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► **To cite this version:**

Gregor Benton. REVIEW ARTICLE Transnationalism Misapplied: Reconciling Empirical Evidence and Theory. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2011, PP (PP), pp.1. 10.1080/01419870.2010.538426 . hal-00670233

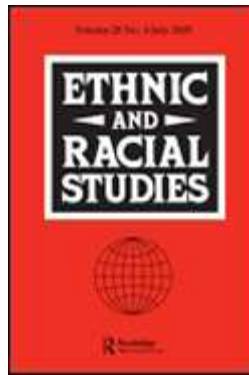
HAL Id: hal-00670233

<https://hal.science/hal-00670233>

Submitted on 15 Feb 2012

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Transnationalism Misapplied: Reconciling Empirical Evidence and Theory

Journal:	<i>Ethnic and Racial Studies</i>
Manuscript ID:	RERS-2010-0367.R1
Manuscript Type:	Review Article
Keywords:	1 Transnationalism, 2 human trafficking, 3 labour migration, 4 middlemen, 5 China, 6

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Manuscripts

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8 **Transnationalism Misapplied: Reconciling Empirical Evidence and Theory**
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12 Edmund Terence Gomez and Gregor Benton
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20 Pál Nyíri, *Chinese in Eastern Europe and Russia: A Middleman Minority in a Transnational*
21
22 *Era*, London: Routledge, 2007, 173 pp. + xvi, ISBN10 0-415-44686-4.
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27 Hsiao-hung Pai, *Chinese Whispers: The True Story Behind Britain's Hidden Army of Labour*,
28
29 London: Penguin, 2008, 262 pp. + xx, ISBN 978-0-141-03568-0.
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34 **Abstract**
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36 Migration is a main topic and source of evidence in transnational studies, but such studies
37
38 sometimes promote abstract theorizing above coherent factual analysis. Predetermined
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40 theoretical schemes can sometimes blind authors to the facts they themselves uncover. Some
41
42 transnational studies romanticize migration by skating over the antagonisms in 'diasporic
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44 culture' and the plight of 'illegal' migrants, neglecting class distinctions, homogenizing
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46 'transnational culture', and exaggerating migrants' mobility and options. In the two works under
47
48 review, Hung-hsiao Pai's unwillingness to engage in abstract theorizing allows her to bring
49
50 perspective and commonsensical clarity into her conclusions, whereas in its theoretical
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commentary Pál Nyíri's book reduces to a relatively undifferentiated landscape the distinctions its author otherwise so carefully identifies and the facts and observations he so richly documents.

Keywords: Transnationalism; human trafficking; labour migration; middlemen; China

Over the past couple of decades, numerous studies have appeared on Chinese international migration, which in the late twentieth century quickly became massive and took new directions, economic and geographic. This migration is a main topic and source of evidence in the recent literature on transnationalism, which pictures the migrants' world as a system of multipolar transnational networks. Theory is essential to the development of understanding and facts are meaningless without it, but some theories explain facts less well than others or use them selectively, ignoring those that appear inconvenient. It is our feeling that this has been the fate over the last few years of some approaches in transnational studies, where abstract theorizing has sometimes stood in the way of a coherent analysis of the facts they present.

The problems an approach based on abstract theorizing can create, and a first step towards their remedy in a renewed respect for the authority of facts, is variously exemplified in the books reviewed here, each quite different in style, content, and approach. Both give a similar picture and are rich in empirical findings about the new migration from China into Western and Eastern Europe. However, the academic study by is hampered by its theoretical framework from providing a coherent analysis of developments such as. This is why we felt it appropriate to take the step – unusual in an academic review – of supplementing our comments by looking at a work

