

2009 FEATURE ARTICLE

THE SEA AS PADDY: THE MAKING OF FUJIAN AS A TRANSNATIONAL PLACE

Jessica Chong, Vassar College

Since the 1980s, Fujian province in China has been known as the main source of Chinese illegal migrants in the United States. In recent years, Fujianese immigrants' destinations have become increasingly varied, with some embarking on transnational entrepreneurial activities in Africa. While most narratives about Fujianese migration sensationalize the role of human smugglers and use economic theory to try to make sense of this large-scale movement of people, this paper emphasizes that Fujianese transnationalism has had at least 500 years of history. Through fieldwork in Fujian and documental research, this paper shows that a long historical perspective is needed to explain why Fujian is a transnational hub with a vast and dynamic global reach.

In June of 1993, a ship named the *Golden Venture* ran aground on Rockaway Beach in Queens, New York. The ship carried 286 illegal Chinese migrants, mostly from Fujian province. Passengers evacuated the ship and tried to swim through frigid waters to shore; sadly, ten drowned. Televisions across the country broadcasted dramatic images of Coast Guard members dragging the Chinese migrants to safety. Shivering, naked, and dwarfed by their rescuers, some clung to small grocery bags that held their belongings.¹ This incident fit neatly into the stereotypical image of impoverished people from the “third world” coming to the “promised land” in search of the “American dream,” effectively crystallizing what Americans thought about Chinese migrants. Media coverage of the *Golden Venture* also fanned the flames of resentment toward snakeheads, the notorious human smugglers generally depicted as indifferent and cruel profiteers who treat humans as cargo.²

Today, Fujianese migrants account for forty-three percent of illegal Chinese migration. But Fujianese migration is much more than a story of snakeheads and desperate migrants. Nearly fifteen years after the *Golden Venture* incident, I found myself in Xishancun, my father's ancestral village in Fuqing County, where most of the *Golden Venture* migrants had originated. The people in the village were not as impoverished as they appeared in the media, and their migration trajectories were not singularly motivated by desperation and necessity. Furthermore, the villagers had mobilized their social capital to move to places as far-flung as South Africa, Leso-

¹ Paul J. Smith, “Chinese Migrant Trafficking: A Global Challenge.” *Human Smuggling: Chinese Migrant Trafficking and the Challenge to America's Immigration Tradition*. ed. Paul J. Smith. (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1997).

² Peter Kwong, *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor*. New York: New Press (1998).

tho, and Nigeria to pursue opportunity. Their destinations were not confined to the “promised land” of the United States; for centuries, sizeable populations of ethnic Fujianese have lived in Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia.³

In fact, Xishancun had been literally emptied of young people. Over the last decade or so, many Xishancun villages had migrated to countries in Africa on family support, opening shops of their own. With the remittances that these entrepreneurs sent home, their families had built opulent four or five-storey houses in Xishancun. The buzz was thick in the humid July air: Africa had become *the* place to go.

In recent years, scholars have tried to understand Fujianese migration using several conventional theories, some of which provide better explanations than others. The theory of cumulative causation stipulates, for instance, that migration sustains itself by creating *more* migration, forming what Massey describes as “migration networks.”⁴ These networks link previous migrants in a particular destination to potential migrants in their communities of origin. In Fujian, these migration networks were even arguably native to the social structure.

Pieke, Frank, and Thuno believe that “emigration from [Fujian] is strongly embedded in local political, sociocultural and economic institutions and histories.”⁵ In order to move away from the Eurocentric vantage point, they use the term “Chinese globalization,” which they conceptualize as “multiple, transnational social spaces straddling and embedded in diversifying smaller regional or national systems[...] and, on the other hand[...] part of a unifying global system.”⁶ They also note that migration is “as much about the details of local places and communities as it is about the networks and connections linking these places to a transnational social space.”⁷ These are important insights.

Other theories, however, are less effective. The economics-based neoclassical migration theory maintains that individuals choose to emigrate based on income differentials, moving from low-wage countries to high-wage countries.⁸ Unfortunately, this theory fails to explain both the recent Fujianese migration to countries whose currencies have less purchasing power than the Chinese renminbi (RMB) and the observations that economic development tends to actually *increase* the impetus for emigration.⁹ Meanwhile, proponents of the world systems theory suggest that transnational migration is a result of industrialization in China’s reform period, a product of “Western capitalism,” wherein farmers have been forced from their land and the

3 Smuggling of US-bound Chinese growing in Peru. *The Taipei Times*, Feb 21 2007 (3).

4 Douglas Massey, et al, *Worlds in Motion: International Migration at the End of the Millennium*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

5 Frank Pieke and Mette Thuno. “Institutionalizing Recent Rural Emigration from China to Europe: New Transnational Villages in Fujian.” *International Migration Review* 39, no. 2 (2005): 485.

6 Frank Pieke, et al, *Transnational Chinese: Fujianese Migrants in Europe*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 11.

