

Extinction and Adventures on the Chinese Diasporic Frontier

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*This article examines the discovery and appropriation of the Chinese diaspora in nationalistic and literary discourse in early 20th-century China. The overseas Chinese experience entered into the main field of vision of the Chinese intellectuals at a strategic moment at the turn of the century, when the diasporic frontier was uncovered only to be re-incorporated into the nationalistic imagination. This analysis begins with a look at Liang Qichao's ambivalent attitude toward the overseas Chinese whom he praised as national colonial heroes on the one hand, and denigrated for tarnishing China's image abroad on the other. In the context of national survival and the theory of evolution, Chinese laborers were hailed by some writers as the exception to the rule of extinction of the unfit. This representation was in no small part reinforced by literary and fictional writings about post-apocalyptic societies where the Chinese once again found their proper role of leadership and dominance over other races. After examining the hitherto largely unknown novels and stories on the subject, the discussion ends with an analysis of the 1906 novel, *Icy Mountains and Snowy Seas*, set in the 24th century in a brave new world near the South Pole.*

Discovering Colonial Heroism

IN 1904, THE INFLUENTIAL CHINESE REFORMER Liang Qichao stated the importance of restoring faith in “hero worship” (*chongbai yingxiong* 崇拜英雄) among the “new citizens” he envisioned for modern China. Convinced that China could boast of its own great explorers and settlers on par with those in the West, he unearthed the historical records of eight southern Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia in a short piece in 1904, *Biographies of China's Eight Great Colonial Heroes* (*Zhongguo zhimin bada weiren zhuan* 中国殖民八大伟人传) (Liang 1999a). Though many of Liang's ideas have been considered as indissolubly linked to the building of modern

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citizens and the cultivation of an appropriate national consciousness, his invocation of China's colonial heroes summoned attention to a larger diasporic horizon. The eight heroes, in fact, were not among the great generals or famous figures much commemorated throughout the glorious history of the Chinese empire.¹ Liang resurrected from the pages of dynastic histories the forgotten lives of migrant workers in tin mines, small-time traders, and even bandits from southern China who found their way to the islands of Sumatra and Java. Fiercely defending their rights as recent immigrant settlers, they resorted to violence and bloodshed in order to secure their continual existence in what Liang called "the natural colony of the Chinese race" (*tianran wozu zhi zhimindi* 天然我族之殖民地). For Liang, they displayed a kind of bravery worthy of any western explorer: "Take the eight fine men I just described and find them a match with the figures in western history; if not in Moses, then at least Columbus or [David] Livingston" (Liang 1999a: 1367). Coming across by chance their biographical entries while reading *Ming Dynastic History: Foreign Lands* (*Mingshi: waiguo zhuan* 明史: 外国传), Liang described his surprise, and subsequent anger, fear, shame, and excitement as he rescued from entombment (*zangmai* 葬埋) the history of these otherwise unknown, entrepreneurial individuals.

Liang's complex emotional reaction upon rediscovering China's colonial heroes was invested in an interesting notion of colonial diaspora. Since the 16th century, peasants forced by famines and poverty, or profit-seeking merchants enticed by trade, have formed a well known migratory flow out of southern China. Though their experiences had not given rise to serious intellectual or political concern, the question of overseas Chinese laborers was an important topic in late Qing political and intellectual discussions, as it had become an emotional focal point of nationalistic outrage against western dominance since the Opium War.

Though colonial heroism had not figured prominently in scholarly discussions of Liang's thinking, it underpinned an important change in nationalistic thought. Shifting from anti-colonialism to a celebration of colonialism itself, the development of nationalist rhetoric encompassed a desire for the power of imperialism that threatened its existence in the first place. The recognition of a diasporic frontier, however, altered that circuitry of reproduced power in important ways. Summoned as an extension of, rather than a split from, the goal of nationalism, diaspora was recalled by Liang from oblivion and then reincorporated into the nationalist imagination.

In contrast to the widely reported mistreatment of Chinese laborers in North America and elsewhere at the time, Liang's celebration of overseas Chinese as colonial heroes carried a wider significance hitherto unexamined in existing scholarship. That he was often the leading voice expressing indignation at the abuse and victimization suffered by overseas Chinese made his later move to repatriate them as colonial heroes puzzling.² As though diaspora had always been

part of the intended trajectory of national expansion, Liang's stance on overseas Chinese laborers and immigrants assumed their compatibility with the goal he desired for modern China. The projection of China's exceptionality onto the diasporic frontier presented to the readers the notion that overseas Chinese shared the same goal of extending the frontier of racial dominance.

To explain how this new exuberance in nationalistic colonialism relied on a reinvention of the diasporic frontier, this article first examines the early arguments refuting the evolutionary theory and the widespread sentiment of racial degeneration as the reason for China's decline in the world. The need to rejuvenate the nation in not only spirit but also body drew attention to physical training and the practice of martial arts as a way of regaining the capacity for adventure and exploration of the world which was perceived as the key to western colonial dominance. This brought about a different interpretation of the mistreatment of Chinese laborers abroad, whose suffering was then lauded as a racial endurance of hardship. The elaboration of this rationale appeared most prominently in fictionalized accounts of colonization and racial resettlement. In intellectual discussions and popular fiction, dispersed people were recast as adventurous settlers, thereby inverting the experience of subjugation under western encroachment as a kind of voluntary venture into the world by way of exploration, relocation, and resettlement. Rather than persecution, rejection and exile, diaspora was reconstructed as a kind of nationalistic expansion, self-reinvention, and repopulation of foreign lands.

An examination of this overlooked convergence between the diasporic and national imaginings at the onset of nationalism in China has much to contribute to our current concern over diaspora.³ In the past 20 years, the perceived relationship between nation and diaspora has been fraught with challenging theories of cultural belonging and globalization (Wang 2004: 157–77; Breckenridge et al. 2002; Cheah 2003; Sassen 1998; Hall 1998: 222–37; Buell 1994). This is readily recognizable in the continual discomfort over the use of “diaspora” as a category capable of encompassing diverse forms of migration and mobility. The association of diaspora with memory, in particular, has been a persistent one in recent critical discourse. Strategically wedged between the need for belonging and the equally strong desire to escape from the dominant locus of China, the focus on diaspora and transnationalism has opened up different literary histories and cultural worlds.

