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

One of the most important aspects of contemporary forms of globalization is what is discussed under the rubric of transnationalism, especially in its manifestation of transnational migration. Scholars have understood current forms of transnationalism as direct products of the accelerated process of globalisation. Moreover, many authors emphasize the instrumental (economic and political) dimension in the study of transnationalism. This dissertation tries to break away from this trend in contemporary scholarship by focusing on the transnational social practices conducted by Chinese migrants between Mainland China and Southeast Asian region in the past three decades. This study demonstrates that, while Chinese transnationalism is a phenomenon that is closely linked to globalisation in the late capitalist era, it is, at the same time, deeply rooted in the history of Chinese migration across this area in the colonial and post-colonial periods. The purpose of this study is to discover the cultural logic that informs and structures transnational practices over a longer period.

The dissertation chooses a lineage as the object of its extended case study. The lineage, originated from Yongchun County of China refers to itself as Peng Siong Zheng, or Zheng in short. In the process of migration over a period of a century, this lineage is basically residing in two different areas: in four villages in Yongchun County and in Malaysia. Together they number over thirty thousand people. The lineage has kept a good family record that goes back to 1360 AD. The dissertation combines ethnographic and historical methods. Lineage documents and local archives were consulted and fieldwork in China and Malaysia was conducted from February 1999 to May 2000. The circulation of people and resources between these two areas over a long period has constructed a translocal space that changes along with transformations in the political and economic context. By narrating the transnational
practices of members of the Zheng lineage this dissertation intends to uncover the cultural logic behind them.

This study shows that the cultural logic can be analysed in four constitutive elements: government, market, social network and personal experience. The interactions of these four elements lead to three perspectives to understand the Zheng lineage’s transnational activities. Firstly, as rational beings, migrants always direct transnational practice towards maximizing of resource utilization. But in practice, what the actor actually can do, and in fact whether or not he can reach his goals depends on the conditions constituted by interactions of several elements: institutions and policies designed by the relevant governments; social networks; market operating space; as well as the reflexive self-regulation of the actor.

Secondly, aiming at maximizing resource utilization, actions must follow a certain pattern. In other words, it is a routine. The routine is developed by the repeating of practice and thus constitutes what Bourdieu call ‘habitus’ and what Giddens calls “practical consciousness”.

Thirdly, transnational social practices are always conducted through networks and follow certain regulations. This can be understood as the “structure” of social practice. Middlemen are situated in the structure and play their roles accordingly.

This study applies the above three perspectives to examine the concrete process of transnational social practices since the late 1970s. The historical and cultural roots of this process connect colonial and post-colonial periods. Part One of the dissertation presents a general picture of Zheng migration, geographically and historically. Part Two presents in Chapter 3, 4, and 5 three case studies that exemplify different modalities of the cultural logic behind transnational activities. Part Three analyses the role of local government and middlemen in the unfolding of transnational practices.
As a singular extended case study this dissertation is limited, but it may be able to shed new light on the discussion of transnationalism. This dissertation shows that lineages have been important features of the social organization of transnational migration for a long time and continue to be so in the present era of increased globalisation. These lineages can be studied as networks in which social capital is a crucial resource.