7 *Ibid.*, 6.

8 Douglas Massey, et al, “Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal.” *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 3 (1993): 431-466.

9 Douglas Massey, “Economic Development and International Migration in Comparative Perspective.” *Population and Development Review* 14, no. 4 (1988): 383-413.

increased competition for factory jobs has become an impetus for emigration.¹⁰ This argument, however, fails to take into account the long history of the Fujianese transnational experience, which goes back several centuries.

Indeed, while Pieke, Frank, and Thuno provide a critical foundation for understanding the composition of the transnational social space, the historical creation of this transnational social space is sadly under-theorized within their work. Thus, my own research is guided by the question of how past Fujianese migrations and current Fujianese migrations are linked. In this paper, I argue that Fujian's history contributes to the "embeddedness" of transnationalism in its people. While I do not wish to paint Fujianese emigration as a uniform phenomenon, I argue that it has been sustained over the centuries in three main ways: one, it has been largely entrepreneurial in nature; two, it has occurred outside of official control; and three, it is sustained by regional and kinship networks. In doing so, I hope to establish the local context for Fujianese migration, both in terms of history and institutions.

This paper is primarily informed through documentary research and my own fieldwork in Xishancun village, Fuqing County, Fujian province. With regard to Fujian's maritime history, I draw on Carolyn Cartier, who argues that the South China Coast is a "historic maritime cultural economy whose conditions in many ways challenged the orthodoxies of agrarian Han society."¹¹ She also argues for the importance of regional identity in China.¹² Wang Gungwu provides much of the historical background on Hokkien merchants.¹³ Both Cartier and Wang emphasize the "otherness" of southern China and particularly Fujian, and how this has been conducive to an entrepreneurial spirit.

In the next section, I discuss the historical background of Fujian with an emphasis on its entrepreneurial maritime activities and the beginnings of Fujian's transnational existence. In particular, I look at tribute trade and the growth of private (illegal) trade—or commercial trade—in Fujian. I also examine why these trade networks emerged in Fujian rather than elsewhere. In the third chapter, I discuss the origins of Fujianese transnationalism in Southeast Asia. In the fourth chapter, I discuss social practices in the village of Xishancun, particularly as they relate to contemporary China and "Chinese globalization." I look at the mechanisms that facilitate their transnational trajectories to such varied places. Finally, in the conclusion, I begin to explore how this project is related to the broader geopolitical climate and provide some commentary about the importance and implications of a long historical perspective.

10 Ko-Lin Chin, *Smuggled Chinese: Clandestine Immigration to the United States*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 16-17.

11 Carolyn Cartier, *Globalizing South China*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 31.

12 *Ibid.*, 38.

13 Gungwu Wang, *China and the Overseas Chinese*. (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992). The term "Hokkien" refers to one of the dialects spoken in the Fujian region, and it is the Min Nan word for Fujian. Older works also refer to Fujian as "Fukien." "Fujian" is the standardized pinyin version and is widely used today.

THE SEA AS PADDY

Mounds of discarded oyster shells dot the paths in Xishancun. Today, oysters are farmed by men in waters about half an hour away by motorcycle. Once the oysters are hauled back to the village, women spend their days shelling them in the shade. These oysters are a small piece of evidence of Fujian's long maritime history, and are emblematic of the Chinese adage that the "sea is paddy to the Fujianese."¹⁴ In this chapter I discuss Fujian's geography and the beginnings of its trade history, the importance of Zheng He and his legacy, and the origins of an overseas Chinese trade network dominated by the Fujianese.

Located on China's southeast coast, Fujian is encircled by mountains and girded by seas (*jinsban dahai*, 近山达海).¹⁵ Roughly ninety-five percent of Fujian's total area is occupied by mountains, while the remaining area consists of generally infertile coastal plains and river valleys. Only eight percent of Fujian, including terrace farms on mountains, is arable.¹⁶ Before the arrival of Han Chinese settlers from the north, the Fujian region was inhabited by indigenous peoples, who likely lived in the mountains and depended on hunting and gathering for subsistence. It was during the fall of the Han dynasty in the late second century that many Chinese flooded to the south from the north—not because it was a prosperous region, but because it provided "refuge from chaos."¹⁷ Overpopulation on limited and infertile lands has been a recurrent theme in the province's history. It was natural, therefore, that the Fujianese turned the sea into a paddy.

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the Fujianese city of Quanzhou became a major port for foreign merchants, supplanting Guangdong province's hub of Guangzhou as the empire's largest port. Quanzhou boasted connections to Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, the Arabian Peninsula and even the coast of Africa. Marco Polo and Ibn Battatu are said to have remarked that it was the greatest port in the world.¹⁸ While Fujianese merchants were able to develop their maritime skills in a "relatively free, officially backed trading atmosphere" during this period, this policy changed with the fall of the Yuan.¹⁹ At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Emperor Hongwu banned private trade as part of a policy of isolation aimed at self-sufficiency, while allowing the continuation of tribute trade under which mutual gifts were exchanged for no commercial gain. It was in this context that Zheng He embarked on his seven famous voyages between 1405 and 1433. It is widely assumed that Zheng He's voyages were for the sole purpose of exploration, but at least one historian, Edward Dreyer argues otherwise. During the first voyage, Zheng He's armada, boasting 27,000 "mostly military personnel," destroyed a Palembang-based fleet of pirate ships which had been preying on

14 Lynn Pan, *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*. (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1999), 30.

