Book Review: Melancholy Order

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HIST3029: Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

May 21, 2014

 Number 10, Spring 2015
http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org

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Melancholy Order and its Undefined Melancholia

In this book review I am going to approach the book in the following order. I will first introduce the premise of the book. Then I will explicate the book's main argument in terms of Saidian orientalism. The argument's merits will accordingly be examined. It will soon become clear, however, that such interpretation leaves the entire book fragmented. At the end I will entertain an approach of the topic of Asian migration in the framework of global history.

The author introduces two events that inspired him to take on this project. One is the almost ritualised, impersonal scene of border control. He comments on the modern passport, the main object of this ritual, as the convergence of one's private and public identity: "It embodies both the most private and the most bureaucratically alienating of identities. … [The personal particulars] enrich it as a token of personal history even as they entrench the bearer more deeply within the files and machinery of state surveillance" (McKeown 2008, 1).

The other is a personal one in which the mechanism of documentation resulted in alienation. He recounts the struggles in adopting his daughter from China. In the process it was revealed that his immigrant wife's identity was a different one in the American system than in the Chinese one. It was not until a bilingual document was found that her identity was restored and accepted. The episode not only testifies to the alienating migration system in which the documents precede the individuals, but also exposes the hostile, exclusive nature of documentation: "As far as the U.S. immigration service is concerned, however, any link to a pre-existing Zhu Zhi is irrelevant now that she has been inserted into cross-referenced domestic files" (360).

In *Melancholy Order*, the author traces the history of this alienating, "melancholy" phenomenon of Asian, predominantly Chinese migration. His critical premise is that the discourse of migration has been remarkably persistent: "the machinery of identification and border control has a much longer pedigree" (351). Finally, this premise brings us to his argument: "the narrative of how the principles of modern migration control were produced out of the restriction of Asian migration to the white settler nation" (15).

This narrative of marginalization, unmistakably, reminds the reader of Saidian Orientalism: "In short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 2003, 11). Of course, I am aware that Said's Orient and McKeown's Asia deal with different subjects. Still, the appropriation is useful as the two concur in their logic. Said describes Orientalism as a strategy based "on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without losing him the relative upper hand" (15). It is precisely this self-perpetuating strategy of discrimination and marginalization that Asian migration was subject to. The book narrates Asian migration in two major halves, the first one imagining the border control and the other implementing it. In these two dimensions I am going to identify Orientalism at work.

The theoretical discussion of Asian migration was a manifold articulation of an essentially *single* idea: that Asians are backward and hence unsuited for migration to Western countries. The author starts the discussion from the premodern, commercial context of indentured Chinese. While Indian indenture prospered within the British Empire, Chinese indentured emigration was severely curtailed in the wake of abuses and bad publicity (McKewon 77). On the one hand, the author points out a structural problem behind the Chinese case of indenture: because it took place in

various ports to equally various destinations, it eluded any central regulation. On the other hand, malicious accusations by the British and the U.S. deliberately condemned collaboration with China, or the "coolie trade" (77). The author summarises that Chinese business customs and economic practices were understood by Western traders as deeply abusive. It was thus established that Chinese were not to be associated with, not to be allowed into the Western civilisation.

Unsurprisingly, this was perpetuated in an ideological dimension. The author points at the convictions that shaped anti-Asian racism in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century : "convictions through accusations that Chinese refused to assimilate, were inculcated with a totalitarian culture that was incompatible with free societies" (123). This contention that the Chinese were abnormal, of course, was paired with one that normalised American society: "the conviction that self-governing societies should determine their own membership" (123). Here, Said's logic is fully manifest. The logic, be it economic or political, is invariably defined in a way in which the West, in this case the U.S., is given the relative upper hand.

One amusing instance of such self-reinforcing logic is the peripheral case of Natal Formula. Natal Formula refers to the immigration policy in the South African colony of Natal that required a European language test for the immigrants, which were mostly Indian (192-3). It is a sly construction of orientalism that once again imposed what is European to the foreign. The formula only purported to restrict the impecunious or ignorant immigrants, while it in fact was based on race or colour.

The way discriminating immigration policies took shape was just as bleak. A key moment in the implementation of migration policy was the advent of documented identity. Under the pretext of accountability and predictability, the United States immigration reform demanded migrants to be identified by documents only. This is

significant in two salient senses: one is that immigrants were thus enslaved to the forged document. The migrant was considered legal only if he could faithfully reproduce the identity according to standardised categories: “In the case of any discrepancy, the files were right and the migrant wrong” (240). Individuality was thus obliterated in a web of specific particulars. McKeown thus observes Foucault’s point that “the main achievement of identification procedures was not to document identities but to produce them” (18).