Such analyses have the ambition to go beyond available conceptual frameworks developed out of colonialism, nationalism, and perhaps eventually, even globalization. At the same time, this increasingly vocal field is also at risk of conceding its scope and complexity to the terms implicit in these much circulated theoretical trajectories. Exile, nativism, or hybridity are appealing positions to take vis-a-vis the primary national locus of “China,” but the success of such interventions is sometimes far from clear. The rippling effect of postcolonialism's theoretical

valence, extending outward to previously unheard voices and territories, seems to produce an equally alarming expansion, where everyone subverts and thus contributes to a new modality of discursive empire. While this is a well-recognized burden of reflexive thought, it also compels us to reexamine the idea of “China” and how it mobilized the diasporic frontier as an extension of its projected self-image.

Theories of Evolution and the Chinese Laborer

Contemporary discussions of evolution provide an important lens through which this double-edged rationale may be seen. Remarking on the prospect of racial extinction for the Chinese, writers and intellectuals in the early 20th century often cited as an example of China’s febleness the problem of unprotected Chinese laborers abroad. Perceived as a failure in China’s own diplomacy and attainment of sovereignty, the mistreatment of Chinese laborers in the Americas and, to a lesser extent, Australia, in the 19th century fueled an emotional, nationalistic resolve and political protests in the early 20th century. From boycotts to underground resistance, the projection of the figure of the sojourner, straying from the protective reaches of his homeland, was a powerful image in inciting indignation and outrage in nationalistic memory. It encapsulated China’s plight as a fallen empire struggling to turn itself into a nation, and evoked a sense of inadequacy deepened by sympathy for one’s *tongbao* 同胞, fellows of the same root. If China were not so weak, it was often concluded, the Chinese laborers would not have had to endanger themselves in foreign lands, suffering gross abuse and discrimination as a result. The fact of their mistreatment in California, for example, increasingly made known through newspaper reports and travelogues in the 1870s and 1880s, further reinforced this sense of national demise (Xue 1981; Guo 1994; Zeng 1998; Zhang 1995–1999; Yan 1901; Zili guomin 1901).⁴

The idea of Chinese laborers wandering into dangerous territories in all parts of the world, in fact, generated a number of different cultural visions that sought to regain a sense of global might in the early 20th century. The focus on their victimization gave only a partial view of the importance of the diasporic Chinese and the emergence of unexplored frontiers in producing China’s sense of the world between the 1890s and 1910s. In bemoaning the nation’s demise, discussions sparked by the reported experiences of Chinese laborers abroad joined other categories of new knowledge in literally reconfiguring the world. This emerging new world not only conveyed its inevitability through China’s own dynastic decline and western dominance, it was also conceptualized and gauged in a different way in which nations and peoples were separated by longitudes and latitudes, and cultural differences were measured by distances and calendars. American Protestant missionary Elijah Coleman Bridgman’s 1838 introduction of

the geography and history of the United States, for instance, emphasized its relevance to the Chinese sense of the world by explaining America as the place that shared the same latitudes as Qing China (Bridgman 1838: 4–6). Nations were related to one another through not only trade and conquest but also the shared geographical physicality of being in a world, which was unfolding along axes and divided into hemispheres.

Though this new way of looking at the world had already been introduced by the Jesuits in the 16th century, it did not circulate widely until the 19th century with the sharply rising interest in Western learning. The science of geographical exploration, however, was aided by both the immediacy of China's own experience at the receiving end of colonialism and the desire to invert this experience as a projection of China's own national strength. The euphoric anticipation of such a scenario can be seen in the countless biographical notes and portraits of famous western settlers and conquerors in a variety of literary, industrial, and science journals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which expressed a growing interest in the possibility of geographical expansion and resettlement. Throughout the Republican period, discussions on race and population even referred to the demographic and geographic advantages as primary factors in determining the disposition and evolutionary success of any race (Pan 1993; Chen 1934).⁵

Though this new excitement in calculating and interpreting national viability in global space was inspired by the success of western imperialism on the five continents, it generated a productive vision for China. In hoping for a similar success, the Chinese wonderment at its own possible dominance through exploration became a pursuit separate from the condemnation of the horrors of western colonialism. At the center of this antinomy is the reworking of the experiences of the Chinese laborers and the representations of their remembrance. Narratives about Chinese migrants were not simply a pretext for expressing a nationalistic outrage. Earlier on, they also harbored a transnational desire to create a new order of civilization (*wenming* 文明) founded on a return to a post-utopia that demonstrated a conviction in China's future dominance. This was by far more powerful than these narratives' role in nationalistic discourse, because reported accounts of the Chinese laborers helped to project the possibility of founding new communities, dispersed but committed to the idea of China as a diasporic imagining, and collectively remaking the world in its image.

One of the important ways in which the diasporic frontier impinged on China's conception of itself in the world was its implication for the vitality of the Chinese race. The idea of the survival of the fittest explained for many Chinese intellectuals and observers their nation's state of affairs around the turn of the 20th century. Empires of the East, once powerful, were in a state of decline. Western nations, armed with advanced technology, scientific thought, and a spirit of adventure,

were emerging as the new locus of civilization. The interest in learning western technological know-how during the Self-Strengthening Movement expanded into a larger inquiry into the superiority of western civilization after the sobering outcome of the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 (Elman 2003: 283–326).⁶ Taking their cue from the examples of the black, brown, and red races spread across the isles and continents according to the ethnic cartography of the modern world, the Chinese ranked themselves among the nations of the yellow race, hence endorsing a racial scale divided between the strong, who were competitive, and the losers, who were unfit to compete and headed for extinction.⁷ For them, this was the essence of the theory of evolution. Though it was greatly modified from Spencer's original conception, which was itself one step removed from Darwin's premise, this recognition drove the impulse to build the Chinese nation in an undertaking that would take a century and more to materialize.

