

BOOK REVIEW

## *Unsettling Exiles: Chinese Migrants in Hong Kong and the Southern Periphery During the Cold War*

By Angelina Y. Chin. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.  
xiii + 302 pp. \$35.00 (paper)

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doi:10.1017/jch.2024.10

Roman Tam's 1979 Cantonese song "Beneath the Lion Rock" (*shizishan xia* 獅子山下) paints a hopeful portrait of Hong Kong's postwar generation: comrades sharing one boat (*tongzhouren* 同舟人), overcoming tears, hardship, and sadness to "conquer difficulties," "chase their dreams," and, collectively, make Hong Kong what it is today. The song, the opening number to a television series of the same name, evokes a particular narrative about Hong Kong's post-war population, one in which war-torn refugees, through grit and hard work, created a robust collective community and one of the world's most successful economies.

Angelina Chin's new book *Unsettling Exiles* opens with the series *Under the Lion Rock*, explaining how the "Lion Rock Spirit" at the heart of the series reflects what so many believe to be the city's core values. Yet to Chin, the typical migrant's story at the heart of the Lion Rock Spirit is more mythos than truth. Chin's book, instead, tells a Hong Kong story that is "less easily celebrated" (1), one that accounts not only for the willing migrants who are readily accepted by Hong Kong society, but also for the political exiles—the temporary migrants en route to elsewhere, the victims forcibly taken to Hong Kong, the bodies that arrived in Hong Kong dead, and other people rejected by their homes—in essence, those who were not always eager participants in the "Lion Rock Spirit," whether because they did not "desire to settle" or because they were not "permitted to settle" (3). These people, Chin contends, were as central to the making of Hong Kong and its neighbors as the *tongzhouren* about which Roman Tam crooned.

While centered on Hong Kong, her true subject is what she calls the "Southern periphery": the "vast territory at the southern frontier of the PRC beyond its administrative border" (6) that includes Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao, and the waters that surround them. This recentring, she argues, helps to "destabilize the popular perception that Hong Kong was a unique colonial city devoid of regional politics" (7) and to bring Hong Kong's history into conversation with broader regional trajectories. By bringing to light the intersection of histories often portrayed as separate, Chin brings into sharp relief stories and structures that existing insular histories often ignore, but which materially affected the realities of everyday individuals navigating and living in the region.

Together, these two historical correctives—the challenge to the Lion Rock mythos and the recentering of cold war history on the southern periphery—make this book a particularly important addition to the field of Hong Kong history. And its corrective is not just historical, but contemporary. Global commentators, both in the leadup to Great Britain's handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China and today, often use the "Lion Rock Spirit" to drive a wedge between Hong Kong and China, proclaiming that Hong Kong's population has always been a population of "anti-China" willing refugees. Chin powerfully shows that, from the political exiles who were as critical of British colonialism as they were of the Guomindang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to women and children who were taken to Hong Kong reluctantly, sometimes forcibly, there were many Hong Kong residents whose journey was not as straightforward as those global commentators suggest, and who did not come with rosy images of the British colony. Indeed, Chin clearly has her eye on current events throughout the book, as most chapters begin with a tie-in to recent events. This strategy makes a strong statement that the narratives she highlights may be obscured by the Lion Rock Spirit, but are potent nonetheless; they matter deeply to how Hong Kongers imagine not just their past but their future.

Chin's book explores multifaceted migratory experiences within the Southern Periphery in six chapters divided roughly into two parts. The first part, encompassing chapters one through three, analyzes discourses about migration among various powerful institutions, including the KMT, the CCP, the Hong Kong colonial government, the British government, the United States, and the United Nations. Chapter 1 narrates how various stakeholders applied, or refused to apply, the term "refugee" in post-war Hong Kong. Chin argues that the contested nature of what constituted the "Chinese" nation-state and its borders turned the term into a political minefield that disadvantaged migrants were forced to navigate once they arrived. Chapter 2 focuses on the political exiles of the "Third Force," a small but ultimately influential group of Chinese intellectuals who found themselves displaced in Hong Kong as they sought to create support for non-CCP, non-KMT leadership of the Chinese nation-state. By mining their writings, Chin argues that these intellectuals were not simply proxies for the United States government, as they are so often portrayed; rather, they helped build the groundwork for Hong Kong's future democracy movement. Chapter 3 explores the gruesome discourses of the treacherous stories of border crossing via nearby waterways, including alleged victims of kidnapping across Hong Kong's borders, or unfortunate victims of the PRC's Cultural Revolution whose bodies appeared on Hong Kong's coastline. The chapter connects these discourses to broader ideas about how Hong Kongers imagined themselves *vis à vis* a China led by the Chinese Communist Party. Chapters 4 and 5 take an intimate turn, narrating personal stories of several individuals whose experiences were both shaped by, and moved beyond, the discourses and structures discussed in the first three chapters. These chapters are particularly powerful. Making use of in-person interviews and other sources, they represent a "history-from-below" approach that centers individual stories of less-powerful players in historical narratives—an approach Chin has shown mastery of since her first book. Chapter 6 moves to historical memory, showing how histories of borders and migration have shaped how Hong Kongers today think about their city, their identity, and their global position.

Scholars of Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan, will find this book extremely valuable, as will scholars of borders, migration, and the global Cold War. My one quibble is that sometimes the individual chapters, which make fascinating arguments in their own

right, seem somewhat disconnected. Yet, this disconnected structure may better reflect the messy realities of migration and borders in the southern periphery—in other words, there is a good case to be made that a multifaceted pastiche of discourses and experiences gets us much closer to the historical realities of this history than an extremely clear argumentative arc. Overall, this book is a thoughtful and significant addition to Hong Kong history, one that is sure to shape the field in years to come.