



CHICAGO JOURNALS

Chinese Migrations, with Special Reference to Labor Conditions by Chen Da Emigrant
Communities in South China by Chen Da
Chinese Migrations, with Special Reference to Labor Conditions by Chen Da; Emigrant
Communities in South China by Chen Da
Review by: Barbara Celarent
American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 117, No. 3 (November 2011), pp. 1022-1027
Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.press.uchicago.edu)
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/662990>
Accessed: 19/12/2011 12:24

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
American Journal of Sociology.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Chinese Migrations, with Special Reference to Labor Conditions. By Chen Da [Ta Chen], Bulletin No. 340, United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923. Pp. 237.

Emigrant Communities in South China. By Chen Da [Ta Chen]. New York: Institute for Pacific Relations, 1940. Pp. xvi+287. (First published as *Nan yang hua giao yu Min Yue she hui*. Shanghai: Shang wu yin shu guan, 1939. Pp. 336.)

Barbara Celarent*
University of Atlantis

After the elite heroics of Sarmiento's *Facundo*, we come to the heroism of everyman. Chen chronicles the southward migration of millions of ordinary Chinese: from the inner provinces to the Fujian and Guangdong coasts, and thence to the Nan Yang—the islands and coasts that arc from China southward to Australia—and indeed to lands far beyond: Hawaii, the Transvaal, even France. In the first book, Chen looks at China, then at each major receiving society. In the second he looks at the remittance communities that live off the wages of emigrant labor. The first is a book of broad brushstrokes, general statistics, long histories. The second is an intimate work of short case studies and little life stories, of homely descriptive statistics and everyday events. Together, the books constitute one of the great migration studies of the 20th century. If Thomas and Znaniecki's much-celebrated classic *The Polish Peasant* more intimately describes and theorizes the social psychology of migrants, it nonetheless lacks the systematic demographic and organizational perspective that we find in Chen's work.

Chen Da was born in a peasant family in 1892 in Yuhang, slightly northeast of Hangzhou. After first steps in traditional education, he moved rapidly up through schools reformed in the last days of Qing, entering in 1912 the Tsinghua College to prepare for overseas study under the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship program. Starting in 1916, he attended Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where he met Columbia-trained sociologist W. F. Ogburn, who was then on the Reed faculty. On his return to Columbia, Ogburn took Chen along, and the young scholar received his Columbia MA in 1920 and PhD in 1923. (Chen's PhD thesis is the *Chinese Migration* volume above, published—as American dissertations of that time often were—in an existing monograph series, in this case the series of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.) Returning to China, Chen became a professor at Tsinghua, which was shortly thereafter transformed from a preparatory college into an independent university. For more than a decade, Chen had a normal academic career of teaching, research, and conferences, publishing his population lectures in 1934 and then undertaking the sur-

*Another review from 2050 to share with readers.—Ed.

vey of emigrant communities that became the second work reviewed here. But the Japanese were attacking Beijing even as the English version of that work was being completed, and Chen fled with his colleagues, first to Changsha, and then to Kunming.

In the wartime institution that combined fugitive portions of Peking, Nankai, and Tsinghua Universities, Chen directed the Institute of the Census, carrying out systematic demographic studies of the surrounding area. These were published as *Population in Modern China* in 1946. Elected in the immediate postwar to the Academia Sinica (the honorific science organization of the Nationalist government), Chen disappeared in the early years of Communism. He lost his Tsinghua teaching position in 1951 and worked most of the 1950s in labor colleges and economic positions. This was hardly surprising. Most sociology was suppressed in 1952, and a specifically Marxist sociology dominated until the late 1970s. Although some field research continued, a major impetus of Chinese sociology was toward popularized, amateur research practice, culminating in the Four Histories Movement, a nationally sponsored local-history initiative reminiscent of Works Progress Administration efforts in the United States in the 1930s.

However, Chen resurfaced briefly during the Hundred Flowers Period as one of a number of sociologists—most of them Western-trained like Chen—who pushed for the rehabilitation of sociology in 1957. The move failed, and Chen was denounced as a rightist. Although that classification was rescinded in 1961, Chen was by then 70 and his research career over. He died in 1975.

Chinese Migrations begins with a review of conditions in the main Chinese provinces of origin—Guangdong, Fujian, Shandong, and Zhili—as well as a brief discussion of the three stages of the emigration trade—informal emigration via junk, brokered emigration through an emigration company, and government-sponsored migration. The main argument of these chapters traces emigration to the push factors of overpopulation and famine and to the structural factor of adjacency to the seacoast. The migrants are chiefly young men, an obvious fact given that much of the migration occurred under formal arrangements for manual labor.