Although the centrality of the evolutionary theory to China's nation-building process had been a well-established notion relating to 20th-century China, its interpretation was never coherent or well understood by its contemporary proponents (Schwartz 1964; Pusey 1963). As late as the 1930s, a complete translation in Chinese of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was still unavailable, even though its author had been introduced in the widely circulated Shanghai newspaper, *Shenbao*, in August 1873.⁸ At the time when the evolutionary theory was propagated, there were already those who questioned the need for such an evolutionary scheme. One writer, Lin Yongxuan (1907), pointed out that the theory lacked explanatory power, as it merely described the state of imbalance among living things, rather than analyzing the social, political, and even philosophical circumstances for the subordination of the weak. He also questioned the selection under "superiority" and "inferiority." Mottoes such as "living things compete for natural selection" (*wujing tianze* 物競天擇), "the superior wins, the inferior loses" (*yousheng liebai* 優勝劣敗), "natural selection" (*ziran taotai* 自然淘汰), or "those who adapt survive" (*shize shengcun* 適者生存) were simply repeating the obvious, that "winners win and losers lose."

This view was shared by others with similar skepticism in whose eyes the discourse of evolution promoted those already in power, while further depriving those in need of recognition. As another writer remarked, "If one were to submit to natural selection, then the superior will simply become more favored, while the inferior will become even more disadvantaged" (Anonymous 1907: 170). For the less persuaded, the theory of evolution drove those already not favored to embrace a kind of fatalism and become resigned to destiny, while reserving the opportunities of advancement for those who did not lack the power to dominate. Extinction was the expected scenario for the colored races, while continual dominance and prosperity belonged, by the same logic, to the white race. Chinese observers recognized the theory as an instrument of the strong to legitimize their

dominance over the weak, and furnish the dominant West with a pretext to further amass power.

Had the theory of evolution been rejected as a result of this kind of skepticism, China's experience of nation-building might have taken a different course. Despite their cutting insight on the implications of evolution for China, the skeptics were equally unwilling to pass up the utility of its rationalizing power (Anonymous 1905). The premise of evolution offered many unintended possibilities including a common framework for international struggle, the specific terms and process of which were still to be defined. Relying on precisely the supposed truism of the theory of evolution in justifying the survival of the strong as a biological predisposition, dissenters from the inevitability of extinction proposed a different set of possibilities from this scenario of predestined winners and losers. While some wondered whether there was still a way for the yellow race to survive on the five continents, others speculated on the possibility of relocating to an altogether different planet. The usual apprehension about imperialism and the vanishing of the natives, when grafted onto a popular, rudimentary knowledge about the physical world and outer space, gave expression to a new vision of nationalistic frontiers and diasporic exile. Nowhere was this better illustrated than in the changing interpretation of the Chinese laborers' desire to sojourn abroad.

As perhaps the most influential critic of the mistreatment of Chinese laborers in America, Liang Qichao spoke about their plight to appeal to the Chinese sense of nationalistic outrage so as to advance his own vision of the new Chinese citizens. A long appendix to his *Travel Notes from the New World* (*Xin dalu youji* 新大陆游记) reported in great detail on the Chinese communities in San Francisco and Honolulu, their struggle with California's Exclusion Act, and their endeavors to win recognition from the host society (Liang 1999b). Even as he noted the poor conditions under which they were compelled to live in ethnic enclaves, however, Liang expressed a general admiration for their ability to endure suffering and hardship (Liang 1899: 1183–92). Undeterred by the language and cultural barriers, Chinese migrants ventured into foreign lands with no protection from their own government. Equipped with an undying will, their bare hands and little else, Chinese laborers stepped onto foreign shores of all corners of the world with a sense of adventure and entrepreneurship.

As though he was speaking of a group of overseas Chinese who were entirely different from the ones whom he had seen and written about — Chinese who gathered in the filthy slums of Chinatowns, some of whom were lured and kidnapped by their own countrymen to be perilously transported to South America and Southeast Asia — Liang envisioned an alternative overseas experience, rife with the spirit of adventure (*maoxian jingsheng* 冒险精神). For him, Chinese laborers were an exception to the rule of evolution. Rather than the sign of a decrepit homeland negligent of its own people's livelihood, their continued

outward push demonstrated that the Chinese race, as a nation, was destined to survive. Their diasporic wanderings, as such, defied the inevitability of evolutionary decline and corroborated, instead, the destiny of national expansion.

Whether this conflation of diaspora with nationalism was made possible by a paradoxical praxis at the core of a nationalistic narrative compelled by a universal sense of Chineseness, or by the prior dispersion of capital and labor carried out by Chinese migrants since the 16th century, has been the subject of much recent scholarly discussion (Duara 1997; Karl 2002).⁹ Primarily recast as a question of cultural essentialism vs. global materiality, the difference between nation and transnationalism pivots on the conditions of mutual constitution. However, in attempting to develop an expansive notion of transnationalism and globality that ultimately seeks to undermine the analytical premise of nationalism, both sides of the debate neglect the significance of the nation's "discovery" of diaspora as part of its internal history.

To return to Liang's own chance encounter with the records of diasporic heroes, the pivotal moment lay in the required condition under which the diasporic frontier could emerge as a recognizable outpost for the nation. His "unearthing" presents us with a heroic relic that is reminiscent of a national past rather than a transnational presence. The significance of this incorporative imagining pivots on the way it recognizes how diaspora could be used to bolster the nationalist claim. From the moment the diaspora or overseas Chinese entered into nationalistic discourse, it was created as something wholly other than, not identical to, Chineseness or a prior global imagining, but as an appropriated exteriority useful for precisely its distance from the national center. From this perspective, invoking transnationalism as a way of challenging nationalism is to see a false dichotomy where there are really only two aspects of one rationale. The significance of the history of Chinese laborers thus lies in its tropological power in relaying the nationalist desire across real and imaginary territories, while disguising its morphology as acts of "discovery."

