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Richard T. Chu

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

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The Chinese Question: Ethnicity, Nation, and Region in and beyond the Philippines

CAROLINE S. HAU

Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2014, ix+379p.

Close observers of Philippine politics and society might have recently come across two newsworthy stories of the year 2014: One was *Forbes* magazine’s list of the 50 richest Filipinos (Brown 2014). A cursory look at the list would reveal that at least half of the individuals listed are Filipinos of Chinese or mixed Chinese descent. Another is a major daily newspaper’s ranking of China “bullying” the Philippines over the disputed reefs in the “West Philippine Sea” (from the vantage point of the Philippines; “South China Seas” for China) as the second most “raging” event of the year (Inquirer.net 2014). As an ethnic minority in the Philippines, the Chinese in the Philippines have

not been subjected—at least in the last half-century—to the same pogrom that the Chinese in neighboring countries in Southeast Asia have experienced, especially those in Malaysia and Indonesia. Nevertheless, their ubiquity in Philippine society, especially in their participation in the Philippine economy, makes them vulnerable to the vicissitudes of geo-political or domestic/regional politics. As tensions between the Philippines and China rise over the ownership of the reefs, the Chinese in the Philippines have been accused of showing more loyalty to China than the Philippines. While many Chinese in the Philippines are already Filipino citizens, or have lived in the country for several generations, they are still seen by many Filipinos as an “Other.” Caroline Hau’s *The Chinese Question* could not have come at a better time when contemporary issues regarding the ethnic relations between the Chinese in the Philippines and the Filipinos, as well as the political and economic relationship between the Philippines and China are being strained due to the political tension over the Scarborough Shoal. Its publication provides readers with an alternative perspective to the Chinese question in the Philippines and in the region.

Through a close reading of “texts” (e.g. films, novels), the book seeks to analyze how the ethnic signifiers “Chinese” and “Chinese mestizo” (and in a related manner, “Filipino”) have changed since Philippine independence in 1946; how different actors engaged in the construction or reinvention of such terms; and what geopolitical events, local conditions, and other factors helped shape the discourses surrounding the “Chinese [and Chinese mestizo] question.”

Chapter One focuses on the 1950s, and describes the conundrum by which people of mixed Chinese-Filipino heritage, known as Chinese mestizos, faced vis-à-vis the citizenship policy of the Philippines, a policy based on the principle of using “blood” to determine national belonging (*jus sanguinis*). Since the Americans colonized the Philippines in the late nineteenth century, the Spanish colonial ethno-legal category of (Chinese) “mestizo” had disappeared. With the construction in the twentieth century of hardened boundaries between who was considered “Filipino” and who was “Chinese,” Chinese mestizos found themselves having to negotiate their bicultural identifications. This can be seen in the characters of the novel *The Sultanate*, particularly in the Chinese mestizo Ric, who, in wanting to prove his loyalty to the Philippines, acts as an informer of Chinese communists. However, because of his “mestizeness,” he can never earn the trust of either other Chinese (who think that he is betraying his own people) or Filipinos (who think Ric is not Filipino). Despite this, the characters still choose to give their loyalty to a country that continues to treat them as an “Other.” Ultimately then, the novel “seeks to define citizenship in ways that go beyond the ascriptive, involuntary aspects of membership in a national community by birth or blood” (p. 85).

As an ally of the “free” world in the 1950s, the Philippines participated in containing communism in Asia. The celebrated case of the arrest and deportation of the Yuyitung brothers, suspected of being communists, opens Chapter Two. During the Cold War era, the question of most countries with a sizable number of Chinese, including the Philippines, was how to protect its citizens from the communist “threat.” But in the 1970s, the relationship of these countries with

China thawed. Furthermore, these countries began to view the “Chinese” not as a threat. Their “Chinese question” turned to how to integrate the Chinese into the national polity, i.e., allowing people of different “cultural” backgrounds to live together in one state without losing the uniqueness of each group. In the Philippines, Marcos implemented the mass naturalization law in 1975, allowing the Chinese to finally become citizens. Hence, movies like *Dragnet* and *Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (This is How We Were, How Are You Doing Now?) portray the Chinese in a more positive light, veering away from earlier movies that tend to associate the Chinese characters with greed and corruption. However, the image of the Chinese “as alien and capitalist” persists in the “Filipino nationalist imagination” (p. 128), as can be seen in *Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanag* (Manila in the Claws of Light). This is the conundrum that has always faced the Chinese in the Philippines (as well as in other countries): the association of the Chinese with capital.

