

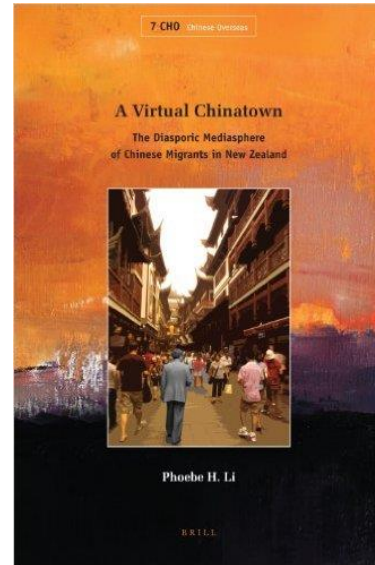
Phoebe H. Li, **A Virtual Chinatown: The Diasporic Mediasphere of Chinese Migrants in New Zealand**, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013, 216 pp., \$69.85 (hardcover).

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Over the last few decades, China's desire for economic growth, labor mobility, and global integration increased the size of Chinese diasporic communities around the globe. This process, in turn, created a greater need for media content that bridges the homeland and the host land, providing Chinese migrants with both connections to their place of origin and socialization resources in their new locality. An example of this relationship is presented in Phoebe H. Li's **A Virtual Chinatown: The Diasporic Mediasphere of Chinese Migrants in New Zealand**. Focusing on the 2005 New Zealand general election, Li discusses the ways in which the diaspora-oriented Chinese-language media has become a "virtual Chinatown," pulling together different Chinese migration waves in New Zealand into one mediated center. While usually referred to as a tangible common place for the Chinese community in diaspora, the Chinese-language media in New Zealand became a nontangible manifestation of a Chinatown.



The book contains an introduction and six chapters. The first four chapters offer a conceptual review for the empirical case study presented in chapters 5 through 7. In this review, the relations between Chinese migration and media are discussed extensively. The author highlights historical and contemporary developments in immigration law and policy in China as a whole and in the context of Chinese immigration to New Zealand in particular. Alongside this discussion, Chinese media outlets in New Zealand are presented as alternative forms of media for their audience. This interesting approach comes across as quite contradictory, as the author also argues, in a somewhat old-fashioned manner, for the power of media as "a window onto or a mirror of a society, and also, at the same time, a filter of or a platform for selected information and views" (p. 15).

The author's review of global Chinese movements and related political and legislative developments is, however, fascinating. Li presents a detailed account of the formation of the Chinese diaspora and Chinese identity over the 20th and 21st centuries. Identifying its various origins, the author establishes the complexity of not only studying the Chinese identity within China, but also sensitively addressing its nested essence in a diasporic context, where the characteristics of the host country are also taken into consideration. This review of the multidimensional Chinese identity is of great value to any scholar interested in studying the Chinese diaspora, but also for any scholar looking for a good example of an in-depth conceptualization of a complex identity in a global-media context.

Thus, Li presents the Chinese identity as a historical concept diversified and expanded by factors such as ethnicity, race, nationality, financial capital, and more. Defining the Chinese identity as a political entity, for example, means that one refers to the People's Republic of China, but not to the greater China. Emphasizing the ethnic component of the Chinese identity means that one addresses the sublocalities that create the notion of "China." These include Taiwanese, Malaysian Chinese, Cambodian Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, and other sub-Chinese cultures that differ in geographic settings, local cultural influences, and so on. To further complicate the issue, Li stresses how these identity descriptors are accompanied by other important factors such as nationality, class, language, and migration, which emphasize different histories that articulate the highly diverse Chinese identity. This nuanced discussion of Chinese identity (in China and in diaspora) is the book's most obvious strength. It provides a great example of the way in which the concept of identity should be addressed in scholarly research.

Set in Auckland, New Zealand, the fifth and sixth chapters of Li's *A Virtual Chinatown* focus on a media-based case study. Through an examination of media production and consumption alongside analysis of various media texts during the 2005 general election period, Li presents a snapshot of the reciprocal relations between media outlets and their audiences. This empirical section nicely addresses all three aspects of the media sphere—production, text, and reception. The book would benefit even further if a detailed discussion of the importance of such an all-encompassing mixed-method approach had been included. Nevertheless, the author does try to present a well-rounded representation of the case.