The Chinese Sojourner as an Exemplary National Subject

From the victim of colonialism to exemplary national hero, the Chinese sojourner was used as a gauge for measuring other forms of exploitation and an instrument to incite China's citizens into dedicating themselves to bringing about the rebirth of the nation. The figure of the Chinese migrant was circulated among the array of late Qing epistemic formations that reconstituted parallels with one another, created analogies where they were not apparent, and referred to those resulting semblances as though sanctioned by a prior, existing ground of commonality. The antinomy of the Chinese migrant as, on the one hand, the denigrated Chinese in foreign societies and, on the other, a potential new breed of colonizers, served

two different kinds of discursive trajectories. This would have presented an obvious paradox, if we were expecting conceptual coherence from the fluidity of nationalist discourse at the time. For its contemporary audience, however, the utility of equivocation helped to shape two equally persuasive views (Lin 1907: 43). One group extrapolated from the first the proposition that the impending partition of China was to be a replay of the demise of India and Poland. The other camp, in contrast, was inspired by the implied promise of a vision of crisis in the second proposition. Its followers enthusiastically expressed the conviction in China's revitalization in the process of awakening to the modern world. Unlike before, they argued, China had learned its true capacity to lead the world.

In this way, the discussions of overseas Chinese pivoted on a wishful conception of China as an exception to the logic of evolution and on the inversion of colonial encroachment as one's own incursion into the world through exploration, relocation, and resettlement. The ability to evolve often implied a capacity to invade and conquer. The insistence on recasting their hardship as voluntary exploration and adventurousness, in particular, was inspired by the example of western imperialism which, in colonizing territories and peoples on all five continents, displayed an unrelenting curiosity about the world in quest of modern "civilization."

Though China had no small amount of violence in its own tradition to look to, intellectuals and writers drew particular inspiration from the hegemony associated with western dominance. It was the violence associated with modernity that promised a transformation of empire into nation. Often juxtaposed with the inertia of the Chinese empire, the ambitious feats of European explorers reintroduced the spirit of adventurousness as one of the keys to successful domination and hegemony. In conjunction with the repeated calls for the Chinese to restore their martial spirit, the demonstration of adventurousness overseas made sense of the reasoning for strengthening China's capacity to protect itself by way of intruding upon others.¹⁰ The diasporic frontier was proof that physical travels outside one's accustomed geographical boundaries entailed a reinstatement of colonial conquests and violent assertions of oneself in a host country, as was witnessed in the biographies of the eight great colonial heroes. Martial spirit and adventurousness were considered important marks of a people capable of rejuvenating itself as a nation and asserting itself in the world.

Though possessing the martial (*wuxia* 武侠) spirit became the natural counterpart of the spirit of the new citizenry, in comparison to the distinct genre and cultish practice of martial arts in the Republican period, the development of the concept of the martial spirit around this time occurred, at first glance, in unobvious contexts (Chen et al. 1929; Zhongyang jiji xuehui 1929).¹¹ It emerged, among other things, as a genre of fiction, collecting under its rubric traditional knight-errant tales and historical novels of subversion and sworn brotherhood such as

Water Margins (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸传). The encouragement of “martial spirit” (*shangwu jingshen* 尚武精神) around the turn of the century articulated the recognized need for military strengthening to be resuscitated from its traditional subordination to the literary arts.

How this need was transformed into a martial regime of the individual body as a way of cultivating physical well-being (*yangsheng* 养生) entailed, from the 1910s, a process of recasting “imperialist nationalism” as an individual practice. This involved shifting the focus to the building of sound bodies and citizens (Morris 2004). Liang Qichao saw clearly the significance in claiming a thriving martial arts tradition in China. To this end, he brought to light a collection of anecdotes and references which he then designated as proof of the tradition of martial arts spirit in China. This rhetorical artifice of creating cultural memory under the rubric of “re-discovery” encapsulated the beginning and end of his preface:

Westerners and Japanese often say, “China’s history is a history of the absence of military arts. The Chinese race is a race with no military capacity.” Alas! I am shamed, angered, and unpersuaded by these words. Our divine ancestor, Yellow Emperor, descending from the Kunlun Mountains, conquered the four sides and won over eight corners, leveled foreign tribes, and nurtured his descendants with his martial virtue (*wude* 武德). In more than three thousand years, there have been hundreds of tribes which gathered themselves on the mainland of the East, but none surpassed our martiality. Following the universal principle of “the survival of the fittest,” our race became the master of the mainland.... Martial spirit belongs to the original nature of the Chinese race. Our present lack of martial spirit is a secondary disposition. What caused this secondary nature? The propensity of our times, geographical favoritism, and man.

(Liang 1999c: 1383)

Prompted by the show of contempt by outside observers for the lack of a Chinese martial tradition comparable to Japanese bushido, Liang’s defense referred to the “model of bushido,” but immediately added that the reference was made merely to uncover what already existed in China’s own traditions and political consciousness. At the end of his preface to *China’s Bushido* (*Zhongguo wushidao* 中国武士道), Liang noted the Japanese origin of the word, which he borrowed for its finer literary connotations and depth of meaning, apparently in preference to *shangwu jingshen* which would have called to mind a military mentality which was less admired in Chinese history. Bushido, which had first prompted Liang’s formulation of a Chinese *wushidao*, was thus redeployed in this self-discovery process as a borrowed expression in the service of restoring the Chinese martial spirit, now presented as a referent for Japanese bushido. Liang approached the questions of martial spirit and the history of the southern Chinese diaspora as though the rediscovery of China’s prowess lay in a continual excavation of what it always had, thereby incorporating the frontier, little by little, into the nationalistic imagination.

