the scope of lineage’s affairs; instead, he paid a full attention to contributing to the modernisation in the hometown area, in particular, to educational projects. His educational endowments constituted his major border-crossing activity. The third figure, Jingxing Zheng, is revealed as an entrepreneur who owned an international consortium. He built up a social network beyond the confines of the Zheng lineage and his hometown. His investment and management activities in Yongchun, Fuzhou, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur, carried out on the basis of his social network were the major content of his transnational practice.

The narrative of the border-crossing practices of these three actors suggests that it would not seem to be correct to attribute a profit-driven principle pure and simple as the major motive stimulating Chinese migrants’ transnational undertakings.

As rational beings, it stands to reason that Chinese migrant border-crossing actors invariably follow the operational principles of the market, trying to maximise their interests. In other words, the actors seek to maximise resource utilisation. Here, interests should not be understood merely in a narrow economic sense. Instead, it
should be understood as the satisfaction of the various kinds of needs and requirements of the actors. It includes both material needs, such as waxing prosperity and capital growth, and a more intangible need for power and reputation. Furthermore, the transnational actor intent on maximising his potential makes a judgement about where his interests lie on the basis of the knowledge he has accumulated from his personal experience and as drawing elements of this from the collective memory forged in his historical setting. Here, the historical and current logics meet together and coalesce.

As pointed out in the introduction, Southeast Asian Chinese border-crossing activities are of long standing. Taking the late nineteenth century and 1970s as chronological limits, they can be divided in three phases. The activities of the pioneers appeared only in the second phase, namely from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Virtually throughout the whole duration of the seventy-year-long migration wave, whichever government was in power in China was seeking for ways to introduce economic modernisation and, accordingly, changed its policy toward emigrants. Taken in conjunction with the rise of Southeast Asian Chinese nationalism and the almost co-terminal rapid expansion of European colonial capital in this region, plus the somewhat later effects of the world economic crisis, these factors constructed the set of circumstances in which Chinese migrants developed their early trans-territorial activities.

From a migrant point of view, building up a linkage with the hometown region is the sort of behaviour outstandingly suited to mobilising the already existing social resources in order to survive and develop the newcomers potential in the new place of residence. Against the background of the collective cultural schema already in place, the relationship, first enacted in scattered individual behaviour, developed into a
massive collective and regular means of acting. When the accumulation of the relationship ties reaches a certain degree of intensity, an embryonic form of trans-territorial social space will be formed.

This historical process is demonstrated in Part One, in which we see that the pioneering migrants recruited clansmen and county fellows from the hometown to work on their plantations or in their shops in Malaysia. Hence, slowly but surely a migrating chain connecting Malaya and their hometown in China was built up, as shown in the cases of Meizhang Zheng and Yiyu Zheng. This proves that what Charles Tilly (1990) has referred to as “networks migrate” was popular even in the early Chinese migration movement. It was also true that “the effective units of migration were (and are) neither individuals nor households but sets of people linked by acquaintance, kinship, and work experience” (ibid.: 84). We also see that after establishing a firm foothold, the early migrants immediately set to work to construct an elaborated pattern of living at the two ends in the trans-territorial region. This trans-space framework was typically expressed in the case of Yiyu Zheng and his brother in the running of the Xingdeshun and Xinder Tang. With such evidence on hand, we dare to suggest that “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999) is not a novel invention of contemporary era.

Following up the individual trans-territorial practice, a more concerted collective action came into play. This collective practice was reflected in the emergence of the Zheng Clan Association as well as in its trans-territorial operations, in particular the running the lineage school, the Peng Siong School. The Zheng Clan Association was laid out trans-territorially. It consisted of two sets: one in the receiving country; the other in the origin area. Pertinently it operated under a unified leadership, a committee composed of the successful pioneering migrants in Malaya. The social practice thus
organized provided the collective Zheng with a resource for drawing social capital and this transformation laid a solid cornerstone in the embryonic form of the social space. This type of trans-territorial clan organisation has not yet aroused enough scholarly attention. The past studies on Chinese migrant associations have focused almost exclusively on aspects such as the emergence and development of clan and similar organisations in the receiving countries (Camba 1966; Shi 1985; Xie 1985; Wickberg 1988; Song 1995). Now the time has come to investigate how Chinese migrants constructed their social networks on the basis of extended family and regional ties in much greater depth. It was precisely through these kinds of activities that Southeast Asian Chinese, as exemplified by Zheng migrants, gradually found themselves in a position to establish their pattern of routine border-crossing activities, which cultivated both their practical consciousness and collective memory by the repetition of practices to a heightened degree. This is the way the historical roots of transnational social practice were built up.