Hau examines the conflation of (Chinese) ethnicity and class in the Philippines by focusing on the spate of kidnappings that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter Three discusses how the kidnappings enforce the stereotype that the Chinese are wealthy people. Historically, the Philippine government has treated the Chinese as a form of commodity. For instance, it has made acquiring citizenship difficult, charging the Chinese exorbitant fees to acquire it. As a result, the connection between the Chinese and money is reinforced. How the kidnappings highlight this tension between citizenship, class, and ethnicity can be seen in Charlson Ong’s fictional story of a Chinese family whose daughter died during a botched attempt to rescue her from her kidnappers. Civic organizations such as *Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran*, whose membership consists mostly of Chinese Filipinos, use the logic of citizenship to advocate justice for the “Chinese” kidnap victims. However, *Kaisa* faces the challenge of dealing with this issue without appearing to be only interested in protecting the “Chinese” (p. 159). Hau argues that a political solution to the kidnaping menace may not be effective unless it is a call to obtain justice for everyone, including Filipinos.

Chapter Four covers the period from World War II to the present, and deals with the “revolutionary cosmopolitanism” of Chinese communists. It analyzes how this kind of cosmopolitanism forces us to rethink notions of nation-ness and national belonging; and how Chinese leftist groups such as the Wha Chi were fitted either within a “nationalist narrative of liberation and/or socialist-regional narrative of amity and cooperation” (p. 179). Specifically, the chapter focuses on *guiqiao* (returned “overseas Chinese”) authors Du Ai and his partner Lin Bin; the anti-Japanese guerilla organization in the Philippines, the Wha Chi; and Du Ai’s novel memorializing the experiences of the Wha Chi. Du Ai’s novel *Fengyu Taipinyang* (Pacific Storms), although partly autobiographic, points to “a degree of interdependence and intimacy between Wha Chi guerrillas and their Filipino counterparts that is unequalled by any existing account of Chinese-Philippine relations” (p. 185). The novel includes interactions of members of the movement with communists from China, Russia, and countries from Southeast Asia, suggesting an alternative to the nation-based notion of “community” (as constituting members with a common “origin”), to a one that is based on a common

destiny, though such membership, consisting of a heterogeneous group of people and created through the bonds of shared lives and experiences, also runs the risks of “betrayal and rejection” (pp. 189–190). Such “revolutionary cosmopolitanism” as exhibited by the characters in the novel “highlights the fact that nationalism is not always or necessarily about boundedness, exclusivity, rivalry, and enmity, but possesses the capacity for openness, linkages, dialogue, bridges, networks, mutuality, reciprocity, complementarity, and friendship” (p. 198). And yet, we see that even the Wha Chi guerillas are constantly being re-imagined by different actors, including the Philippine government, which, in its national goal of integrating the Chinese within the national polity, issued stamps in 1992 featuring different guerilla groups in World War II, including the Wha Chi. Hau points out that many members of the Wha Chi were in fact, non-Filipino citizens.

The next chapter segues into a discussion of the “Chinese question” in the last three decades. In this chapter, Hau demonstrates how a “regional” approach to the study of the Chinese complicates notions of “Chineseness” often couched in “national” and territorially-bound terms. Focusing on the popularity of Chinese-character driven movies in the Philippines (the *Mano Po* movies, *Crying Ladies*) and other similar movies or television shows in Southeast Asia, the chapter shows how the “Chinese question” is better understood within the “specific geopolitical, social, economic, and cultural configurations that have taken root within the historical context of nation-building, capitalist transformation, and the American-mediated regional system in Asia” (p. 241). Such configurations include the rise of China as a regional (and global) power and the success stories of “tiger” economies in East/Southeast Asia (at least until the Asian financial crisis of 1997), and nationalist efforts (supported by some members of the academia) to attribute the success of these economies to “Chinese/Confucian” values and other “Chinese” characteristics. Hence, the movie producers or scriptwriters of such shows tap into such discourses and capitalize the Chinese’ regional connections as well as “ethnicity” to forward their own integrationist agenda. For instance, the first *Mano Po* movie plays on the *Tsinoy* (referring to Chinese Filipinos) identities of the characters to demonstrate that due to their hybridity of being both “Tsino” (Chinese) and “Pinoy” (Filipino), Tsinoyos are constitutively part of Filipino society, identity, and culture, and that their loyalties lie with the Philippines. Vera, the main character of the movie, decides to stay in the Philippines and not migrate to another country even after her family went through the personal tragedy of a family member being kidnapped. But despite some “success” in attempts by certain sectors in Philippine society to push for the integrationist agenda when it comes to the Philippines’ “Chinese question,” the continuing economic inequality and social injustices in the country, coupled with the consistent association of the Chinese with capital, complicate such efforts.