The disentanglement of China's history, to put Liang's conception differently, propelled nationalist history as a series of discoveries outside the usual confines of one's accustomed history. By exteriorizing the uncovering of inner memory as the materiality of outward geographical expansion, the retrieval of nationalism necessarily entailed a corresponding aggression toward the outside world, incorporating diasporic frontiers as valences of the nationalistic core. The desire to know oneself became an invasive curiosity to know others. Setting into motion a series of quests for the "more" true and authentic embodiment of one's ideal discovery, nationalism was driven by a search of its own specular embodiment, taking in the world as its potential reflection. In so doing, however, it actually denied the participation of globality in the possibility of its conception in the first place. Thus, Liang's process of unearthing nationalism, by directing its ambition to the world and a future utopia, reconcealed the homological ground on which it first established its relation to the world. Called into presence by the world, nationalism articulated the urgency of its survival by laying claim to a right of defensive expansion.

While the global imagining awakened China's national consciousness, the nationalist vision, in turn, desired its own world. In this way, to find a comparable martial tradition entailed the cataloging of a series of China's historical invasions beyond its borders. The implication of the martial spirit as demonstrated by territorial acquisitions and, conversely, diminished by geographical disadvantages, imbued militarism with a propensity for discovery and physical exploration. Militarism, colonization, and anti-imperialism converged in a curiosity about the physical world drawn with the precision of maps.

Though incorporated in the martial narrative, the spirit of adventure, however, unleashed greater imaginings of conquest and colonization far exceeding the territorial bounds of the nation. The enthusiasm expressed in the cultural imaginings of settling in remote islands or uncovering submerged colonies opened up a vast territory of unclaimed national frontiers. The diasporic Chinese, reinvented in popular fiction in the early 20th century even as their plight was increasingly widely reported in newspapers and journals, emerged as the locus for fantasizing such desires.

Diasporic Adventures and Post-Survival Tales

The ubiquity of the figure of the oppressed overseas Chinese has at its command a wide range of fiction in the early 20th century. A perusal of this little examined corpus and its much more narrowly defined literary historiography gives an important overview. Novels dealing with the experience of overseas Chinese workers were produced primarily between 1905 and 1907. The most prominent of these were associated with the Anti-American Goods Boycott of 1905 (Wang 2002; Lai 1988). Historians have pointed out that fiction, in this regard, followed

quite closely newspaper accounts and possibly personal recollections related to writers in urban Shanghai where the movement began. Most recently, novels of this kind, notably *World of Gold* (*Huangjin shijie* 黄金世界), *Society of Bitter Hardship* (*Ku shehui* 苦社会), *Extraordinary Tales of Boycotting the Treaty* (*Juyue qitan* 拒约奇谭), *The Suffering Student* (*Ku xuesheng* 苦学生), *Tears of Sojourners* (*Qiaomin lei* 侨民泪), and *The Secrets to Getting Rich* (*Facai mijue* 发财秘诀), are considered to be the result of collaborations, rather than first-hand accounts, between Shanghai writers and their overseas Chinese informants who returned to China with their personal testimonies (Wang 2002; 2001). Fiction writers then rendered them into a style and dialect intended for the audience of the metropolis.

The historical accuracy of these literary accounts is, however, in many ways, a difficult and, in the end, less relevant issue to resolve. They repeated a certain repertoire of the overseas experience already much reported in newspaper accounts, travelogues, and, most importantly, other novels. As late Qing novels constituted a vast world of textual borrowings, mutual responses, documentary-style narratives, and cross genres, the professed realism of Anti-American Boycott fiction was not likely to be an exception. Invariably, these novels narrated the economic hardship at home that first led to the voluntary or involuntary sojourning of the Chinese laborers, their arduous and often fatal transport on crowded ships to distant lands, the humiliating physical examinations on arrival in the host countries which singled out the Chinese as a filthy, disease-ridden race, and the abuse they suffered while being subjected to the horrendous conditions of slavery. In short, their experiences were told from a nationalistic perspective that put across their suffering as a corollary of the nation's demise.

The figure of the *huagong* (华工) was a traumatic image for the nation. It encapsulated China's lack of sovereignty, as evident in its lack of diplomatic leverage in negotiating for the welfare of its people abroad. China's weakness as a nation was seen, in a mode of self-blame, as the cause for the punitive suffering inflicted on its people dispersed throughout the world. The wandering figure of the Chinese migrant was thus invested with a nationalistic outrage, the logical remedy for which was China's inevitable return as an aggressive player in the world of nations. In this fashion, the accounts of suffering were read as the nation's suffering, transforming the diasporic experience into an extended tale of nationalism.

At the same time, a transnational imagining lay at the foundation of nationalist thinking. In the landscape of fiction, Chinese laborers traversed a wide range of territories, from the real to the fantastic, appropriating remote diasporic frontiers as new bases for a renewed Chinese civilization. In *World of Gold*, for example, a remote utopian-like island near the Antarctic Circle transformed itself into a new habitat for a Chinese settlement/colony (Biheguan zhuren 1961). Populated by the descendants of Ming loyalists who were shipwrecked on their way to Japan

after the fall of the dynasty 260 years earlier, Conch Island provided a haven for the survivors, where they arduously built their homes and preserved the traditional way of life. As the fall of the Ming was often cited as a parallel to the end of the Qing in the early 20th century, Conch Island embodied an imaginary territory appropriated by a national nostalgia expressed at the unclaimed diasporic frontier.

The author of *World of Gold*, Master of the Sapphire Lotus House, was distinctly attracted to the possibility of a brave new world ushered in by overseas Chinese. Immediately after publishing *World of Gold*, he wrote the futuristic novel *New Century* (*Xin jiyuan* 新纪元), which narrated a war between the yellow and white races, ignited by a dispute over the right of the descendants of Chinese laborers in Australia and South America to observe the Yellow Emperor's calendar (Biheguan zhuren 1908). At the core of these novels was the message that, given the choice, all overseas Chinese would prefer to preserve the heritage and rites of their homeland.