There follow chapters on the principal overseas emigrant areas (I use current names): Taiwan—home of more than 2 million emigrants from the mainland—Indonesia (with separate sections on Java, Bangka, Belitung, and Borneo), Malaysia, the Philippines, Hawaii, the Transvaal, and France. In each of these destinations, we get a basic history of the migration as well as a description of current conditions of life and labor, plus numerous specialized analyses when data are available: of miscegenation in Indonesia, of self-funded versus servitude-funded emigration to Malaysia, of the impact of language laws in the Philippines, of the effects of the American annexation in Hawaii, of criminal behavior in the Transvaal, and of geographical distribution in France. The somewhat arbitrary character of the detailed analyses is driven by source availability:

the work is a secondary one, based on the review of published materials. (But the bibliography includes sources in Chinese, English, Dutch, French, German, Spanish, and Japanese, indicating that Chen must have been an extraordinary linguist: even his Reed BA thesis—written three years after his arrival in the United States—is written in fluent, stylish English.)

Several topics cross most of the geographically specialized chapters. The theme of racial mixing pervades these studies, for example. It proves to be strongest in communities where Chinese have entered the merchant ranks rather than remaining as isolated workers on latifundia and plantations. Of course, as Chen notes, this racial mixing is driven by the predominance of young single men in the emigrant population. In places like Hawaii, where Western whites were a minority and immigrants were numerous and diverse, racial mixing had proceeded far indeed.

Another general theme is labor conditions, which varied much with the attitudes of the local and imperial governments that oversaw the receiving communities. In particular, many such governments forbade Chinese landownership, a policy that drove the Chinese into merchant and commercial roles, which in turn made them highly dependent on assimilation in terms of language. (It also made them, as Chen notes in various places in both books, crucial middlemen for the various Western imperialisms.) This forced commercial activity also drove intermarriage, for a Chinese merchant would have great use for the language skills, cultural knowledge, and personal connections that a local bride could provide.

If *Chinese Migration* shows us the worlds of the overseas Chinese, *Emigrant Communities* shows us the effects of this massive human mobility on the communities from which it originated. Unlike the former book, which offers a review of secondary sources, *Emigrant Communities* is a work of large-scale ethnography, with multiple investigators each studying somewhat specialized topics in several communities, under the general leadership of Chen. The chapter list follows a design familiar from works like *Middletown* and the *Social Trends* volumes of Chen's mentor Ogburn, beginning with what were conceived as given background factors (environment and race; culture traits), then moving through history (social change), to a discussion of basic aspects of life (livelihood; food, clothing, and shelter; the family; education; health and habits; social organization and enterprise; religion). Alongside his study of three communities with high emigration levels, Chen also studied a nearby community that did not have high emigration. Serious, detailed comparison was thereby possible.

The empirical detail in this work is extraordinarily rich. For example we learn of the complex ways in which remittances were actually repatriated. In the overseas communities, there emerged remittance brokers who consolidated remittances (particularly from simple laborers and small merchants who had no other way of sending money) until they reached investible levels. (These brokers of course pocketed any interest on these

temporary holdings.) Once that level was reached, the brokers bought goods, which could be shipped and which on sale in China (at prices unestablished *ex ante* and hence vulnerable to exchange rates, demand shifts, and so on) yielded shares that a receiving remittance broker turned into cash and divided up appropriately among the relevant “hometown” families. There, monies were then again distributed to individuals as needed by the local head of the household, who, as we learn in the family chapter, was often the principal wife of the male titular head of household, the family member who was very likely himself abroad, earning the remittance money and supporting another wife who, as I noted earlier, provided language assistance and local contacts because she was typically of the receiving community’s race and nationality; she also usually had children by her Chinese husband as well. In such a case, the overseas head of household did not come back to China for two, five, or even ten or more years. As this story makes clear, estimating the overall total of remittances was neither possible, nor, in this general sense, really meaningful, since remittances were a complex function of fluctuating prices and transfer charges. But one can look at one particular point in the process, and Chen did; he looked at the detailed budgets of 100 families in his three sending sites and found that about 80% of family income was from remittances, a figure thought to be *underreported* for fear of taxation. The sending communities were thus utterly dependent on overseas finance. In fact, the typical sending village could itself produce only a four month supply of rice—the chief subsistence crop.

