

Introduction to a Forum on Migration in Early Medieval China

WEN-YI HUANG  AND XIAOFEI TIAN 

HOW DO WE THINK about migration? This question was the topic of the first installment of the 2019 Tanner Lectures on Human Values, given by the exiled Russian journalist Masha Gessen, at Harvard University. Gessen, who had reported on immigrants, began with a story of a Montenegro man whose family fled to the United States when he was five. Then they told a second story, then a third, followed by fifty-four more stories of individuals' sorrows, despair, and dreams. Gessen's intent was to bring to life individual migrants, underscoring their diverse experiences. Individuality and complexity matter, because too often, people on the move are reduced to numbers in the news and in the eyes of governments.

Humanizing migration is challenging, even more so when it comes to the movement of people in premodern times. This can be partly attributed to the limitation imposed by extant sources. Ancient authors hardly reflected on migration as an independent phenomenon. Even when we find numbers and other data in traditional texts that may indicate the scale and complexity of a migration, such information by itself fails to convey palpable experiences of displacement. What sources can we draw on to tell stories of historical migration? What insights can we learn from such stories and contribute to contemporary migration studies? The four essays in this forum explore the answers to these questions.

The temporal focus of these essays is the fourth through the sixth century CE, a time of unprecedented mobility of people, texts, goods, and ideas, when “all the major events had to do with migration.”¹ From the fourth century onward, the vast territory now known as China was a multipower world divided into distinct polities. Internecine and interstate warfare, accompanied by floods, epidemics, and famine, drove approximately a million people from their homeland in the Yellow River basin to the lands south of the Yangzi River.² In 317, northern elite émigrés, forced from their old capital Luoyang by the Xiongnu army, established the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420 CE), with its capital in modern Nanjing, succeeded by four consecutive southern states (420–589 CE). Southbound migration changed the Yangzi River basin from what had once been

Xiaofei Tian (stian@g.harvard.edu) is Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University. Wen-Yi Huang (wenyihuangtw@gmail.com) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taiwan.

¹Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, *Chen Yinke Wei Jin nanbeichao shi jiangyan lu* 陳寅恪魏晉南北朝史講演錄 [Lectures on Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties] (Anhui: Huangshan shushe, 1987); Xiaofei Tian, *Visionary Journeys: Travel Writings from Early Medieval and Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

²Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, “Jin Yongjia sangluan hou zhi minzu qianxi” 晉永嘉喪亂後之民族遷徙 [The ethnic migration after the upheaval during the Yongjia era of the Jin], *Yanbing xuebao* 15 (1934).

one of the largest wetlands in Asia into a major agricultural region and one of the most populous areas in the world.³ It also transformed the south from a land traditionally considered peripheral to the “central plains” of North China into a new political and cultural center. It was, however, a traumatic event, both for the dislocated migrants and for the local population of the south, which was stratified into a Han people and a large portion of non-Han peoples in multiple ethnic groups and linguistic types.⁴ The northern elite émigrés strove to assert sovereignty over the indigenous peoples and resorted to violent means to suppress their constant revolts.

North China, on the other hand, went through a series of Inner Asian regimes. After a tumultuous era referred to by traditional Chinese historians as the “Sixteen Kingdoms of the Five Barbarians,” the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE), founded by the Tabghatch clan of the Xianbei people, unified the north in 439; the Wei split a century later, and the fractured political order was not to be restored until the reunification of the Chinese empire under the Sui dynasty in 589. This period saw many forms of state-organized mobility, such as cross-border resettlements of large numbers of war captives, enforced movements of soldiers to border regions or newly subdued territories, and capital relocation that forcibly moved imperial family members and court officials as well as commoners from an old political center to the new one.⁵ The last constituted a type of compulsory migration unique to early medieval China.

Given its large scale, distinctive features, and far-reaching impact, migration in early medieval China is a major chapter not only in Chinese history but also in world history. It has, however, rarely been treated as an independent subject in English-language scholarship. Studies of Chinese migration often focus on the modern times or its modern phase, which is dated to the sixteenth century.⁶ The essays in this forum not only intend to fill this gap but also attempt to complicate the picture of migration by raising broader questions about migration’s impact on both migrants and the local population that was affected by the flow of new settlers.