As a new site for the community, the image of a lone island provided the setting for the post-catastrophe survival. But it also stored a pre-nationalist memory reflecting a deeper allegiance to, and a lineage of, empire. Unknown territories embodied a pristine primitivism that restored a world of national conflicts to the simplicity of traditional political praxis. The question of whether the Anti-American Boycott fiction bore any resemblance to what really happened diverts one's attention from how anti-imperialism and nationalism claimed to be the necessary lens through which the diasporic experience should be seen. It also limits the deeper significance of articulating nationalism as anti-imperialism, overlooking the important point that anti-imperialist nationalism sought a similar claim to power. In many ways, looking at Chinese laborers as nationalistic figures reinforced the exclusive claim of nationalist thinking to champion them. Upon closer scrutiny, the broader, transnational cultural imaginings from which nationalism extrapolated its singularity reveals that the founding ambition of nationalism never contented itself with the mere idea of national territorialization.

The very novels we understand as *huagong* fiction demonstrated a similar critical displacement of their putative status in modern literary historiography. Collected under the rubric of "Literature of Anti-American Prohibitions on Chinese Laborers" (*fanmei huagong jinyue wenxue ji* 反美华工禁约文学集), the influential literary historian A Ying, who produced other defining literary volumes on the Opium War, Sino-French Wars, Sino-Japanese War, and Boxer Uprising, envisioned these anthologies as corresponding to China's series of defeats at the hands of foreigners. *Huagong* literature was collected as anti-American nationalistic literature with the goal of commemorating national injuries. Placed in the larger context of diasporic imaginings, however, fiction on *huagong* open up to a different landscape of cultural fascination, where one became enchanted with a

world of exploration, adventure, and the implementation of China's own colonialism in a post-modern and -national era.

Novels designated by A Ying as *huagong* literature, in fact, belonged to a wide assortment of yet to be examined late Qing fiction dealing with diaspora. Featuring Chinese sojourners and laborers in Southeast Asia, South America, or Africa, these accounts narrate exploitations suffered at the hands of not only white imperialists but also Chinese merchants and entrepreneurs betraying their own people. For example, a 1907 novel *Grievous Wind and Bitter Rain* (*Qifeng kuyulu* 凄风苦雨录), related the story of three Shanghainese on their way to find work in Nanjing who were then kidnapped and sold as “piglets” to work in the Dutch Indies (Anonymous 1926).¹² Similarly, prolific Cantonese novelist Huang Xiaopei 黄小配, mostly known for his historical romances and novels of social critique, composed *Tides of the Sea of Officialdom* (*Huanhai chao* 宦海潮) between 1906 and 1907 (Huang 1995). Told in the little disguised voice of late Qing figure Zhang Yinhuan 张荫桓, who was an emissary to America in 1886–89 and who dealt with the controversy over the prohibitions placed on the Chinese laborers, the novel embellished his experiences. Among these was his own subjection to a humiliating physical examination at the US customs in San Francisco, one of the most often reported ordeals suffered by the Chinese laborers. These texts joined a wide, dazzling, and instructive cosmopolitan repertoire of commentaries on urban scandals, social injustices, and encounters with the modern world, often in a futuristic setting.¹³

Together, these narratives construct a post-survivalist tale, whereby a people, no longer defined by citizenship or race, revitalize the ruins of an empire in a transnational historical reinvention. Looking back to the future, these new societies possess a fabricated historicity, expressing the future perfect of desires yet to be realized. Thus, they lack the utopian tone of the traditional tales of wonderment and exoticism. In a setting where civilization has no evolutionary advantage, survival levels the global ground for rebuilding new allegiances and hegemony.

“Colonization Novel” and the Founding of Political Utopia

Describing what this post-national world might look like was an enticing challenge many writers took up. What would be the foundation of equality in this new society? Who would lead? Would the absence of colonialism imply the absence of new forms of domination? In response, the self-styled “colonization novel” (*zhimin xiaoshuo* 殖民小说) *Ice Mountains and Snowy Seas* (*Bingshan xuehai* 冰山雪海) constructed a provocative scenario (Anonymous 1906a).¹⁴ Unlike other novels dealing with the Chinese laborers that were preoccupied with narrating victimhood and exploitation, this novel constructed an elaborate post-

colonial society, led by the Chinese laborers themselves that incorporated all oppressed races in a newly rationalized political and social system. Set in the distant 24th century, a group of overseas Chinese gather in the coastal city of Quanzhou in Fujian province, a historical nexus for trafficking labor abroad. They decide to embark on a journey to explore the South Pole in search of a new place of settlement, because their foothold has been overrun by a new group of settlers, referred to, in a clear parody of the white imperialists, as those claiming to possess a mandate to rule over others.

With a following of 11,495 local residents and coolies, they set out on 13 ships. They are determined to recapture the “adventurousness” of their precursors. For 700 years, their predecessors had successfully settled across the Indian Ocean, until the new group of more powerful settlers drove them out. Subsequently, the inhabitants in various places followed suit and began putting up prohibitions against the Chinese until the latter could no longer enjoy any peace or prosperity. The poverty in China means that they could not return to their homeland. As a third alternative, they have decided on this perilous journey in the hope of discovering a brave new world. Lightly equipped with, among other things, binoculars and wireless telephones, they cross the Pacific, sail along the Red Sea, and circle the Atlantic Ocean. In hard times, they seek solace and encouragement by telling each other stories of the mythical creator of the world Pan Gu and Columbus. Finally, on 9 September 2399, they reach a new continent near the South Pole, which they believe to have been auspiciously “created by divine will for the surviving descendants of China in order to facilitate their survival and independence in a time of chaos” (Anonymous 1906a: 30).