A host of other topics familiar from later studies of migration are already canvassed in this volume. Family loyalty and a desire to die at home led to the return of many emigrants (although their children by overseas marriages came back only if they were boys, since the girls had no marriage possibilities). The returnees brought money and attitudes that transformed communities: the new tight clothing from Shanghai, the use of cutlery, the desire for more diverse and richer food. Their money pushed up housing and other prices. (All these forces were also observable before they came back, produced by the large flows of money to the home branches of their families). The long-standing tradition of polygamy absorbed many of the complicated marriage arrangements produced by migration, although one senses that a team of all-male researchers may not have been told the details of this issue, just as they were not told all the details of income.

Emigrants invested heavily in education, both within their own families, and, if they were very successful, for their home villages as a whole. They might however also devote large funds to creation of educational institutions in their receiving communities as well. Indeed, contact with imperial governments abroad tended to make emigrants less likely to support purely clan institutions at home and to create instead what they had come to understand as “public” institutions. (The emigrant community that was a single-clan village showed distinct differences.) The evolution

away from clan institutions was also evident in religious behavior; clan halls were sometimes repurposed in ways that would earlier have been thought disrespectful. In part this reflected the evolution of the clan hall as an institution in the overseas settings themselves, where the halls were perform general institutions of Chinese solidarity.

Chen's works thus portray a vibrant global community. In the regions of China he studied, a substantial portion of the working-age population was overseas. A steady flow of people, money, and obligation, as well as of new ideas and practices, bound together the main migrant area of Guangdong and Fujian to the vast world of the Nan Yang (literally, the "south seas"). Although a community of common, everyday people, this migratory world was nonetheless a world of heroism and betrayal, of permanence and change, of love and anguish. The first book portrays the size and grandeur of the overall phenomenon, the second gives the hundred intimate details that translate such a grand portrait into triumph and tragedy at the individual level.

But it was also a world of intense culture contact, whose other sides—the imperialists, the local populations—we see only through the eyes of the Chinese. Except in occasional snapshots, we do not see how the local populations reacted to the Chinese, to intermarriage, to Chinese dominance in commerce, and so on. We do not hear the debates in imperial parliaments about the role of Chinese immigration, debates about what they often called the "problem" of the Chinese. We do see the edicts that constrained activity by emigrant Chinese, but we lack the local and imperial logics that produce them. This limitation is of course inevitable. No book or books can capture the whole of a social world, for any good book looks from a particular point of view, and such a point of view must always be limited. This further question of the impact of the emigrants in their host lands thus becomes for the reader an essential next question.

Striking as this issue of spatial limitation is, however, even more so is the question of temporal irony. Today's reader knows that this vast emigrant world would shortly be submerged under war and revolution. The Japanese would conquer the Asian coastline from the capital of China all the way to the great imperial outpost of Singapore. The Nan Yang would echo with bombers and battleships for four years, as the Japanese tenaciously resisted the avalanche of American power. Throughout China there was land war: between Chinese warlords, between the Chinese and the Japanese, between the Communists and the Nationalists, culminating in the Communist triumph of 1949. Through all of this, the emigrant communities must have lived along, trying to find a way of life—perhaps, for all we know, continuing the same old ways of life under various subterfuges and arrangements. By the turn of the 21st century, certainly, the emigrant region studied by Chen was once again outward-looking, strongly bound by ties of culture, money, and lineage to Chinese communities throughout the Nan Yang and further afield. Remittance com-

munities were common, and agriculture had almost disappeared as the alternative form of employment.

How are we to reconcile these two ways of thinking about history? Is history really the story of the grand events—the battles, the wars, the social revolutions, the epochs? Or is it the story of the long filaments of lives and lineages that traverse all of these? After all, many people lived through the battles and the wars and the social revolutions, as indeed did Chen Da—his book *Ten Years' Wandering* (recounting his life from 1936 to 1946) is in fact his most reprinted book.

Chen himself gives us no direct answer to the great puzzle of reconciling the histories of the great men and the masses, but his indirect answer is clear. His works proclaim the heroism of everyday people, living everyday lives that reeve lineages across great historical changes that they themselves—along with myriad others—through wondrous complexities have made to occur. To understand those complexities without losing track of the everyday lives through which they emerge is the task of a truly historical sociology. Chen's work and life tell us that in no uncertain terms.