

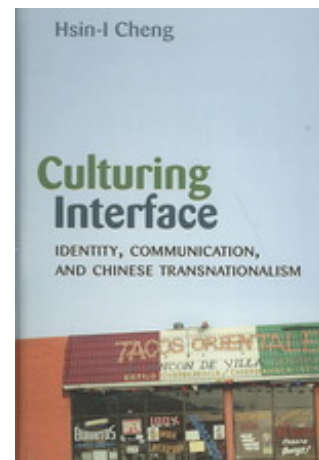
Hsin-I Cheng, **Culturing Interface: Identity, Communication, and Chinese Transnationalism**, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, 224 pp., \$69.95 (hardcover).

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As the world becomes increasingly globalized with national boundaries no longer limiting the movement of people and capital, managing transnational communities is a challenge for nation-states at the turn of the 21st century. This is particularly true for the U.S. after it implemented the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, a treaty that removes barriers on tariffs and facilitates the mobility of business executives and professionals between Canada, Mexico and the U.S. Against this background of economic integration, many multinational corporations, including major Taiwanese electronic companies, have thrived on the borders of El Paso (Texas) and Juárez (Mexico) over the last decade.

Culturing Interface is an insightful study of the experiences of a Chinese transnational community on the U.S.-Mexico border. This transnational community was composed of many Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese professional migrants such as company managers, computer technicians, merchants, medical doctors, and nurses who settled down in El Paso, Texas and commuted to Juárez on a daily basis. Drawing on fieldwork observations and extensive interviews with the migrants, Hsin-I Cheng examines the geopolitical, social and economic forces that have integrated this group of Chinese professional migrants into the fast-growing U.S.-Mexico border economy. In particular, Cheng explores the multiple worlds of these Chinese transnationalists, their encounters with American mainstream society, and their changing perceptions of China, Taiwan and the U.S. Cheng also discusses the social and cultural institutions that these migrants created to support themselves, and the various strategies they employed to cultivate their hybrid identities in a transnational environment.

Comprised of seven chapters, the introduction outlines the purpose, scope and methodology of this study, and sets the framework for conceptualizing the stories of Chinese migrants in the space of El Paso-Juárez. Chapter 1 discusses the latest scholarly research on transnationalism, border-crossing and identity-formation. With respect to Chinese transnationalism in the U.S., Hsin-I Cheng draws on Lok Siu's concept of "double citizenships" to emphasize that after coming to North and South Americas, Chinese migrants still maintain strong political, social and economic ties with their homeland communities in China (p. 26). Such transnational networks not only help Chinese migrants overcome any travel restrictions imposed on them by nation-states but also enable them to maintain their cultural identities while adjusting to the new environment. Chapter 2 looks at the political, economic and social transformation of the U.S.-Mexico borders after the signing of the NAFTA. As with other multinational corporations, many Taiwanese companies took advantage of the NAFTA to establish their business operations in the U.S.,



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especially in the El Paso-Juárez area. These companies had huge industrial plants in Mainland China and Taiwan. Now they have made El Paso their distributing centers for North America and built factories in Juárez to assemble computers and other electronic products. One unintended consequence of the NAFTA is that the ever-expanding trans-Pacific business ties between Taiwan, China, the U.S. and Mexico have successfully integrated the East Asian and North American regional economies into a new economic order.

The diverse experiences of Taiwanese professional migrants in El Paso are discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Working in multinational corporations, these professionals defined personal security in terms of economic strength. They witnessed that Taiwan underwent a process of relatively slow economic growth while China rapidly expanded its influences worldwide. As a result, they were no longer concerned about Taiwan's quest for independence. Instead, these Taiwanese professional migrants began to subscribe to the idea of "Greater China" and saw the fast-growing Chinese economy as the hope for the overseas Chinese. In the border city of El Paso, they began to internalize the mainstream American values of individualism, freedom and democracy. But ironically, they had not yet come to terms with the multiculturalism of American society. Even though they frequently interacted with Hispanic-speaking migrant workers, they perceived America as a white-face English-speaking society. In their El Paso experience, an exception was Mama Gau, a businesswoman who owned a hardware store in the downtown area and spoke Spanish fairly well with her Hispanic customers.

As with other nation-states, the U.S. uses a complex system of visa classification to patrol and control its border as well as travelers entering the country. Chapter 4 takes a look at the Taiwanese migrants' encounter with the U.S. border control system. Because these Chinese professionals came to the U.S. on tourist visas and work permits, crossing the El Paso-Juárez border became an important part of their everyday life. After September 11, 2001, the American government tightened its border checking system even though none of the 9/11 terrorists came to the U.S. through Mexico. For those Chinese professionals who needed to commute between El Paso and Juárez, they had to be careful in answering questions by the U.S. border guards. Hence, they were determined to obtain permanent residence and, eventually, citizenship in order to secure their everyday practices of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border to go to work and return home.

Chapter 5 highlights the important role that the Chinese Christian church played in helping these migrants to adjust to new life in El Paso. To many Chinese and Taiwanese who perceived long separation from their homelands as almost like an exile, the church was a strong center of community life, providing opportunities to socialize with other Chinese and fostering a sense of unity and belonging. The church also provided a safe and supportive comfort zone that mediated the differences between Chinese values and mainstream American society. In this fascinating process of cross-cultural encounter, Christianity became integrated into the personal and family identities of the migrants. The final chapter concludes with a critical self-reflection on the whole fieldwork experience. Hsin-I Cheng discusses the ways in which her background as a Western-educated Taiwanese doctoral student influenced her access to this transnational community, and in which she crossed the class, gender and cultural boundaries to interact with her informants. This self-reflection is a cautionary tale and becomes a challenge to researchers to be critical of their preexisting values and the power relations with the informants.

Conceptually there are three important themes worthy of attention. First, these Chinese transnational migrants should be viewed as part of the restructuring global economy. As the North American and East Asian economies are increasingly dependent on each other, the flows of capital, labor and resources across national boundaries have become the norm. Second, Hsin-I Cheng singles out the issue of identity and status recognition as a key to understanding the stories of Chinese migrants in the El Paso-Juárez region. As they came to terms with their transnational status, they were aware of their vulnerability when dealing with the U.S. border guards. Awareness of one's transnational status is as important as awareness of one's marginality, and these two elements together have shaped the everyday practices of these migrants. Third, Cheng draws on her extensive ethnographic data to emphasize the "making" of Chinese transnational experience. Here, three interrelated processes can be discerned: the construction of transnationalists' status; the response, which was often resistant to the U.S.-imposed visa restrictions and border controlling system; and the lived experience of Chinese transnationalists. According to Cheng, these transnational communities have developed a variety of strategies to engage and challenge the existing order created by the state, and they are capable of wielding resources, intended or unintended, in order to address the political, social and economic pressures that limited their border-crossing activities.

In short, *Culturing Interface* is a well-researched study of Chinese transnationalism along the U.S.-Mexico border. Rich in details and highly readable, it should be of interest to scholars and students interested in transnational migrations, identity politics and intercultural communications.