The idea of the Chinese being the object of divine selection leads to the belief in resettlement with a cosmic legitimacy. At first sight, the novel seems to follow a similar trajectory of discovering some version of the utopian Peach Blossom Spring. The utopian connotation in *Ice Mountains and Snowy Seas*, however, quickly gives way to a politicized conception of these remote frontiers. A different story line begins in Chapter 4, tracing the history of the African diaspora and slavery in America and the black race’s subsequent attempt to return to their home continent to establish its independent nationhood. To the disappointment of the returnees, global warming has drastically altered the climactic patterns and Africa is no longer inhabitable. Thus, teaming up with 1,329 survivors of the Jewish diaspora, they set out to explore their own alternatives by following the example of the by then well-known Chinese settlers at the South Pole. Upon their arrival, members of the Chinese Settlement embrace and welcome them as brethren in their classless society, but not before the host explains to them the mission of the Chinese Settlement (Huashe 华社):

Regardless of central or branch offices, members of our society live in public housing and eat public food. Be it natural resources or man-made products, none may fall into private

ownership. [Together with] those comrades who join us late, regardless of race, we live, eat, and drink at the same place. As for the things they have brought with them, other than one's bedding, everything else has to be returned. Apart from this, all the ship's cargoes must be communalized. There can be no private hoarding. Because the mission of our society does not allow individual wealth or poverty ... it makes no distinction between the noble and lowly, wealthy and poor. For these reasons, neither class nor inequality exists. As for the various races, we are not interested in hearing comments on their superiority and inferiority (Anonymous 1906a: 61–62).

As a remarkably specific and prescient vision of what would become the ideological battleground for the rest of the 20th century, communism in the common, classless, egalitarian sense of the word surfaced as the ideology with real potential in the fictional post-utopia promised by the diasporic frontier. Dispersion resulting from persecutions and exile became a rallying point for the transnational allegiance of an emerging third-world imagining. Open to only the colored, oppressed peoples in the muted hierarchy of a “communal” (*datong* 大同) society, the Chinese settlement united all those races in need of refuge and a new collective identity.¹⁵ Following the lead of the Africans and the Jews, other races and peoples, such as the Filipinos, Turks, and Koreans, whose demise were amply reported in the late Qing newspapers, quickly enlisted themselves as new comrades in this fictional, post-socialist transnationalism founded by the Chinese. Pitting their “communism” (*datong zhuyi* 大同主义) against “imperialism” (*diguo zhuyi* 帝国主义), this new ideal forged a new commonality and promised in some ways to be even more expansionist and inclusive than the coercive power exerted from the imperialist *metropoles*.

At the moment of its recognized importance in the early 20th century, the diasporic frontier was re-imagined according to a nationalistic geography and imperative. Its seamless transracial solidarity promoted an imagined third-world community, idealized to match and to overshadow the perceived aura of the first-world. The new survivalist community, however, was also distinctly reminded that China alone led this borderless coalition. Only the diasporic Chinese had the will to establish a transnational cooperative for other peoples of dispersion who, though suffering equal distress, were perceived to have less capability in establishing their own independence. The egalitarian orthodoxy harbored a new analogy of might and hegemony. The recognition of a global imagining based on nationalistic thinking did not help dissociate one type of envisioned hegemony from another. On the contrary, it dispelled, even as it was helping to create, the promised advent of transnationalism and globalism as a new world order that could subsequently replace nationhood.

The community of Chinese Settlement posited itself as an egalitarian society, using an undefined sense of commonality to forestall internal racial differences and potential conflicts within the third-world utopia. Other novels on racial

catastrophe and relocation, similarly, portrayed a post-colonial world where either the oppressed colored races were united under Chinese leadership, or only the yellow race was fit to survive and to avenge their grievances. Another memorable example is Cha Erlang 查二郎 from *Chinese Columbus* (*Zhina gelunbo* 支那哥伦波), a novel of “exploration and adventure.” The undaunted protagonist settled in Northern Africa and founded a new republic consisting of various indigenous tribes after accomplishing a remarkable variety of feats, from discovering Sea Dragon Island near Denmark on his way to a northern expedition, to defeating a dragon in Java using his martial arts.¹⁶ In the name of the perished, the yellow race became their designated protector, even though in envisaging such a scenario it also asserted its presumed racial superiority and evolutionary viability over them. In challenging the logic of imperialism with a similar logic of its own, the nationalist vision armed itself with the call for emancipation. Though its scope was transnational, the articulation of its ambition remained firmly tied to the national impulse.

In this vein, *Icy Mountains and Snowy Seas* takes the opportunity to recast the popular motto of evolution as a hierarchical co-existence among the colored races. As encapsulated in the opening couplet of Chapter 7 following the welcoming of the Africans and Jews: “Those who come as guests are guests, each adapting to what accommodates him; no race and against race, all speak in unison their own voices 来宾为宾各适其适 无种非种同声其声” (Anonymous 1906a: 63). While appearing to celebrate a harmonious new world without racial antagonisms, the couplet also stipulates the impossibility of dissent, as no voice speaks on its own. Despite the emphasis on racial unison, guests remain guests. Returning to the Chinese sojourner’s adoption of the logic by which he or she was once excluded, the absolute delineation between original occupants and guests reinforces the prohibition as the condition under which other races might reside in the Chinese Settlement. Thus, the idea of adaptation (*shi* 适) that is central to the intellectual debate on the necessity of identifying with the survival of the fittest is redeployed here to compel each guest to observe his or her proper place.

In the late Qing nationalist imagining, the Chinese diaspora projected its desire of an expansionist movement onto the world. It pursued a global vision that was ultimately unperturbed by the possibility of the diasporic frontier. The resilience of nationalistic memory was evident in its capacity to absorb into its own grievance the untold suffering of its diasporic people, excavated from the margins even as they almost immediately disappeared again into the nation’s fold. The diasporic frontier, in this way, constituted a flexible threshold in the nationalistic vision, according to which the Chinese diaspora was not a physical dispersion but a greater national allegiance emerging from all corners of the globe.

From its perspective, nationalism in the late Qing era saw itself as a homeland rather than a point of departure. Substituting its own desired narrative for a

disparate sense of cultural belonging, the invented tradition of nationalism incorporated as well the memory of the diaspora. On the one hand, Chinese migrants abroad constituted an erosion of national sovereignty, both in their former association with a kind of betrayal of their homeland and in their emblematic status in the late 19th century as ostracized figures bearing the stigma of a weak China. On the other hand, nationalistic discourse incorporated and praised the diasporic experience as an extension of its own frontier, transforming the denigrated *huagong* into an explorer and nationalistic settler of foreign territories.