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3 of journalism that not only accurately documents the lives of the undocumented but unashamedly
4 identifies with their plight.
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8 Pál Nyíri's primary focus is on China's 'new migrants' in Russia and Eastern Europe
9 (mainly Hungary), though he devotes a fair portion of his book to Chinese migration trends in
10 this region over the past two centuries. His book richly documents the development of interstate
11 ties between China and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and of links between the Chinese state and
12 the old and new diaspora; new migrants' manipulation of ethnic identity to gain access to
13 concessions within the gift of the Chinese state; and the manipulation of ethnic-based institutions
14 by migrant entrepreneurs to further their business links in China and abroad. He also maps the
15 routes and activities of the snakeheads, from China into Western Europe, and the growing role of
16 the Chinese government in furthering transnational ties, including by exporting labour from
17 China to work on infrastructural projects in Eastern Europe implemented by its own agencies.
18
19 One of Nyíri's main arguments is that Chinese in these places are less likely than their
20 counterparts in Western Europe to seek local citizenship, make claims in the 'local public arena',
21 and want their children to stay and settle. Instead, they engage in 'intense transnationalism',
22 entailing extreme international mobility and economic dependence on China. Their mobility in
23 local society is limited, due to (a) a lack of attractive possibilities and (b) indigenous hostility, so
24 they adopt the strategy of a 'middleman minority' (a term Nyíri resurrects from American
25 sociology in the 1980s). The economies they enter lack goods and services that the migrants,
26 through their ties with China's state enterprises and transnational connections, are in a position to
27 provide, filling the region's underdeveloped and poorly managed market niches with Chinese
28 manufacture and models of transnational entrepreneurship. The study concludes that the option
29 of 'flexible citizenship' – Aihwa Ong's coinage for the strategy of moving regularly across state
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3 boundaries to circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes – is no longer an
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5 aspiration but has become a reality for China's transnational entrepreneurs in Russia and Eastern
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7 Europe, who are unlikely to integrate in their places of temporary fixation.
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10 Nyíri provides important evidence for transnational ties, but the situation he describes
11
12 would seem from the materials he cites to be in part peculiar to its time and place. Nearly all the
13
14 migration is new and exploratory. Some of the migrants have better contacts than Chinese in
15
16 Western Europe with enterprises in China, since they left China (a) more recently and (b) at a
17
18 time when Chinese state industry was in transition to lesser regulation. China is contiguous with
19
20 Russia, and many of the migrants are 'commuters' rather than settlers, i.e. they are closely linked,
21
22 physically and economically, with China. Homeland ties are reinforced by the ease of cross-
23
24 border transportation (including the Trans-Siberian Railway) and new means of communication.
25
26 Many have neither the opportunity nor the wish to settle in Russia and Eastern Europe, unlike
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28 Chinese migrants past and present in Western Europe. This is because Russia and Eastern
29
30 Europe are poorer and therefore more difficult and less promising destinations than countries in
31
32 the West, for which they are often seen as mere transit points, and because indigenous
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34 bureaucratic authorities often put obstacles in the way of migrants registering for residence or
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36 getting visas. The migrants also feel insecure because of anti-Chinese feeling among officials
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38 and the general population.
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46 Can a general theory be spun from data about migrant communities so strongly shaped by
47
48 transitory, contextual, and exceptional circumstances? Many of the migrants seem to have made
49
50 no permanent commitment to the place they live in or final decision about their migration
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52 strategy; the economies of Russia and Eastern Europe are poor, unstable, and in transition; and
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54 China was itself also a transition economy in the early period of this migration. But despite these
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3 special circumstances, Nyíri uses his analysis of Russia and Eastern Europe to support a
4
5 theoretical model of regions of Chinese migration described as 'transitional peripheries'. This
6
7 model stretches to South America, Africa, and China's neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia
8
9 and is characterized by migrants' 'very high level of international mobility and economic
10
11 dependence on China'.
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15 He also generalizes excessively about the Chinese in Russia and Eastern Europe itself. He
16
17 himself shows and implies in his analysis that there are major differences of social class among
18
19 Chinese throughout the region, and that Chinese in some regions (especially Siberia and the
20
21 Russian Far East) are much poorer and have fewer opportunities for investment or onward
22
23 migration and weaker links to the outward-reaching Chinese state than elite Chinese
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25 entrepreneurs in Western Russia and Eastern Europe. However, these distinctions fall away in
26
27 the conclusion, which talks (like the subtitle) only of the niche-bound middleman, 'mediating
28
29 between the cultural and capitalist logics of Western and Chinese globalizations in places that
30
31 were peripheral to both' (Nyíri 2007, p. 139).