Since Malaysian Zhengs began to reactivate their border-crossing activities in the late 1970s, even in the new environment of the late capitalist era, the historical roots are still clearly discernible. This is not to say that the influence of late capitalism is not also unmistakably imprinted on their patterns of behaviour. In the three cases discussed in Part Two, which stand as exemplars of the various types of contemporary transnational practices, we can observe how Wenyao Zheng indulged his imaginary identification with the hometown and pursued the collective memory of “education above all else”; how Xingzhong Zheng followed in the footsteps of his father, donated his family house to the lineage and established an educational foundation for the Peng Siong School; how Jingxing Zheng carried his father’s promise even further and contributed a grand gymnasiu m to the hometown county. On the other had, we can
also see how Xingzhong Zheng took the opportunity to re-invest in the family residential property as well as how he revealed his flexibility in negotiations and displayed his accumulated acumen in the process of dealing with the issue of the residential property, thereby maximising the resource utilization at his disposal. Such an examination also cogently reveals how Jingxing Zheng mobilised the global flow of capital, technology, information and commodities and established the Wanma Group, an international enterprise in which international capital from Japan, Malaysia and China is invested. This demonstrates a combination of behaviour which closely imitates that of the trans-territorial pioneers, indicating a historical extension of early border-crossing social practice combined with the pursuit of the maximisation of individual interests that reflects contemporary business practice. This demonstrates a manifold and complex cultural logic.

In the context in which contemporary Southeast Asian Chinese transnational practices are embedded, local government in China has been a crucial factor. As far as the relationship between transnationalism and government is concerned, a popular view tends to celebrate the liberating character of transnationalism (Guarnizo and Smith 1998). The view places an emphasis on transnational migrant practice as being opposed to the state. Transnational practice is seen a subversive power niggling away from below so that the government’s controlling power is consequently enormously weakened. In their criticism of the totalising emancipatory character of the tendency, Smith and Guarnizo declare that “While transnational practices and hybrid identities are indeed potentially counter-hegemonic, they are by no means always resistant” and that the sending states have a tendency to try to “incorporate their ‘nationals’ abroad into both their national market and their national polity” (1998). This study takes the latter argument further. Government, in my view, is not an external factor, but an
active participant in the transnational space. The research makes it abundantly clear that a distinction should be made between the Central State and local government, as the state is not a homogeneous entity. In this study, the participation of the local government in the transnational social space vividly reveals the process of reworking of "multiple modernity". In Yongchun and Fujian, the local governments are noted for their efficient mobilisation of their fundamental resources, including authoritative and allocated resources. They achieve this by establishing and formulating institutions and policies which are designed to provide conditions conducive to such a mobilisation and to create a good environment in which to divide up and guide the potential field for transnational migrants' actions. Besides this facilitation, the local governments also make use of traditional social sources, such as family feelings, personal networks and folk beliefs to satisfy the migrants' requirement of acquiring a social reputation, position, and power. Among the various means the local governments have used, the strategy of forging an identity out of regionalism is highly significant. By correcting out-dated, mistaken policy, by stepping out to make face-to-face contact with migrant communities in efforts to cultivate and nurture hometown fellow feelings and to promote the collective memory, by inventing a new local colour culture, a regional identity is being re-created and strengthened. The efforts of the local governments are bearing fruit. To a great extent, the migrants' practices have been channelled into the project of rebuilding localisation. This revelation of the interaction between the transnational actors and the local governments in part Three will help us to understand the cultural logic behind what is happening much more clearly.

What is impressive is that local government policies and practices bear an unmistakable resemblance to those of the government of China in the late nineteenth century. Such similarities can be seen in the emphasis placed on overseas Chinese
associations, the provision of favourable conditions for investment and the rewarding of donors with fame and prestige, as well as in the sending of official delegations to visit Southeast Asian Chinese communities and so on and so forth. Indubitably, this resemblance cannot be facilely understood as a simple repetition of history. Its significance is now embedded in what Aihwa Ong has designated “alternative Chinese modernity”.

Reading the trans-territorial social networks connecting China and Southeast Asia, in which Chinese migrant practices are embedded, precisely is another key link by which we can broaden our understanding of the cultural logic. Studying Chinese social networks has become popular in the last two decades. But, because of the abuse of the concept, Chinese network theory runs the risk of becoming an empty conceptual vessel. Questions have also to be asked about why Guanxi, a fundamental element of Chinese social network, has so often been described as a conventional and static attribute of Chinese society. Bearing this pertinent question in mind, this study tries to reveal the social network in which the actors embedded as a reified picture, illustrating what kinds of social relations the Zheng migrants have constructed. The logical consequence is then to ask: how do the actors operate their networks?

With regard to social network, this study raises an issue of middleman which has not yet been paid any attention in the discussion of transnational practice studies. Middlemen form a group of transnational agents. Their function in the Zheng transnational networks shows that they are one indispensable component in transnational migrant practices. Portes’ network theory is relevant to this question. He develops Granovetter’s idea (1985, 1992) about “embeddedness” and suggests two concepts. One is “relational embeddedness”, which involves actors’ personal relations with one another. The second concept, structural embeddedness, refers to different