First, through a quantitative content analysis, the author addresses Auckland-based Chinese-language media, including radio shows, newspapers, and Internet websites. This analysis spans more than 13 weeks' worth of media content and includes the analysis of talk radio call-ins and user comments on election-related online news articles. Li also addresses some mainstream English-speaking New Zealand-based media to further ground her analysis in a local context. The author does not provide the reader with a sense of the representativeness of the outlets chosen for the content analysis. According to Li:

It is difficult to construct a complete picture of the new Chinese language media in New Zealand, in particular of print media. This is mainly because, to date . . . there is no comprehensive and systemic collection of these Chinese media by either public or private libraries. (p. 83)

The second stage of the study includes two focus group meetings with New Zealand-based Chinese audience members (overall, nine participants took part in these focus groups) and five qualitative interviews (two in-depth and three informal) conducted by the author with Chinese community members. The focus groups and interviews were followed by a third stage of data collection based on observations and additional interviews conducted with high-profile community members and Chinese media producers at social functions and gatherings of the Chinese community in New Zealand. By weaving these three stages together, the author discusses the ways in which media outlets cover political elections, the ways in which audiences interpret these media messages, and, finally, the way media producers perceive their local Chinese audience. This discussion leads up to chapters 6 and 7, which delineate the complex reciprocal relationship between Chinese media and their audiences. Here the author stresses that the reality of a given society is not mirrored by media outlets; instead it influences these outlets and the

content they produce. Since the local Chinese-language ethnic media in New Zealand depends on the local immigrant community for financial sustainability (mainly through advertising), many media outlets consider and respond to their audience's political reality, and have even been, at some points, influenced by the changing nature of the Chinese immigrants community in New Zealand.

Li's contribution to the field of Chinese diaspora and media is through the concept of the Chinese "new rich." This is a group of educated, wealthy, urban Chinese migrants who identify as anti-left, with conservative political tendencies. These new rich members of the Chinese community represent the changing nature of the Chinese diaspora in New Zealand. The community has transformed over the years from immigrants of the lower economic classes to the newcomers—the wealthy group of migrants depicted in the book. Invested in the prosperity and financial growth of China, this new rich community exemplifies the global scope of media and nationality in our age. The newcomers, according to the author, influenced media production for the Chinese community, revealing the two-way relations media and audiences hold. With a wish to make a political mark in New Zealand, the new rich led to more criticism of liberal local state authorities and more patriotic pride in the homeland. This important finding ties the book's small-scale contextual case study to the global influences of media outlets and audiences' experience.

There are a few missing parts in *A Virtual Chinatown*. The lack of a strong media theory backing the findings is apparent and a clearer explanation of the representativeness of the collected data is needed. Although the author incorporates into the analysis media-related concepts such as "imagined community" (drawing on Benedict Anderson's work) and "soft power" (though not referring to Joseph Nye's work in the book), she leaves out key scholars in migration and media studies. Through a discussion of Appadurai's (1996) writing, for example, the author could have stressed the importance of media for migrants in the process of creating a community in a new locality. Referencing Georgiou's (2006) focus on the city as a place of social diversity for migrants would have surely contributed to Li's argument about the shifting nature of Chinatown—from the physical, city-based location to a virtual, media-based sphere.

Nevertheless, this is still a good read that offers an extensive review of Chinese identity and migration as a whole, and in the context of New Zealand in particular. It illuminates the value of probing into the different manifestations of identity (be it an ethnic, religious, national, etc.) for understanding media consumption and production patterns. Li's discussion of the concept of "virtual Chinatown" is valuable for scholars interested in the role news and media sources play in the lives of migrants, and vice-versa. It stresses, in contrast to some of the positions presented in the theoretical portion of the book, that media outlets might be influenced by the public they serve rather than merely mirroring their reality, especially when the financial revenue of the media outlets is considered. In the context of this virtual Chinatown, the author provides an example of an analysis that addresses the full communication process (that is—from production, through the text, all the way to audience reception). This analysis is helpful for understanding the two-sided relations of media and audiences, and can be useful as an example for a media research methods class or for a study that addresses all layers of a media field via a mixed methods approach.

### References

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