
The book ‘Hong Kong Movers and Stayers. Narratives of Family Migration’ brings together the long-term expertise and different research perspectives of three well-known scholars of Hong Kong society. In this work, the authors engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue based on long-term ethnographic and sociological research in Hong Kong. Combining quantitative and qualitative social inquiry, they narrate the experience of transnational migration without building yet another ‘grand theory’ of transnationalism.

The three authors follow the migration plans and predicaments of different Hong Kong-based families for some ten years, starting from just before the 1997 hand over of the former British colony to the People’s Republic of China. The book opens with an introduction to the local context of Hong Kong during this period. The former British colony, then Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China, is sketched out as the quintessential hub, a vital crossroad of transnational business and kin networks whose reach is global. The authors divide their informants into three groups of families, largely defined along lines of class, status and relationship with the territory of Hong Kong.

Part One looks at the ‘Cosmopolitan Emigrants’, wealthy professional and business families who are highly motivated to leave Hong Kong. Although each of these families has a different reason to migrate, their ultimate aims all emerge from a somehow ‘cosmopolitan’ social identity that they associate with pre-1997 Hong Kong and its ‘Western’ connection, rather than with Mainland China. All these prospective migrants have chosen Canada as their destination, and embarked on their migration project in the belief that their entrepreneurial spirit and professional qualities would allow them to thrive in a foreign land of opportunity. The high status these families enjoy made them desirable prospective migrants for the Canadian immigration authorities. After a relatively smooth visa application process, they set foot on Canadian territory. Here, however, they soon realise that accessing leading business and professional circles in their new abode is not quite so easy. ‘The West’ does not prove to be as open and full of chances as they possibly had expected, prompting some of them to transfer the emigration project to their offspring, or to lead fairly
unstable lives as ‘astronauts’, continuously travelling between Hong Kong and Toronto.

The second part of the book focuses on the so-called ‘rooted’, those who perceive their social identity and status as fundamentally tied with Hong Kong-based kin and their economy. Their modest economic status and lack of connections with global institutions suggested that their chances of obtaining a visa for either Canada or the United Kingdom were quite slim. Indeed two families have their applications rejected, while one just decides to stay in Hong Kong and does not apply for a foreign visa. Political views among these informants are quite varied, however they all end up deciding that even after the hand over, Hong Kong might be the best place of residence for them and their kin.

In the third part of the book, the three authors look at ‘working class families’ that end up staying in Hong Kong. For some, the failure to leave is mainly due to their lack of financial means and eligibility for a Western visa. Within this group, however, there are others who are not even interested in leaving. For them, the fact that they were once able to leave their village of origin in Mainland China and settle in Hong Kong implies that they have already ‘made it’. For all these families, kin networks appear to be of crucial importance: not only may kin members help to improve one’s livelihood, but these relations are a fundamental part of one’s social identity. However, for those with dreams of transnational migration, the support of family members abroad is by no means sufficient. Their lack of economic resources and of desirable skills prevents them from reuniting with their relatives.

Summarising, ‘Hong Kong Movers and Stayers. Narratives of Family Migration’ represents an original project within fields like area studies and the study of migrations, and one that can speak to students from a wide range of disciplines. This book shows that a longitudinal approach to social research may allow the grasping of those specificities of time and place that give substantial meaning to choices of leaving or staying. The reader might feel that this concern with the local and the historical is not always matched by an equal effort to question commonly held classifications like class and gender, or discursive categories like ‘family’ or ‘tradition’. Throughout the book, these are then portrayed more often as essential realities rather than discursive production. Even so, this work improves on those theories of transnationalism that in order to embrace a ‘global’ scope, end up relinquishing local realities. Salaff, Wong and Greve’s work remains an important
source for all students interested in transnationalism, migration and diaspora studies, as well as Chinese society in general.

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