15 Ibid.

16 Hugh R. Clark, *Community, Trade, and Networks: Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9.

17 Billy K.L. So, *Prosperity, Region, and Institutions in Maritime China: The South Fukien Pattern, 946-1368*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 15.

18 Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 336.

19 Wang, 83.

merchant ships. His fourth voyage took him to Hormuz, the great trading center of its region.²⁰ These events lead Dreyer to suggest that Zheng He's voyages may, in fact, have been commercial in nature.

Whether or not Zheng He's voyages were for trade or exploration, they "educated many more Chinese about the trading opportunities at a time when private trade was being destroyed and future generations of those who were drawn to trade privately overseas were being intimidated."²¹ Additionally, economic growth from newly discovered cash crops, such as hemp, silk, sugarcane, litchi, and cotton²² fostered population growth, straining the land area and leading the Fujianese to turn to the seas for profit. Shipbuilding and navigation techniques improved, and an organized private (and thus illicit) trade network flourished. Moreover, Fujianese merchants recognized growing overseas demand for items like cloth, silk, and pottery and were eager to fill it.²³ Private trade also flourished because of the acquiescence of nearby state officials. As Lynn Pan notes, "many of the mandarins in the southern ports were persuaded to turn a blind eye—how else were people to live?"²⁴ As a result, large numbers of Fujianese merchants migrated all over the globe and started to dominate overseas trade, establishing particularly noteworthy presences in Taiwan and the Philippines.

Even as the Ming state turned inward once again in the mid-fifteenth century, imposing a series of bans on international trade, private sea trade showed few signs of stopping. In 1580, the Spanish Governor-General established a trading post for the Chinese in Alcayceria, Manila, permitting them to settle there permanently. Official Spanish authorization of Chinese settlement aimed to strengthen Spanish wealth; the Spanish wanted the ability to ship fine Chinese goods to the European market via Acapulco.²⁵ The Spanish also saw that they could gain from using established Chinese trading networks, which connected the Malay archipelago, the Indo-Chinese coasts, China, and Japan, and the Fujianese willingness to bring their porcelain and silks to the market. Many Dutch-supported merchant communities also came into being.²⁶ However, the presence of a "well-organized, dynamic, and apparently prosperous alien group" proved at times to be a threat to the Europeans, so measures were taken to control the Chinese populations. In Manila, all Chinese were ordered to live outside the city walls in an area called the Parian and what is now the city's Chinatown.²⁷ Stepping beyond the reach of legally-imposed discrimination, the Spanish also repeatedly massacred the Chinese in Manila, and "a major bloodletting occurred" in

20 Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty*, (New York: Pearson Education, 2007), 31.

21 Gungwu Wang, *China and the Overseas Chinese*, (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992), 85.

22 So, 28-29.

23 Lin Renchuan, "Fukien's Private Sea Trade in the 16th and 17th Centuries," trans. Barend ter Haar, in *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. E.B. Vermeer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 176.

24 Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, (New York: Kodansha America, 1994), 6.

25 Annabelle R. Gambe, *Overseas Chinese Entrepreneurship and Capital Development in Southeast Asia*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 12.

26 Wang, 88.

27 Gambe, 13.

Batavia in 1740.²⁸

Significantly, Ming officials “showed no interest in the Chinese overseas merchant communities, in part because trade and profit-seeking went against the Confucian tenets to which the Chinese polity adhered. Chinese trading abroad were on their own.”²⁹ The entrepreneurship of the Fujianese was distinctly homegrown and sustained by a well-established tradition of social networks.

Why was such a complex and successful system of overseas trade able to emerge out of Fujian? As Cartier notes, “it is important to see China how it sees itself—as a country of regions—and to ask questions about processes that create regional meaning and stitch China together as a coherent whole.”³⁰ Most of the knowledge we have inherited about southern China preserves the worldviews of the Chinese literati, who judged the south China coast in terms of the north. The coast, for example, “was not a landscape of desirability in traditional Chinese imagination,” and in old Chinese maps, the South China Sea was depicted as especially fearsome.³¹ Furthermore, “strangeness about south China has been a type of otherness... that reminded imperial rulers and northern Han Chinese of the extent of the ordered world and the need to secure that world on its margins.”³² Becoming an independent kingdom during the tenth century was also a “major turning point” in Fujian’s history; its cities of Quanzhou and Zhangzhou were in frontier territories, with relative autonomy away from direct interference by court and provincial mandarins.³³ It therefore follows that China’s isolationist policies through the centuries have had a negligible impact on Fujianese commercial activities. As a result, as Wang succinctly put it, the Hokkien comprised “the majority of the overseas traders between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. They were also the most successful.”³⁴

