

Coming Home to a Foreign Country: Xiamen and Returned Overseas Chinese, 1843-1938. Ong Soon Keong. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. xiv + 226 pp. \$65. Hardcover ISBN-13: 9781501756184.

As an hourglass funnels sand from the top, through its waist, to the bottom, and when turned over shifts that same sand back, Ong Soon Keong portrays the coastal Chinese city of Xiamen as a middle ground funneling people from Fujian to Southeast Asia and back again. Much of the scholarship on Overseas Chinese and emigration/immigration has focused on the adopted homelands, where migrants eventually settled, or ancestral homes from whence they or their forefathers once departed. Ong's study suggests that such a focus obscures the important middle—the hourglass's waist. Borrowing Elizabeth Sinn's analysis of Hong Kong, Ong presents Xiamen as an “in-between” space which provided emigrants with opportunities and services and was transformed in the process.

The book, divided into six thematic chapters, as well as an introduction and conclusion, is a well-researched and enjoyable read of an important port city that has not received the same amount of scholarly attention as other large Chinese coastal cities, such as Shanghai, Tianjin, or Guangzhou. This is somewhat understandable, as Ong explains that despite early interest in Xiamen as a potential major trading port, significant foreign trade in the city never materialized nor did it become an influential manufacturing city. The goods that were produced in the region and shipped through Xiamen, such as vermicelli, dried fruits, paper umbrellas, and tobacco, did not have strong appeal in Western markets, but instead targeted Chinese living in Southeast Asia.

More important than the goods that travelled through the port, however, were the people. The sharp decline in trade in products, such as opium and tea, in the final decades of the Qing dynasty is in stark contrast to the continual growth in the number of people transiting through Xiamen to and from Southeast Asia. More than serving as a *qiaoxiang*, or native home for Overseas Chinese, Ong shows how Xiamen served as a “migration hub,” attracting people from surrounding regions and channeling them to port cities in the “South Seas.” Therefore, discussion of Manila, Batavia, and Taiwan, as found in the early chapters of the book, is integral to understanding Xiamen and helps paint emigration as a dynamic process with layered back-and-forth interactions.

Transit through Xiamen gave birth to ancillary entrepreneurial opportunities, several of which are discussed by Ong. Headmen recruited fellow villagers to take jobs abroad and arranged for domestic travel and lodging in Xiamen. Tickets for ocean vessels were often brokered through several middlemen, each taking a small cut. Even transport by oarsmen from emigrant inns lining Xiamen's harbor to large steamers was highly organized to maximize profits from the industry of emigration. After going abroad, emigrants relied on a variety of methods to transfer earnings back to relatives in China. Banks and postal offices, as well as less official remittance services, marketed their products to fill this niche. Xiamen, then, became a nexus not only for emigrants, but also for services connected to the process of emigration and (potential) return.

The city also became a place of preferred residence for many of the emigrants who returned to China. Many of these returned emigrants employed fluid notions of nationality, emphasizing

foreign citizenship when it proved advantageous, for instance to receive tax breaks or impunity from the law, but also stressing their Chinese identity when beneficial. The relative stability, convenience, and modern amenities found in urban Xiamen were much more appealing than rural or interior ancestral villages. The influx of wealth and human capital from returned emigrants with diverse experiences in Southeast Asia transformed Xiamen. This was particularly apparent on the small island of Gulangyu where many of the mansions built in the first decades of the twentieth century by returned Overseas Chinese are still standing today. As one of two “international settlements” in China (the other being in Shanghai), during the first half of the twentieth century constructing a large home or other investment on the island was seen as safe, and modern amenities, such as running water, electricity, and representative forms of governance, were more in line with what many returned emigrants experienced abroad.

Ong relies on a variety of sources, both in English and Chinese, including local newspaper accounts and publications, American consular dispatches, and maritime customs reports, but is particularly strong at succinctly summarizing primary and secondary writings in a way that is closely connected to his major arguments. Throughout the book, Ong effectively dialogues with existing scholarship while pushing theoretical boundaries in new directions, but also intersperses narratives on specific figures that give life to the text. For instance, Ong’s discussions of Li Qingquan and Lim Boon Keng, two significant residents of the Xiamen region in the 1920s and beyond, successfully reflect the internal identity struggles many Chinese with overseas experience faced, as well as how these experiences helped reshape a modernizing Xiamen.

Ong’s portrayal of Xiamen is transformational in multiple ways. For one, it problematizes the geopolitical framing of “China” as bounded by the contemporary borders of the mainland. Secondly, by showing Xiamen to be neither ancestral hometown nor foreign residence, Ong interrogates the idea of “home” and how this has been presented by previous scholars of Overseas Chinese. Much of this scholarship emphasizes the continual connection between emigrants and their ancestral homes to the point that enclaves abroad were extensions of Chinese villages. Ong pushes back, arguing forcefully that emigrants left their homes and were changed in the process. Finally, the story of modernization in Xiamen challenges the predominant role of Westerners found in many narratives on China’s late Qing and Republic eras. Ong’s research highlights how notions of modernity were filtered through Chinese emigrant experiences in Western-influenced cities of Southeast Asia and introduced into China in a hybrid way. The China-centered telling of the early twentieth century history of Xiamen is an important corrective to our understanding of Chinese modernization.

Overall, this is an excellent historical account of the role of emigrants in the making of Xiamen and is presented in a readable and theoretically important volume. The narrow focus on the city of Xiamen makes the book more appropriate for graduate students and scholars of emigration/immigration and the Chinese diaspora.

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