This disguised commonality in the end tells us much more about nationalism and diaspora than each can independently of one another. In the process, it also reaffirms the idea of the need to have something in common to ensure the collective memory of any community. One might in the end consider the perceived conflict between nationalism and diaspora as the logical conclusion of a set of reified but false incompatibility between the diasporic imagining and the transnational foundation of nationalistic memory.

Notes

- ¹ They were, however, celebrated as founders and pioneers in the history of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia. Liang Daoming of Guangdong, for instance, established an important foothold in southern Sumatra as the purportedly legitimate ruler of Palembang (San Qi), which left him with the title of *wang* (king) in Ming history. More than a century later, another Cantonese, Zhang Lian, a known bandit, also ruled Palembang. Zheng Zhao founded a dynasty in Siam in the 18th century after the age of 50 and became king, while Ye Yalai (Yap Ah Loi) is credited with founding Kuala Lumpur. That these figures were not accorded a position of significance in the history of the Middle Kingdom further testifies to the traditional indifference to the traffic between China and Southeast Asia. Ironically, Liang's excavation of this link did little to undo this embedded sinocentrism but, instead, replicated its logic in terms of the exigency of modern nationalism.
- ² I have discussed this elsewhere. See *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
- ³ Against the tendency to return the notion of diaspora to the framework of China-centered analysis, Wang Gungwu argues for the importance of seeing the implicit plurality in diaspora, each community inhabiting its own configuration of multiple national and cultural worlds. My purpose, however, is to demonstrate the reliance of the China-centered analysis on diaspora as an indispensable and formative constituent. In order to understand the value of diaspora as always meaning diasporas, one has to problematize also the tendency to view nation as a singular or unified polity from which diaspora can be differentiated. Cf. Wang (2004).
- ⁴ Liang Qichao's *Qingyibao* was among the earliest journals to report widely on the abuse of Chinese laborers abroad. Beginning with its 34th issue in 1900, *Qingyibao* included a special column, "Miscellaneous reports on colonization" (*zhimin zazu*), which regularly featured reports on Chinese laborers in North America and similar issues regarding other races around the world. For a few examples, see "Kugao huaren" (Tearful words to the Chinese), *Qingyibao* 16 (1899): 990–92; "Meibao lun Zhinaren yizhu" (American newspaper

- on Chinese immigration), *Qingyibao* 22 (1899): 1408–1409; “Huaren kukuang” (The bitter hardship of the Chinese), *Qingyibao* 59 (1900): 3771–72.
- ⁵ In his study of how to optimize the racial advantages of the Chinese race, eugenicist Pan Guangdan acknowledged a significant intellectual debt to the work of a geographer at Yale University, Ellsworth Huntington.
 - ⁶ Benjamin Elman recently argued that the scientific interest in western technology had undergone a transformation since its first institutionalized voice in the 1860s, as the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) prompted a view that saw the spiritual component of science civilization as an equally important order of knowledge to master. See Elman (2003).
 - ⁷ Geography and maps often served the introductory function of consuming and classifying ethnicities around the world. An important translated work that incorporates western imperialist geography into China’s own attempt to establish ethnic and racial hierarchies as natural orders of knowledge is Lin Shu’s translation, *Minzhongxue*. See note 2. For a detailed study of the transformative role of geography in reconceptualizing both China and the West, see Zou (2000).
 - ⁸ “Xiren boshi Dawen” (Western scholar Darwin), *Shenbao* (23 Aug. 1873).
 - ⁹ Prasenjit Duara claims that the co-opting of overseas Chinese in nationalist narratives paradoxically ruptures the bound territoriality of nationalism and, introduces an uncommitted notion of geographical, national belonging that is inherently contradictory to the essence of nationalistic identities. Challenging Duara’s presumed prior culturalist essentialism, Rebecca Karl proposes to resolve his narratorial paradox by resituating nationalism’s transnational imagining within the context of globalizing capital and labor flow. As the precondition of nationalism, this global world, forced open by imperialism, is then reabsorbed into a nationalist narrative. Both views, however, assume the transparency of the act of “discovery” that accompanies much of the geographical opening of the world in which nationalism and transnationalism take part. Departing from both approaches, my discussion centers on the “discovery” of cultural essentialism as well as the global imagining as an epistemic process involving the culturalist and materialist productions of knowing the world in the late Qing.
 - ¹⁰ Discussions of the bushido way, interestingly, were not actually about martial arts in the early 20th century. Liang Qichao’s representative book was a collection of anecdotes and examples of chivalry and adventurousness taken from Chinese history, emphasizing the spirit of knight-errantry rather than martial skills. See Liang (1904). Also available in *Liang Qichao quanji* 3: 1376–1423.
 - ¹¹ Martial arts manuals from the Republican period expressed physical training in direct relation to the strengthening of the national body. See Chen et al. (1929).
 - ¹² This later version contains 32 chapters, while the first edition contains 18. A Ying apparently saw only 13 chapters.
 - ¹³ For other novels and stories written in this vein, see Shanwai shanren (1906), Anonymous (1906b), Anonymous (1903).
 - ¹⁴ The novel was thought to be authored by the well-known writer Li Boyuan, but it has now been proven to be a forgery.
 - ¹⁵ The reader at the time would not have failed to see the imprint of Kang Youwei’s proposed “world of the great union.” For a treatment of Kang’s specific discussion of race in this world, see note 2.
 - ¹⁶ Also known as *Shizixue* (Lion’s Blood), Chinese Columbus not only satisfies one’s desire for adventure but also displays the spirit of bushido. The protagonist established his fame as the “Professional Chinese Explorer” (*Zhongguo tanxianjia*) among the Javanese by subduing beasts with his impressive martial arts skills.

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