FUJIANESE TRANSNATIONALISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

While China has volumes of historical records, few tell of the people involved in overseas trade, indicating the “low esteem in which traders were held within Confucian society.”³⁵ Yet because of their marginalization, the Fujianese people were able to cultivate what Bert Hoselitz calls “genuine innovations in social behavior.”³⁶ Once in Southeast Asia, the Fujianese engaged in a variety of activities. Some traded rice in the Chaophraya Valley; others were employees of China-based merchants at a port in a Malay trading state. By the nineteenth century, many had become agents for labor

28 Wang, 88.

29 Ibid., 90.

30 Cartier, 38.

31 Ibid., 41.

32 Ibid., 45.

33 Wang, 81.

34 Wang, 97.

35 Leonard Blussé, “The Vicissitudes of Maritime Trade: Letters from the Ocean *Hang* Merchant, Li Kunhe, to the Dutch Authorities in Batavia (1803-08),” in *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 148.

36 Bert F. Hoselitz, “A Sociological Approach to Economic Development,” in *Development and Society*, eds. David Novack and Robert Lekachman, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964), 157.

recruitment from China, revenue farm bosses, and local leaders.³⁷

How were Fujianese entrepreneurial projects sustained through the years? Their success and predominance overseas relied on a kinship-based system of social organization that characterizes Fujianese transnationalism today:

They needed the skills of Hokkien shipbuilders and captains, the capital of wealthy clansmen who had made their fortunes in China's internal trade, and their literati relatives to speak for them and even protect some of their illegal activities. And they needed their families and village networks to provide the personnel. They also had to bribe corrupt officials at home and co-operate with foreign officials and merchants overseas.³⁸

For example, when the British established Singapore as a free port in 1819, many people from the southern villages of Fujian came to take advantage of the tax-free markets, but most of them already had pre-existing connections with relatives who had been trading in the region for decades.³⁹

The term that is most often used to refer to the Chinese overseas is *huaqiao* (华侨), where “*hua*” means Chinese, and “*qiao*” signifies a short-term visitor, or a sojourner.⁴⁰ Eventually, the individual will return home. In effect, the word *huaqiao* has helped to maintain the pretense that the “sojourning” is temporary and unrelated to permanent settlement.⁴¹ Indeed, Redding argues that “many of the Overseas Chinese do genuinely still feel bound to China even after centuries of family settlement elsewhere, and the flow of movements of *nanyang* (南洋, Southeast Asia) visitors to China is enormous.”⁴² Is this so surprising? After all, according to Pan, “an intense preoccupation with origins and identity is typical of people who live on the edge of things, away from the cultural or national center; and Chinese emigrants, whether they ended up in Southeast Asia or America, came overwhelmingly from Fukien and Kwangtung, both peripheral areas.”⁴³

However, “belonging” is not inborn; it is an awareness of one's native region that is sustained through certain institutions, such as dialect and clan links, as well as the building of ancestral halls, temples, and a *huiguan* (会馆, dialect association).⁴⁴ These institutions connect those abroad on the basis of a common origin, but they also serve to facilitate the entry of new transnational migrants. Indeed, for new migrants “access to [the clique of the Straits Chinese] was securable through dialect and clan links.”⁴⁴ Once in their new areas of settlement, Fujianese migrants created what Frost calls “diasporic spaces,” which helped a settler population divided by mutually

37 Wang, 5.
38 Wang, 97.

39 Wang, 167.

40 S Gordon Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993).

41 Wang.

42 Redding, 23.

43 Pan, 12.

44 Mark Ravinder Frost, “Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1914,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (2005): 29-66.

unintelligible dialects to establish “cultural authenticity and political authority.”⁴⁵ For example, temples were important gathering places where settlers could share news, continue their social practices and celebrate their patron deities. Singapore’s oldest Fujianese temple, Thian Hock Keng, is notable for its patron deity Mazu (or Tianhou (天后), meaning “Empress of Heaven”). According to the myth, Mazu was a fisherman’s daughter who protected fishermen and seafarers.⁴⁶ The temple served as a transit point for new immigrants: upon arrival in Singapore, passengers and crew thanked Mazu for their safe arrival. Other temples celebrated, among others, the god Sam Po (Sanbao), whom Frost hypothesizes as “possibly the deification of the Eunuch admiral [Zheng He], and was worshipped in temples in Java, Singapore and Malaya.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, newly-built diasporic spaces in the home village, such as temples, ancestral halls, and schools constructed with money from ex-villagers serve as visual reminders that a life overseas is one to which to aspire. Indeed, “social practices related to former migration not only celebrate the village’s identity as part of a transnational community, but[...] reaffirm the importance of international migration as the avenue and marker of success, regardless of the actual destination and presence or absence of other villagers there.”⁴⁸ In fieldwork conducted in a village in central Fujian, Pieke and Thuno discovered that ongoing connections with former villagers in Southeast Asia and Japan had a strong influence on current transnational practices, largely informed by “patrilineal ancestor worship and the desire to perpetuate patrilineal kinship ties between villagers and former villagers overseas.”⁴⁹ Of course, over time, many generations of overseas Chinese populations around the world have settled and become nationals and political actors in their countries of residence. As Frost notes, “cultural ties with homelands were often more easily imagined than enjoyed in practice,”⁵⁰ especially during times of political unrest in China. Thus there is a myth-making component to this sense of belonging that is negotiated multi-locally and over time; it is not fixed, static, natural, or given.