The other is the simultaneous rejection of any alternative, specifically Chinese, means of immigration. McKeown’s concise point is that “the very organization of Chinese migration was essentially illegalised” (241). The previous, Chinese method was characterised by its social nature. There were brokers and middlemen who guaranteed the identities of immigrant applicants. Interestingly, American consul McWade was seen to concede this practice prior to the reform, in which applicants staked one’s wealth to get recommendations of well-established meddlers (239). However, because of unyielding standardization, these interested parties were now condemned as “unscrupulous smugglers and hustlers” (240).

As a response, China as the inferior party could not but succumb to this enforcement. Tragically, the succeeding events exposed both external and internal limitations of the Chinese government. McKeown introduces post-1905 boycotters and their efforts to amend the discriminatory immigration laws as “doomed from the beginning” (302). They could neither address the external imposer of discrimination, nor consolidate the nation under one cause: “They were trapped between U.S. officials who could see them as nothing but an infringement on U.S. autonomy, and more radical Chinese who insisted that anything short of entire abrogation failed to address the root offense” (302).

Moreover, China faced further condemnations from the US consuls who blamed the boycott as an illegal obstruction of free trade. The result was a humbling acceptance of the discriminating policies for a temporary period of ten years. A regrettable reality for the Chinese was that "international problems could be solved only after China itself had grown strong and disciplined" (305).

Thus understood, *Melancholy Order* is a rigorous and compelling account of Orientalism applied to the subject of Asian migration to the West. It demonstrates that the West's othering of the East was articulated, rather tautologically, in economic, ideological, and diplomatic terms. At the same time, this diversity of scope is another great merit. Mongia writes on the intricacies of the book "In McKeown's analysis, these seemingly disparate strands in the making of a certain international and global formation … socio-political or ideological verities… institutional and bureaucratic structure… converge and cohere around the management of Asian exclusion from white settler colonies (Mongia 2009, 222).

It must be acknowledged, however, that the interpretation of "melancholy" as orientalising stems largely from my latitude. Strangely, the author himself does not offer any definition of the title. Then, it is worthwhile to investigate not only the "melancholy" but the "order" as well. In the following I am going to examine the book's further merits in the light of two possible interpretations of McKeown's "order." On the one hand, we can think of "order" in the collective sense: "A class, group, kind or sort of people, animals, or things, distinguished from others by character, quality or importance" (Oxford English Dictionary. Thus "melancholy order" can be understood as a collective mechanism of othering. McKeown brilliantly depicts the self-reinforcing and exclusive mechanism of othering in international politics. A lucid example is the case of Latin American nations under the influence of

the U.S. model. The author describes the symbolic significance of adopting discriminatory policies as "[preserving] the ideals of self-government from the threats of an uncivilised world" (319). This generated a secondary significance of the implementation: the capability to meet the standards that defined the nation's status (327). The implausible consequence was that many Latin American nations, for whom Asian migration was "at best a mere trickle," also banned Asians (321).

The other way to think of "order" is in procedural, methodical terms: "Regular or customary mode of procedure; a method of action; a customary practice, an established usage" (Oxford English Dictionary). In this case the emphasis is on the process rather than the actors. In particular, he presents a fascinating account of border control as a ritual. Properly understood, this is a development of the Foucauldian point of documenting identities; it looks into the enactment of the documentation that solidified it. Indeed, the concept of ritual here translates into the shared experience between unequal participants that confirm, although not necessarily being convinced by, the status quo: "Rituals can create and confirm the status of imperfect institutions and individuals, but only by constructing the framework within which that imperfection is judged in the first place" (272). The results of this ritual, he observes, are that not only the creation of Chinese immigrants' identities, but also the assertion of an order in which hierarchy was given concrete form.

At this point I would like to reconsider my appraisal and thereby discuss the book's problems. The book's biggest issue, interestingly, is the downside of my aforementioned reasoning. Championing the book as a rigorous attestation of Saidian Orientalism, admittedly, is a very reductive reading. Apparently I have considered China and the U.S. as exclusive representatives of a bilateral relationship, and to speculate on "order" as international politics. As a reader, I am unsure how

interpretive I can get with the author's disparate and diverse examples, because the representative value of his examples remains unclear.

On the one hand, my reductive reading is based on the author's statement that he will focus on the bilateral relationship of China and the U.S. As for China, McKeown seems to recognise it as the embodiment of an uncivilised and therefore victimised Asian state. As for America, he emphasises the fact that "unlike the British dominions, [it] was an independent nation state dealing directly with Asian nations" (16). From the onset of the discussion he excludes Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

On the other hand, this reduction does not capture the discussion in its entirety. In terms of Asian countries, examples of Indian and Japanese migration are introduced without being incorporated into the *melancholy* narrative. Satyagraha of India is considered as an alternative response to the Chinese boycott. While the Chinese boycott was fraught with tensions between state sovereignty, mass politics and migration control, Gandhi's alternative was marked by its spiritualizing elevation (308-9). McKeown ends the discussion with an open-ended praise that Gandhi "transformed participation in the enforcement of migration laws from an issue of political necessity and national honour, as it was with the Japanese, into an individual moral imperative" (317).