Chapter Six deals with how “families” highlight the complexity and challenges of identity construction or reinvention within the socio-economic and political context of the nation and region. As China becomes a global power, to be “Chinese” presently carries a degree of social status, leading some elite creolized families in Southeast Asia—including those in the Philippines—to

reclaim Chineseness in their heritage. Intermarriages between Chinese and natives are also becoming more commonplace. However, in the Philippines, the increasing blurring of boundaries between what is “Filipino” and what is “Chinese” carries with it some problems. For instance, many Chinese elite families still practice endogamy (p. 259), thereby maintaining the boundaries between the Chinese and the Filipinos. Furthermore, the increased interaction between Chinese elites in the Philippines and those in China or elsewhere, whether through business or personal ties, can be “fraught with ambivalence,” since such couplings have sometimes resulted in political scandals involving graft and corruption (p. 263). Finally, “Chinese” families continue to experience discrimination and injustices, despite having become “Filipino” by citizenship. Such “fraught relationship between family and nation” is explored in Charlson Ong’s *Embarrassment of Riches*, where the main protagonist Jeffrey, a Chinese mestizo who grew up in an outpost of the Philippines named Victorianas, ends up in exile in the Philippines. However, despite being denied citizenship, Jeffrey continues to profess loyalty to the Philippines. Hence, the novel also “asks Filipino readers to experience what it would be like to learn to love a place where one ‘lives’, even when one is unwanted,” an experience, in the age of “large-scale Filipino international migration . . . is no longer unimaginable, but rather, commonplace for Chinese and Filipinos alike” (p. 278).

In the concluding chapter, Hau challenges the ideal of “China” as the site of “Chinese” identification, for she demonstrates that in the last century or so, notions of “racial nationalism” espoused by Chinese nationalists have been influenced by Japanese and British ideas. Furthermore, other countries have invented their own concepts of “Chineseness” from within and/or from the region other than China. Even within China itself, “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces continue to “territorializ(e) and de/reterritorializ(e) China and Chineseness” (p. 309). The contestations of what it means to be “Chinese” can be seen in the two “Chinese” movies *Hero* and *2046*. In *Hero*, the movie producers attempt to “reterritorialize” Chineseness by casting famous Chinese actors from different countries to appear in the movie and speak Mandarin even while this is not the actors’ first language. On the other hand, in *2046*, the characters spoke in different languages to each other, thus “decentering” Mandarin (and by extension, China) as the locus of “Chinese” identification. Hau sums up the chapter, and the whole book, by reiterating the aim of the book, i.e., to point to the reader how the “Chinese Question” can be more broadly understood by analyzing not only attempts by dominant groups to reterritorialize and deterritorialize “China” and “Chineseness” to localize the Chinese and their descendants, but also the efforts of the latter to negotiate the efforts of the former in order to “claim, and base their actions on, commonalities and/or differences with Southeast Asians, *other* ‘Chinese’, and others” (p. 315).