FUJIANESE TRANSNATIONALISM DURING CHINESE GLOBALIZATION: CASE STUDIES IN “PERIPHERAL” COUNTRIES

In this section, I draw on my own fieldwork and the empirical research of others to examine the climate surrounding the recent trend toward migration to Africa. I contend that the current emigration climate in Fujian, coupled with China’s foreign policy in Africa, creates the necessary conditions for their movement.

Thinking beyond the constraints of the nation-state

It was never possible to understand Chinese migration to Europe solely

45 Ibid., 40.

46 Ibid., 43.

47 Ibid., 45.

48 Frost, 46.

49 Pieke, 2005, 497.

50 Ibid., 497-408.

at the level of the individual European states... Chinese migrants have always shown scant regard for lines drawn quickly and apparently at random across Asia's European promontory. In that respect, they were Europeans before the Europeans.⁵¹

Fujianese migrants can be said to be truly transnational, as their transnational journey is not guided by the idea of unidirectional migration and permanent settlement. Rather, the core objective is to "generate savings and remittances for the migrant's natal and/or nuclear family."⁵² It is generally understood that most migrants wish to go to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia—traditional migratory destinations. However, the new migration paths out of Xishancun are consistent with Pieke's notion that "Chinese emigration no longer simply is the move to the centers of a world system fully dominated by the West, but is just as much an aspect of the outward extension of a world system centered on China itself."⁵³ In Xishancun, I spoke with three brothers whose lives were deeply enmeshed in current Fujianese transnational practices. The brothers were the wealthiest in the village; they drove cars on newly-paved roads still populated mostly by putt-putt motorcycles. They picked their gold teeth and wore flashy watches. They spoke on cell phones with their wives, who were looking after their grandchildren at home. Furthermore, their children were scattered around the Southern Hemisphere. Each expressed regret that they had not sent their children to Canada, admitting that if Fujianese people had the resources, they would probably send their children to North America. But just because the U.S. and Canada are constructed as first choices doesn't make countries like South Africa and Argentina mere consolation prizes; the brothers were certainly tasting the fruits of success!

Factors that enable Fujianese Migration

China lacks a unified emigration policy "beyond the acknowledgement in the 1985 emigration law that allows Chinese citizens who have legitimate reasons to leave to do just that."⁵⁴ Passports are available to those who have been invited by relatives abroad; after this, it is up to the migrants to either obtain a valid visa themselves, or to hire a smuggler to help them through the process.⁵⁵ However, one cannot privilege the availability of passports too much: after the July 2000 Dover incident,⁵⁶ the Chinese government banned the issuance of passports to any male under 35 years of age in Fuzhou prefecture. However, as was the case during trade bans and isolationist policy, little could be done to stop transmigratory activities. Furthermore, local governments have little incentive to stop emigrants. They tolerate it because of the high volume

51 Benton, viii.

52 Pieke, 2004, 32.

53 Pieke, 2002, 6.

54 *Ibid.*, 20.

55 *Ibid.*, 345.

56 In July 2000, fifty-eight Fujianese migrants, twenty-eight of whom were from Fuqing, were found suffocated in a cargo truck in Dover, England (Pieke 2004).

of remittances. In fact, corruption “has reached dimensions unprecedented during Communist rule and bolsters migrant smuggling in [several] ways.”⁵⁷ Snakeheads (or human smugglers) are also crucial to the process of emigration; they are perceived as professional service providers, a source of information and advice, and a gateway to prosperity. Many migrants use several smugglers to reach their destinations. To migrants, at the end of the day, smuggling is “merely their way to get where they want to go.”⁵⁸

The potential for legal status is another attractive reason for Fujianese migration. The people whom Pieke interviewed were eager to garner legal permanent residence for its perks. After all, this would enable return visits, finding wives, and benefits including salaries and job opportunities, as well as onward migration to other countries through legal means (notably the United States, Japan, or Western Europe). In sum, “permanent residence makes the migrant a real person again, instead of someone merely in transit.”⁵⁹ The children of transmigrants who are growing up in Fujianese villages may wind up benefiting from the rights accorded to, for example, Argentinean citizens. Therefore, while reaching their destination country often involves illegal means at one point or another (i.e. using a fake official’s passport, flying in legally on a tourist visa but being smuggled across a border illegally), eventual attainment of legal status is a pragmatic concern of Fujianese transnationals.