The example of Japanese migration is more pertinent and, by the same token, more problematic. Japan is an exceptional Asian state that enjoyed privileged membership in the "family of nations". McKewon, rather irresponsibly, is reluctant to account for the singular status of Japan. In one instance he mentions the country's military power—"this change in attitude [towards Japan] was *largely* an acknowledgement of military power"—and in another their legalistic expertise—"Japanese made very effective use of international law" (Italics mine, 154-5). Faced

with this exception, my Saidian framework exposes a fissure; that Japan overcame the gap is in contrast to the perennial *lower hand* that China was subject to.

The same fragmentation of McKeown's examples is true of colonizing nations. In Part II, the author discusses and compares a set of nations and their Chinese immigration laws. In particular, he focuses on individual interests that shaped specific laws. One interesting case is London and its authority to meddle with Australian legislation. The transoceanic British Empire had to implement an egalitarian and cosmopolitan view that often conflicted with the logic of othering of white settler nations.

Another exceptional case is Canada and its immigration policy. Canada, McKeown explains, was more willing to engage with Asian populations out of commercial interests. However, Canada's distinction between Japan and China is stated in an all-too-nonchalant voice: "Canada proved more willing to defer to Japanese complaints, but this was contingent on Japan's ability and willingness to control its own emigration" (200). This was only to be subverted in the wake of Russo-Japanese War when Japan began to loosen its emigration controls and make stronger demands. (202).

As such, I am but to wonder what melancholy order exactly is. Critics share this sense of disorientation in *Melancholy Order*. Kwee rightfully points out that "there is not much explanation of context, who the people he cited were, and what the significant of the departments they were representing was. … It is difficult to gauge how far their ideas were hegemonic" (Kwee 2011, 176).

In the final section I would like to consider the book within the framework of global history. My own understanding of the scope of global history is inspired by Schissler, who challenges the "[fixation] on quite narrow national paradigms" and

implores incorporating "social classes, groups, genders, ethnicities, and locales into the historical narrative" (Schissler 2005, 231). My predicament of coherent representation and fragmentation of migration may find resolution through the examination of it as global history. Admittedly, my interpretation of *Melancholy Order* so far has been trans-national, examining Chinese migration to the United States in the framework of these two countries. Accordingly, it seems worthwhile to consider the effectiveness of the concepts of civilisation and race in *Melancholy Order*.

Interestingly, from the onset, McKeown clarifies that he would focus on civilization in favour of race: "If race seems to be downplayed in this work in favour of a focus on 'civilisation' and technical discussions of law and administration, this is only because I want to emphasise the extent to which seemingly neutral vocabulary can redeploy principles of hierarchy and discrimination" (14). Indeed the reading of "order" in the collective sense has concurred with this notion. Othering has been done by societies. I have stated above that implementing anti-Asian immigration policies was of a matter of joining the exclusive membership of civilised states.

However, on certain occasions race seems to become more prominent than civilization. A telling case of interest is that of Chinese Americans. McKeown comments that the U.S. found itself in a dilemma because the very emulation of discriminatory policies by Central and Latin American countries resulted in the rejection of American citizens of Asian descent. Surprisingly, the U.S. is known to have conceded "the right, indeed the necessity, of a sovereign nation to control migration as it wished" (324). In other words, the U.S. found itself in a paradox as its claim as civilisation only applied to its non-Chinese citizens.

Thus seen, the case of Chinese Americans points at complexity. South American nations recognized a Chinese American's race before his nationality. Indeed the case of Asian Americans is central to the definition of the immigrant nation that is the United States. It is regrettable, therefore, that the author fails to address in more detail the possible conflicts between nationality, race and civilization.

In addition, this sense of conflict between civilization and race, and according neglect of the latter by the author is voiced by Erika Lee in her review of the book. She states that while McKewon's insistence on civilization as a guide is a "thoughtful and instructive approach to the study of Asian exclusion around the world, the lack of race as a category of analysis in explaining the deep-rooted and passionate motives … paints an incomplete picture" (Lee 2010, 885).

In this paper I have reviewed *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalisation of Borders*. I have introduced the argument and merits of the book as a rigorous appropriation of Saidian Orientalism. To reiterate, the application of Saidian notion to (East) Asian migration itself is McKeown's greatest achievement in this book. At the same time I expressed doubt at the rather fragmented and unresolved nature of his discussion, in particular borrowing from concepts of global history. Perhaps, the author should have defined the parameters and answer, *Melancholy Order*, to his presentation rather than embellishing it with enigmatic quotations of Kafka. Then its value as a work of national or global history would have made a more substantial, more easily contextualised impact.

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