

Book Reviews

Forget Chineseness: On the Geopolitics of Cultural Identification

ALLEN CHUN

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Perhaps the most unique aspect of China is the nearly unanimous belief in its uniqueness. Whether viewed as exceptionally good or exceptionally bad, both insiders and outsiders, patriots and dissidents, so-called panda-huggers and dragon-slayers share a common belief that China is uniquely unique. Allen Chun's new book, *Forget Chineseness: On the Geopolitics of Cultural Identification* is a sophisticated and thought-provoking challenge to this received wisdom, pushing readers to radically reassess many of the most basic concepts through which we talk about China today.

The book is divided into four sections, each developing an analysis of communities that could be broadly classified as "Chinese," moving from Taiwan and Hong Kong to the People's Republic, and finally to Singapore and the Chinese diaspora. Developing parallel studies of each of these related yet also distinct societies, Chun turns conventional analyses of Chineseness on their head by taking culture not as a determining and thus explanatory factor, but rather as a dependent variable, constantly shifting in constructed representations resulting from sociopolitical transformations and geopolitics. Rather than culture shaping politics, economics and social processes, Chun instead shows how these various elements shape and continually reshape the idea of culture.

In the first section on Taiwan, three chapters examine in turn representations of tradition in post-war Taiwan, the role of schools in socialization and indeed nationalization, and shifting understandings of multiculturalism in the island nation. Chun shows how the KMT disguised political discourses as eternal cultural realities after 1949, developing a mode of self-representation and citizenship that he memorably labels an Oriental Orientalism. Chun furthermore shows how, ironically, the nationalizing mindset first developed by the KMT has outlasted its founders, living on structurally in the seeming counter-discourse of an ethnically Taiwanese nation-state.

In the second section on Hong Kong, three chapters examine in turn the relationship between "local custom" and colonial culture, the evolution of a contradictorily "cosmopolitan" local identity in the 1980s and 1990s, and the city's subsequent integration into the People's Republic of China post-1997. Chun breaks through the clichés usually employed to discuss history and culture in Hong Kong, tracing the city's development from a battleground between competing nationalisms of the two Cold War Chinas, to a depoliticized and utilitarian free market society, to an increasingly political city with a profoundly ambivalent relationship to its self-declared "motherland." Chun is at his best in the final chapter in this section, "Hong Kong's embrace of the motherland: economy and culture as fictive commodities," a thought-provoking assessment of Hong Kong identity, based on the deceptively simple question of what, if anything, changed in 1997.

Chun closes his discussion of Hong Kong with an analysis of the alliance between big business and the communist regime, and the ways in which this alliance prevents democratization. These analyses naturally open onto the third section of the book, examining the People's Republic of China. In a chapter on the proliferating anthropological literature on *guanxi*, Chun presents perhaps the most revealing articulation of the book's main point: *guanxi* does not need to be exotically rendered in pinyin, as ever more Chinese terms are being exoticized in the anthropological literature. It is, simply, the cultivation of relationships for personal gain. And this strategy, furthermore, is not a timeless nor uniquely Chinese practice that is identical across all "Chinese" communities, as can be seen in contemporary Hong Kong and Taiwanese societies. Rather, the prominence of such instrumental use of relations in the reform-era PRC is the product of socio-political transformations in an emerging capitalist context that made these strategies useful: what we call *guanxi* is then not cultural, but rather fundamentally institutional.

Chun concludes his analysis of the People's Republic with a discussion of "capitalism with PRC characteristics." Against the assumption that marketization would change Chinese politics, Chun shows how a combination of closed nationalist consciousness and free market dynamism contributes to the Party's main goal: self-perpetuation. Chun highlights the fascinating contradictions that emerge from this state of affairs, pointing out, for example, that whereas the market in China is nominally free, access is politically controlled, meaning that the free market can be used to enforce political restrictions. Such analyses have relevance beyond the business world and even far beyond China's borders: the August 2017 controversy over Cambridge University Press's quickly reversed decision to remove articles from this journal on its China site highlight how these trends are also a matter of real concern for international academic work.

Chun closes this collection of essays with a final section on diasporic identity. The final chapter, "The postcolonial alien in us all: Asian studies in the international division of labor" is a particularly provocative and critical analysis of identity politics and identity assumptions in academia. In his afterword, Chun rearticulates his main point that the various processes traced across these communities are not products of a timeless cultural tradition, which Chun calls a fiction. Rather these processes, including even the idea and understanding of "culture," are the products of distinctive geopolitical formations, constantly shifting over time. In order to handle the complex and increasingly relations between the various peoples analysed herein, Chun argues that new contentious geoprismatic strategies are needed, breaking out of the prison houses of history and identity by thinking not only outside the box but indeed "beyond the box" (p. 242).

It is rare that one reads a book that so thoroughly challenges so many commonly held basic assumptions. For this reason, this book evades succinct summarization and is best read carefully, perhaps twice over. Anyone who takes the time to do so will find the way that one talks and thinks about "China" forever changed. I strongly recommend this book for graduate and upper-level undergraduate seminars in both Chinese anthropology and politics: while *Forget Chineseness* is not easy reading, Chun's unique thought exercises are certain to provoke sustained discussion and reflection.

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