Impact of China's policy in Africa on potential transmigrants

In the last ten to fifteen years, China has sought a more active role in the international arena. The push toward active international participation exists in response to fiercely negative Western reactions to the Tiananmen Square massacre; recently, Chinese foreign policy has become “more dynamic, constructive, flexible, and self confident than was the case during the preceding decades.”⁶⁰ Following the backlash to the Tiananmen Square massacre, China shielded Beijing from Western criticism by building coalitions with developing countries. Indeed, after the incident, foreign minister Qian Qichan visited no fewer than fourteen African countries, where China “continues to portray itself as a developing nation.”⁶¹

China’s strategic networking over the past two decades has enabled it to meet an increased need for resources with a boom in Chinese-African trade. By 2006, there were some 700 Chinese enterprises with a total investment of \$1.5 billion in Africa.⁶² China offers low-price export goods such as textiles, clothing, and electronics. China has also become involved through increased aid, debt cancellation, and Sino-African trade. Tull cautions that China’s involvement may prove, economically, to be “mixed at best,” and that the political consequences are “bound to prove deleterious”

57 Hood, 1997, 80.

58 Pieke, 2002,

59 *Ibid.*, 35.

60 Tull 2006, 460.

61 *Ibid.*, 462.

62 *Ibid.*, 464.

as China supports authoritarian governments.⁶³ Regardless, the Chinese penetration into Africa poses a unique opportunity to Fujianese people, as it offers the most affordable migration path.

Xishancun's transnational connections to Africa

Xishancun is a single-surname clan village in Fuqing County, Fujian Province. In the early 1900s, members of the Chong clan immigrated to Singapore; remittances helped to build a primary school, an ancestral hall, and a temple. This kind of family narrative occurred broadly over the Fuqing/Fuzhou area, which sent many of its kin to Southeast Asia. In Xishancun, conditions allow families to grow peanuts, maize, potatoes, rice, and corn. They rent cows from an enterprising man to plough their rice paddies. Only a decade or so ago, there was no plumbing in the village, and only dirt paths upon which to drive. Today, the roads are paved, and houses have flushing toilets. These changes are the result of a combination of state investment as well as remittance payments from the past decade.

For the villagers of Xishancun, migration is a viable and respectable way of making a living. They consider factories jobs beneath them; such employment is reserved for people from rural provinces. Instead, a thriving business supports the mass migration of people. As one villager explained to me, "Someone will say, 'You want to go to Cameroon? Okay, 50,000 RMB!' and then you pay, then go, and open a mini supermarket. Usually your neighbors from home are there, or you have family connections." When asked to justify the dangers of the long journey and of cooperating with snakeheads, villagers scoff. For them, paying smugglers was a wise investment with abundant returns, and Africa had become the cheapest and most profitable place to which to go. Why pay \$70,000 to go to New York, only to wash dishes? In Lesotho Fujianese immigrants can open their own shops and be the boss of others, and pay back all their debts within two years. Even more of an impetus, the journey cost only \$12,000, a fraction of the price.

One villager suggested that one could "try [one's] luck and sneak in somewhere for free, or [one] could invest in a visa and enter legally, which could cost an additional 20,000 RMB." This particular villager has two sons and a daughter. His daughter is in South Africa with her husband, where they own a shop selling clothes, shoes, and strollers imported from China. It cost the villager 25,000 RMB to send his daughter to Johannesburg. There, she was connected to a "superman" who sells things at wholesale prices. They set up their shop in a Chinatown community that had around 40 Chinese-owned shops, according to the villager's estimates. The daughter has lived there for five to six years. In this time, she has given birth to two sons, both of whom live in Xishancun with their grandparents. The journey and arrangements were financed with borrowed money; luckily, the woman's father was able to borrow interest-free from relatives. It cost between 500,000 and 600,000 RMB to open the shop. The family made 100,000 RMB in their first year, and by the end of the third

63 Ibid., 459.

year, they had cleared their debts and begun to build a family home on their allotted plot of land in Xishancun.

Three brothers in the same community had all sent their children abroad as well. At the time, it cost 25,000 RMB to go to South Africa, and 80,000 to 90,000 RMB to go to Argentina. The destinations of their other children included Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Lesotho. Brother A has two sons and one daughter, all of whom are in Argentina. His decision to send his children to Argentina was based on the idea that there were “no prospects in China” and the fact that he had connections to Buenos Aires through other villagers who had already migrated. The original journey cost 150,000 RMB for all three children and took thirty hours. They flew from Hong Kong to Bolivia, and then snuck into Argentina. His children have spent eight years in Buenos Aires and now are fluent in Spanish. Currently, his oldest son has three children; two were born in Argentina, and one was born in China. All three are Argentinean citizens. At the time of the interview, the six year old had to go back to renew his passport. The children will have to go back to China every five years if they wish to keep their citizenship.