The first two studies focus on the southward migration in the fourth century and its aftermath. Evan Nicoll-Johnson uses the case of Guo Pu (276–324), a northern immigrant writer, scholar, and prognosticator, to analyze how early medieval writers negotiated individual and collective memory through anecdotes and biographies of the first-generation migrants who crossed the Yangzi River in the early fourth century. Xiaofei Tian adopts the concept of settler colonialism to redefine the northern migrants who asserted sovereignty and privileges over the indigenous peoples in the south. Focusing

³Robert Marks, *China: An Environmental History*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

⁴W. South Coblin, “Migration History and Dialect Development in the Lower Yangtze Watershed,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65, no. 3 (2002): 529–43.

⁵Shi Nianhai, 史念海, “Shiliuguo shiqi ge geju bazhu de qianxi renkou: shangpian; xiapian” 十六國時期各割據霸主的遷徙人口: 上下篇 [The migrant populations in the various states during the period of the Sixteen Kingdoms], *Zhongguo lishi dili luncong* 3 (1992): 89–116; 4: 1–28; Misaki Yoshiaki 三崎良章, *Goko Jūrokkoku: Chūgoku shijō no minzoku daiidō* 五胡十六國—中国史上の民族大移動 [The five Hu and Sixteen Kingdoms: The great ethnic migration in Chinese history] (Tokyo: Tōhō shoten, 2012).

⁶Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

on a fifth-century collection of “anomaly stories” compiled by an imperial prince, Tian argues that it demonstrates complex issues of class, ethnicity, and gender in the settler colonialists’ domination of and negotiations with the resistant local population. Wen-Yi Huang’s essay likewise scrutinizes migration from the receiving end, but it turns attention to the northern counterpart of the southern regimes—the Northern Wei. By examining the unique measures that the Northern Wei deployed to control the physical movement of migrants, Huang evaluates, through transmitted texts and excavated funerary inscriptions, the ways in which state policies affected migrants. Jin Xu’s essay gives an innovative reading of the reliefs on a sixth-century stone coffin that belonged to a Sogdian couple who had migrated from Uzbekistan and eventually settled in Chang’an (modern Xi’an), suggesting that they present an unprecedented visual narrative of migration along the Silk Road with a hybrid of Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Sogdian motifs and imageries.

Temporality, whose role in shaping the spatial experience of migration is increasingly acknowledged by scholars, is a recurrent theme in the forum.⁷ How did “river crossing” mark the traversing of a geographical boundary and of a temporal border dividing “before” and “after” (Nicoll-Johnson)? How did migrants’ life courses, from this life to the next, materialize in a three-dimensional sarcophagus (Xu)? How was “time” turned into an essential tool for migration control, as manifested in waiting for entry to a new country and permission to integrate with the host community (Huang)? How did the descendants of the first-generation settler-colonialists as members of the ruling class deal with the sense of alienation perpetuated by the social structure created by their ancestors even after several generations (Tian)? Together, these essays stress multiple temporalities and temporal disjuncture embedded in migration processes—the state’s and migrants’ different experiences of time, for instance—and presented through material remains of the past (i.e., the temporality of the viewer vis-à-vis the object). They participate and intervene in the discussions of migration by offering a historical perspective, bringing a fresh view of the period for the insiders of the field of medieval Chinese studies, and opening a window for those on the outside.

While migration may have been a universal phenomenon of all times, how people experience and respond to it can vary from period to period, place to place, social group to social group, and person to person. By employing a broad range of primary sources from historiographical writings, anecdotal compilations, funerary inscriptions to material objects, the essays in this forum seek to highlight the complexities of migration in a historical period characterized by fragmentation and the reconstitution of political, social, cultural, ethnic, and spiritual realms, a period that bears uncanny resemblance to the world we live in today.

⁷Shelly Chan, *Diaspora’s Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018).