Astutely and incisively written, Hau’s *The Chinese Question* indeed raises important questions. Among these are: How can the Chinese in the Philippines find “acceptance” in the Philippines? How do Filipinos perceive the Chinese Filipinos vis-à-vis China’s “bullying” tactics in relation to the Scarborough Shoal? How does one treat the “Chinese question” in the Philippines without

resorting to a narrow sense of nationalism? But more importantly, the book poses the question to its readers: How does hegemony work within the specific context of the Philippines and the East Asian/Southeast Asian region and in relation to the “Chinese question”? Not one to condone instances of injustices or oppression, both inflicted by others upon the Chinese and by the Chinese upon others, including other Chinese, the author, however, does not propose to offer neat and pat solutions to the questions she raises. Instead, she challenges the reader to understand the “processes” by which “China” and “Chineseness” are constructed/reconstructed, invented/reinvented, negotiated/renegotiated by different actors, and what “capacities, effects, possibilities, and limits structure these processes” as well as the lives of the Chinese and their descendants (p. 315). Hau’s magnificent work grants agency to historical actors and offers its readers a “template” (one that examines the interplay of “ethnicity,” “nation,” and “region”) with which to approach the “Chinese question,” especially in the Philippines—an approach that understands and questions power, fights it when it engenders injustice and oppression, accords respect to differences, and continues to engage it through *theoria* and *praxis*. Moreover, Hau’s work is unique from other influential studies on the “Chinese question” (e.g. McKeown 2001; Ong and Nonini 1997; Siu 2005) on two counts. First, geographically, it focuses specifically on the Philippines and East/Southeast Asia, an important area in the field of Chinese diasporic studies that merits further scholarly attention. Second, by demonstrating how China’s own “Chinese question” is being contested and negotiated, and influenced by “non-Chinese” and other nations in the region, it brings the “Chinese question” to a level that does not privilege “China” and marks it *solely* as the locus of “Chinese” identification. While, as the author points out, such approaches are not novel, the contribution of the book lies in identifying what “patterns of difference” are “historically identified and lived as ‘Chinese’ in China, Southeast Asia, and beyond” (p. 312), that would help explain, for instance, how and why the Chinese in the Philippines (and in the region) have been historically identified with capital, and how they would respond (in different ways) to the dispute in Scarborough Shoal.

As an academic book, *The Chinese Question* is pathbreaking. As a political work, it is radical.

Richard T. Chu

Department of History, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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Born Out of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labor

NICOLE CONSTABLE

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Scholars have theoretically couched late twentieth century and early twenty-first century human migration in terms of metaphors that invoke global fluidity, risk, uncertainty, and the dismantling of previous forms of social relations. Migrants, many of whom remain nameless, are often vilified, lambasted, and treated as second-class citizens along with their children. The label “migrant” often denotes persons who come from outside the body politic and it simultaneously provokes societies to demonize foreignness, associating it with contamination, risk, and anxiety. In Southeast Asia, both the Philippines and Indonesia, have intense histories of migration within the region (and beyond it) to cater to the need for flexible workers. Both nations have sent nurses, care workers, nannies, and domestic workers to Taiwan (Lan 2006), the U.S. (Rodriguez 2010), Europe, and other parts of the world where labor is required to fill gaps in the workforce. Nicole Constable’s book provides a timely addition to the literature on migrants workers living overseas. It offers a very welcome and sensitive ethnography based on her many years of fieldwork in Hong Kong (HK) complimenting other recent ethnographic works that have been carried out (Matthews 2011; Knowles and Harper 2009). It focuses on migrant workers’ everyday experiences and importantly, draws out not only the voices of migrant mothers and men, but also those of the children, an often-neglected group in migration literature.

The book focuses on three issues. Firstly, temporary workers to HK enter as workers (both in regards to their contracts and the obligations placed upon them by states, brokers, and other institutions) but they are never *only* workers. Secondly, legal frameworks, laws, and policies implemented to regulate, control, and manage migrants movement often fail in their aims. And thirdly migrants, especially those who are single mothers, enter into a *migratory cycle of atonement*, a “self-perpetuating, precarious pattern of migration that is often the only route to escape the shame that single motherhood brings to them and their families” (p. xiii). In effect, Constable questions the very heart of the system that controls migrant’s movement and aims to critique current policies in not just HK, but in other regions of the world where similar policies are in place.

Chapter one, “A very tiny problem,” presents the overall thesis of the book and takes a sensitive gendered approach toward the issue of migrant mothers in HK, their reasons to overstay and the implications of doing so. Predominately (but not exclusively) focusing on mothers who work in HK and give birth to children “overseas” as opposed to those who are “left behind,” Constable