In Buenos Aires, Brother A's first son owns a mini-supermarket with his wife, employing five or six employees as well as security guards. They live upstairs of the shop and pay about 6000 BA pesos (\$2000 USD) a month in rent. Brother A's second son was a policeman when he lived in China and had the opportunity to go to Canada but refused, to Brother A's chagrin. Now he owns a similar store in a smaller neighborhood in Buenos Aires, paying half in rent. Brother A had hoped that they would go to Canada, where he believed they would face less racial discrimination. But to go to Canada, villagers needed considerable assets before they could borrow. So Argentina it was. It took about two and a half years to make back the initial capital; the extra money was used to build a house in Xishancun. Right now Brother A has one million RMB and is planning to spend it on an apartment in Fuqing city. Brother A's children send their money directly home; none of it is invested in Buenos Aires, where they live simply and frugally in small apartments above or adjacent to their shops. In fact, none of the subjects interviewed had invested in homes abroad.

Brother B's children are scattered all over the world, with one in Argentina, another in Ecuador, and three more in South Africa. He admits, “I'm not sure where they are... I don't know where, I've never been... I don't really care as long as they're making money.” It cost 22,000 RMB to send each of them abroad. They are all married to villagers from Xishancun. Brother B's daughters in South Africa own clothing stores selling the fashions from China. Brother B says, “My children are lucky because I did all the work.” Like Brother A, Brother B expressed regret at not being able to send his children to Canada. His son refused because he was not interested in working his way up in a business; he wanted to be a boss. Brother B has a cousin who lives in Toronto and views life in Canada as something to which to aspire. Even so, his son's refusal was so great (he recalls that his son *sidoubuqu* (死都不去)—“would rather die” than go to Toronto) that nothing could be done. Aware that Canada needs a higher birth rate to sustain its population, Brother B told me, “My dream was to

have my son move to Canada and have lots of children there.”

Brother C’s daughter is in Durban, South Africa. He sent his daughter there in 2003, into a community with a rather substantial Chinese population. According to him, in Durban, “all the Chinese are bosses.” There, his daughter and her husband live with their son. Travelling to Johannesburg to buy stock, they support themselves by selling clothing, shoes, and strollers.

All three brothers had in common the desire to send their children to Canada, but none had the means to do so. Regardless, the migrants have found success in their new destinations. They have amassed considerable wealth in a relatively short period of time, and huge construction projects are under way back home so that they can flaunt their new wealth.

Moving to non-traditional “peripheral” regions is thus not without its perks: with the right connections and some capital, it is relatively easy to open a shop. Another respondent had a son who went to Durban, South Africa; it cost 22,000 RMB in a lump sum to go. The family borrowed from relatives on a 1.5 percent interest. On top of that, it cost 500,000 to 600,000 RMB to open a shop. It took about three years to make back the money; once the debt had cleared, they used the money to build a home in Xishancun. On average, homes cost 500,000 or 600,000 RMB to build, and it’s not strange to see a house that has three and a half floors. The concept of “face” is one that riddles the minds of many villagers of Xishancun. One respondent explained to me that if his neighbor added a floor to his house, then he would do the same.

For the villagers, the elevated status that one might acquire from making it to the Western “center” is undeniable. In that regard, Pieke’s hypothesis that “Chinese emigration no longer simply is the move to the center of a world system fully dominated by the West” actually obscures the powerful pull that Western “center” have on migrants, and the limitations that they face in attaining this goal. Indeed, if they had the choice, capital, and connections, most would be there right now. But Xishancun is a relatively poor village, and the villagers’ transnational networks are anchored in places within reach, representing perhaps only a “step” toward a better life, as one respondent put it. For now, the immediate goal of enriching the family back home has been met.

CONCLUSION

The Implications of a Historical Perspective and Further Directions in Exploring Fujianese and Chinese Transnationalism(s)

In contextualizing and challenging the simplistic model of international migration, which posits that people move from “peripheral” (poor) countries to “core” (rich) countries, we find that current Fujianese transnationalisms in the United States and Africa are part of a much longer history of Fujianese transnationalism that has often been entrepreneurial in nature and has often occurred outside of official sanction. From the beginning, Fujian’s geography, trade-based economy, and ties to Singapore

have created a transnational people. In looking at the life trajectories of the contemporary villagers of Xishancun in Fuqing County, we can see that migration has grown to be an inevitable option. Such a reframing of Fujianese transnationalism is important if we are to understand the factors that contribute to mobility and settlement strategies. Thus we can reimagine Fujianese migrants not as victims at the hands of vicious snakeheads and moneylenders, but as agents who use their knowledge and networking skills to carve out new lives, navigating the potentials of a globalized world.