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37 When building big theories, it is best to start by sorting out the details. Within Russia and
38
39 Eastern Europe, such an approach would require a more precise analysis of class distinctions
40
41 (access to human, material, and political resources). Regarding the so-called 'transitional
42
43 peripheries' about which the study hypothesizes, it would look at each country or region
44
45 separately, to identify its special features and likely trajectories. It would analyse the relationship
46
47 between the local economy (of which there are many different sorts in the continents and regions
48
49 listed) and the local migrant and ethnic Chinese economy. It would look at the way in which new
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51 Chinese migration differs from country to country and region to region; the nature of the country
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53 or region's broader China tie; the migrants' relationship to non-migrant Chinese state or private
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3 investment in the local economy (where such investment happens); the presence or absence of
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5 one or more pre-existing, settled ethnic Chinese communities; and the nature of the new migrant
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7 flow – who are they, how many are there of them, what resources do they command, and why,
8
9 when, and how did they leave China?
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13 Nyíri also discusses Chinese community politics in Russia and Eastern Europe, which he
14
15 describes as embodied in political organizations acting ‘more on a transnational arena than in a
16
17 particular country’. Such organizations vigorously protest their patriotism and maintain close ties
18
19 with authorities in China. However, their membership is usually small and their legitimation lies,
20
21 according to Nyíri, in their leaders’ personal contact with Chinese authorities rather than in any
22
23 social or political work they do in the community. These organizations, he concludes, are
24
25 ‘widely discredited as irrelevant and serving primarily the interests of their leaderships in
26
27 building connections in China’. These findings chime with those of Li Minghuan’s report on
28
29 new-style Chinese community organization at the European level in the 1990s (Li 1998). They
30
31 would seem to undermine other ideas in the study about the role played by political associations
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33 of this sort in structuring the ‘transnational social space of the “new migrant” community’ (Nyíri
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35 2007, p. 120).
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41 As new migrant communities, the Chinese groups in Russia and Eastern Europe are by
42
43 definition more closely tied with their sending places than mature communities. So it is
44
45 interesting to note that the oldest of the new Chinese communities in Eastern Europe, in Hungary,
46
47 would seem to be evolving in a similar direction to the older communities in Western Europe.
48
49 Mixed marriages are common and the children are bilingual and study at Hungarian universities.
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51 This suggests that sections of the Chinese community in Hungary are starting to develop a
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53 Hungarian culture and identity. Unfortunately this development is not integrated into the general
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3 analysis and the theoretical picture the author draws of new Chinese migration. This is, in our
4
5 view, because his theoretical perspective does not encourage him to analyse the implications of
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7 changes of this sort in the culture and identity of migrants or their children.
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10 Both these findings – the absence of a pervasive and well-supported transnational
11
12 political culture and the first flowering of a new national identity and culture among ethnic
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14 Chinese in Hungary, different from that of the migrant generation – raise questions about the
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16 ascendancy of Chinese transnationalism in Eastern Europe.
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20 Nyíri's application of the middleman theory to Chinese traders in Russia and Eastern
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22 Europe is also problematic. Middleman minorities, as Nyíri recognizes, tend to arise in pre-
23
24 modern and colonial societies, in situations where they suffer discrimination but are not socially
25
26 subordinate to any great extent. Their roles typically include trading and money-lending.
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28 Examples often given are the Jews in pre-war Europe and the Chinese in colonial Southeast Asia.
29
30 Middleman minorities of this sort scarcely feature in developed and more mobile societies.
31
32 Chinese traders in Russia and Eastern Europe lack characteristics of a middleman minority, and
33
34 Nyíri fails to contextualize the theory in its new setting. A main agent of the export of Chinese
35
36 labour to Eastern Europe is the Chinese state. The middleman hypothesis obscures this major
37
38 development in Chinese state practice, which distinguishes its international role from that of
39
40 other, more exclusively capital-exporting countries.ⁱ
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46 The rise of 'transnational networks' of the sort Nyíri describes is accepted wisdom in
47
48 studies on new Chinese migrants, said to be linked 'by practice and discourse' to a 'transnational
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50 social space that spans the globe', with 'nodes' in all five continents, a space that 'configures the
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52 perspective through which migrants look at the geographic locations that migration brings them
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54 to' and forms part of a unifying Chinese global system. Within this system, the migrant functions
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3 as a social 'actor' in his or her own right. While such studies accept that only a privileged few
4
5 can act out the full logic of 'transnational geography', even non-elite, illegal, apparently
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7 'subaltern' Chinese migrants are free to negotiate choices and even to consider 'study in
8
9 Australia and investment in South America', apparently 'a regular subject of telephone
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11 conversations with relatives in China' (Pieke, Nyíri, Thunø, and Ceccagno, 2004, p. 162). The
12
13 authors of these statements do not neglect to identify in passing the obstacles – of employment,
14
15 finance, legal status, etc. – in the way of such schemes, but they contribute to the romanticization
16
17 of the life of the illegal migrant by painting a picture in which the snakehead features not as a
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19 people trafficker but as a 'professional service provider' and the migrant not as a potential victim
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21 of forces beyond his or her control but as a picaresque subverter of Western capitalism's labour
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23 and immigration regimes.
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29 Any such optimistic view of the 'options' open to the 'illegal' Chinese migrant is hard to
30
31 square with the description of the lives of undocumented Chinese workers in Britain by the
32
33 journalist Hsiao-hung Pai, in *Chinese Whispers*. This book is not an academic study (for a more
34
35 scholarly account of people trafficking, see Gao, 2004) and could perhaps be best classed as
36
37 *rapportage*, a word sometimes used to translate the Chinese term *baogao wenxue* (report
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39 literature). *Rapportage* in this sense is a form of socially progressive writing described by a study
40
41 of the genre as indigenously Chinese and defined as 'any deliberately literary non-fiction text
42
43 that narrates or describes a current event, person or social phenomenon' (Laughlin 2002, p. 2).
44
45 Its principles were first formulated in the 1930s, by China's League of Left-wing Writers, and
46
47 the genre was successfully revived in China in the 1980s. Its narration is an act of collective and
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49 national identification and imaginative empathy. Although Pai Hsiao-hung does not explicitly
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51 associate herself with *rapportage*, she shares its practitioners' assumptions and approaches. Like
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3 other works of *rapportage*, her book has little ‘theory’ and no footnotes, yet few would question
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5 its sincerity, accuracy, and authenticity. It is based on lengthy interviews and difficult, dangerous
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7 stints of participant observation by the author, and provides a more credible history of the lives
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9 of ‘illegal’ Chinese immigrants at the start of the twenty-first century than many studies whose
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11 theoretical viewpoints hamper a proper understanding of the facts they claim to explain. From
12
13 the point of view of this review, which focuses on the portrayal of Chinese emigration in
14
15 transnational studies, it makes two main contributions.
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20 First, it raises serious doubts about the idea that ‘diasporic culture’, ‘diasporic social
21
22 organization’, and ‘diasporic networks’ are major resources through which minorities cope with
23
24 the societies that ‘host’ them, including resources often attributed to Chinese migration and its
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26 supposed Asian or Confucian values. It remorselessly exposes how the ‘illegal’ migrant’s
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28 enemies stretch across the spectrum of politics and ‘races’. They include the leaders of Europe’s
29
30 migrant-receiving countries, not one of which has ratified the Migrant Rights Convention created
31
32 by the United Nations in 1990 to extend universal human rights to all migrant workers; local
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34 police and immigration staff, who bully them; members of the Chinatown business establishment,
35
36 who exploit and abuse them; the Chinese Embassy, which shows little apparent interest in their
37
38 problems; and community leaders in London’s Chinatown, including the well-connected Chinese
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40 for Labour group, whose members remained silent or non-committal about ‘illegal’ migrants’
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42 plight when Pai interviewed them.
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49 Second, it strips away the romance from the notion of the footloose ‘transnational
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51 subject’ globetrotting across a frictionless, deterritorialized world in which poverty, racism, and
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53 sexism are secondary.ⁱⁱ Pai shows how the ‘transnational subject’ in this instance is not the
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55 migrant but the trafficker – the trafficked migrant can be more accurately described as a
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3 ‘transnational object’. In the past, Chinese migrants worked overwhelmingly in Chinese-
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5 dominated sectors and niches, but today many have become part of mainstream manual labour,
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7 comprising its most vulnerable bottom layer. This raises questions about the attribution to them
8
9 of a ‘new freedom of choice and movement’ and the talk of ‘Chinese globalization’,
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11 transnational Chinese spaces, nodes, niches, loops, and the rest. The bottom level these migrants
12
13 occupy is overwhelmingly non-British and multinational in composition, chiefly from