My concluding thoughts relate my project to the broader geopolitical climate of today. Indeed, as we can see from China's activities in the past decade, China is not a peripheral country any more. But what are the implications of China's growing footprint in Africa, in which Fujianese merchants play a role? As manifestations of Chinese globalization, how might they be interpreted by scholars and by the global community at-large? Are they agents of global capitalism? Can they be divorced from perceptions of China as an encroaching giant? To what extent can and should geographers reconcile the goals of the Chinese government with the continued transmigratory experiences of Fujianese people, and increasingly other Chinese people? As Howard French wrote in *The New York Times*, "Chinese people today look at Africa and see opportunity, promise and a fertile field upon which their energies, mercantile and otherwise, can be given full play."⁶⁴

Indeed, the fear of China's rise as a colonial power is palpable in the mainstream media, particularly as China becomes more prominent in Africa. Yet this continuous scapegoating of China obfuscates the neocolonial and capitalistic projects of the West, both past and present, and the racist tendencies of both governments and mainstream media outlets. In locating the story of Fujianese transnationalism *within* Fujian, I strive to clarify the motives of people who have come to be symbols of China's rise, but who, like anyone, are just trying to make a go at life. It's just that, thanks to five hundred years of sustained history, transnationalism is in their bones.

WORKS CITED

- Abu-Lughod, Janet L. 1989. *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*.
 Benton, Gregor. 1998. Preface. In *The Chinese in Europe*, vii—xi. New York: St. Martin's Press.
 Blussé, Leonard. The Vicissitudes of Maritime Trade: Letters from the Ocean *Hang* Merchant, Li Kunhe, to the Dutch Authorities in Batavia (1803-08). In *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid, 148-163. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
 Cartier, Carolyn. 2001. *Globalizing South China*. Oxford: Blackwell.
 Chin, Ko-Lin. 1999. *Smuggled Chinese: Clandestine Immigration to the United States*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
 Clark, Hugh R. *Community, Trade, and Networks: Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Dreyer, Edward L. 2007. *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty*. New York: Pearson Education.
 French, Howard W. and Lydia Polgreen. 2007. Entrepreneurs from China flourish in Africa. *The New York Times*, Aug

⁶⁴ Howard W. French and Lydia Polgreen. 2007. "Entrepreneurs from China flourish in Africa." *The New York Times*, Aug 18.

18.

- Frost, Mark Ravinder. 2005. *Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1914*. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (1): 29-66.
- Gambe, Annabelle R. 2000. *Overseas Chinese Entrepreneurship and Capital Development in Southeast Asia*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Guest, Kenneth. 2002. Transnational Religious Networks among New York's Fuzhou Immigrants. In *Religion Across Borders: Transnational Immigrant Networks*, ed. Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Chafetz, 149-163. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Hoselitz, Bert F. 1964. A Sociological Approach to Economic Development. In *Development and Society*, ed. David Novack and Robert Lekachman, 157. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Kwong, Peter. 1998. *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor*. New York: New Press.
- Massey, Douglas. 1988. Economic Development and International Migration in Comparative Perspective. *Population and Development Review* 14 (4): 383-413.
- Massey, Douglas, et al. 1993. Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal. *Population and Development Review* 19 (3): 431-466.
- Massey, Douglas, et al. 1998. *Worlds in Motion: International Migration at the End of the Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Menkhoff, Thomas and Solvay Gerke, eds. 2002. *Chinese Entrepreneurship and Asian Business Networks*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Pan, Lynn. 1994. *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*. New York: Kodansha America.
- Pan, Lynn. 1999. *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*. Singapore: Landmark Books.
- Pieke, Frank. 2002. Recent Trends in Chinese Migration to Europe: Fujianese Migration in Perspective. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.
- Pieke, Frank and Mette Thuno. 2005. Institutionalizing Recent Rural Emigration from China to Europe: New Transnational Villages in Fujian. *International Migration Review* 39 (2): 485-514.
- Pieke, Frank et al. 2004. *Transnational Chinese: Fujianese Migrants in Europe*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Redding, S Gordon. 1993. *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Smith, Paul J. 1997. Chinese Migrant Trafficking: A Global Challenge. In *Human Smuggling: Chinese Migrant Trafficking and the Challenge to America's Immigration Tradition*, ed. Paul J. Smith, 1-22. Washington DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Smuggling of US-bound Chinese growing in Peru. Feb 21 2007, p.3. *The Taipei Times*. Feb 21.
- So, Billy K. L. 2000. *Prosperity, Region, and Institutions in Maritime China: The South Fukien Pattern, 946-1368*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- ter Haar, Barend J. 1990. Translation: Lin Renchuan, Fukien's Private Sea Trade in the 16th and 17th Centuries. In *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. E.B. Vermeer, 163-215. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Tull, Denis M. 2006. China's engagement in Africa: scope, significance, and consequences. *Journal of Modern Africa Studies* 44 (3): 459-479.
- Wang, Gungwu. 1992. *China and the Overseas Chinese*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.