14
15 developing countries and Eastern Europe and Russia. The snakeheads, gangers, and agents are
16
17 also multinational: they include whites, South Asians, and Southeast Asians, although most are
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19 Chinese speakers (not necessarily Chinese from China).
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25 Pai’s study offers a new perspective on the middleman theory that Nyíri’s application
26
27 misses. She shows how Chinese and other agents of international migration out of China
28
29 organize the route from Russia and Eastern Europe into Western Europe, as part of a chain with
30
31 numerous embedded links. These agents settle wherever and for as long as money can be made
32
33 from maintaining the chain, from China to the West.
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37 To complete the picture of Chinese transnationalism Nyíri draws, one would therefore
38
39 need to bring more distinctions to bear on the class of intermediaries and other migrants. Nyíri’s
40
41 argument about their geographic itinerancy is real, but in developing it he homogenizes them.
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43 Some sink roots because they find it profitable to do so, others are immobilized by a lack of
44
45 material and human resources, while still others move around constantly in pursuit of interests
46
47 that require permanent mobilization. Nyíri’s analysis generalizes from the experience of the
48
49 hyper-mobile minority to the community as a whole, and thus produces a misleading picture.
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51 Nyíri himself notes how some Chinese businesspeople move from Eastern to Western Europe
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53 only to return later to Eastern Europe because they find they are unable to compete in more
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3 industrialized countries. They cross borders not because they are ‘endowed with cultural capital’
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5 and live in ‘transnational space’, but in order to maintain a profitable enterprise. The large
6
7 number of ethnic Chinese-owned firms in Hungary results not from the existence of ethnic-based
8
9 networks founded in ‘transnational social space’, tied to China, endowed with cultural capital,
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11 and geared to a transnational system of enterprise, but because those who found them recognize
12
13 the links being created by the mainland state in Eastern Europe and thus see a market opening up
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15 for them. They create businesses to meet the demand created by the inflow of Chinese workers
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17 and migrants, often sponsored or facilitated by state industries, and hope to nurture ties with
18
19 the Chinese state. This confluence of factors is a more convincing explanation of Chinese
20
21 entrepreneurs’ convergence on Hungary in the 1980s and the 1990s than ‘the logic of
22
23 transnational geography’. A differentiated analysis of this sort, to which Pai’s study is a helpful
24
25 pointer, would explore the uneven distribution of power in the migrant community, a community
26
27 by attribution rather than by assent. It would reveal the levels of intra- and inter-ethnic
28
29 exploitation, the motor that drives the chain along its track. It would identify the true secret of
30
31 the Chinese agents’ ‘patriotic’ attachment to the government in Beijing and the sending
32
33 provinces, municipalities, and counties, whereby powerful intermediaries recognize the
34
35 government’s wish to reach out to the diaspora and use their hold on people and resources to
36
37 extract concessions from it – in reality an exercise in vested interest, passed off as patriotism and
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39 communal concern.
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48 How does the community cohere? Here too Pai offers an explanation. Even among the
49
50 army of the super-exploited can be found the aspirant trafficker, all too ready to swap the role of
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52 the oppressed for that of the oppressor. Thus the system is perpetuated, as new agents constantly
53
54 climb the ladder into profitable sectors of the system. As for rebels and critics among the
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3 migrants, they are marginalized both by the gangers and migration agents, who threaten or
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6 destroy them, and by their fellow oppressed, who fear trouble and ignore them.
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8 Transnational studies have deepened our understanding of many aspects of contemporary
9
10 migration. Their authors often speak out trenchantly for the civic and economic rights of poor
11
12 migrants in rich countries. They have also helped focus attention on the new hybridized and
13
14 transliminal identities with which migrants and their offspring enrich national cultures
15
16 throughout the world. In these respects, they have made an important contribution to ethnic and
17
18 migration studies. Taken to extremes, however, their desire to celebrate the role of ‘transnational
19
20 social space’ in reshaping geographic and class boundaries leads to extravagantly optimistic
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22 conclusions about its transformatory, liberationist potential.
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- Gregor Benton is Visiting Professor at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, and Emeritus Professor in the School of History and Archaeology at Cardiff University

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7 ⁱ The same is happening in Africa. For example, the Chinese government has exported 70,000
8 skilled and unskilled workers to work on Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in Angola
9 (Benoit and Su, 2010].
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11 ⁱⁱ On the exaggeration of mobility and the lack of attention to ‘oppression, racism, and powerful
12 structures, like capitalism and patriarchy’ in transnational studies, see Dunn 2010.
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