

Internal Exile and Industrial Modernity: Rethinking Diaspora in Anchee Min's *Pearl of China* and Leslie T. Chang's *Factory Girls*

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ABSTRACT

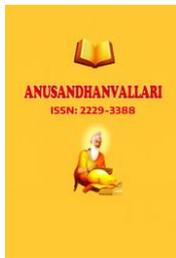
Diaspora has traditionally been theorized through the lens of transnational displacement and exile. This paper argues that internal displacement within modern nation-states can generate structural conditions indistinguishable from classical diaspora, thereby requiring a theoretical redefinition of diaspora beyond geography. Through a comparative reading of Anchee Min's *Pearl of China* and Leslie T. Chang's *Factory Girls*, the study demonstrates how Maoist ideological persecution and post-reform rural-to-urban labour migration produce forms of diasporic consciousness shaped by estrangement, hybridity, and fractured belonging. In *Pearl of China*, political legitimacy is revoked through ideological surveillance, rendering subjects symbolically expelled within their homeland. In *Factory Girls*, economic mobility is structurally constrained by class and gender hierarchies, producing alienated yet aspirational identities. By extending diaspora theory to encompass internal migration and political estrangement, this study reconceptualizes diaspora as a condition of negotiated belonging produced by power rather than border crossing alone.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, Internal Displacement, Capitalist Modernity, Hybridity, Labour.

Diaspora has evolved from its classical association with exile into a complex framework for analyzing migration, displacement, and negotiated belonging. While diaspora studies have primarily privileged transnational movement, less attention has been given to internal forms of displacement that generate comparable conditions of estrangement, hybridity, and fractured subjectivity. Through a comparative reading of *Pearl of China* and *Factory Girls*, this paper argues that both ideological persecution under Maoism and rural-to-urban labour migration in post-reform China produce forms of diasporic consciousness. Drawing on Avtar Brah's concept of "homing desire," Stuart Hall's theory of identity as becoming, Homi Bhabha's "Third Space," Robin Cohen's typology of diasporas, and Marx's notion of alienation, the study expands diaspora theory beyond territorial border-crossing to encompass internal displacement structured by state power and capitalist modernity.

Internal displacement in modern nation-states can produce structural conditions indistinguishable from classical diaspora, thereby requiring a theoretical redefinition of diaspora beyond geography. Migration, while historically ubiquitous, acquires distinctive contours in modern contexts shaped by intensified transnational networks and rapid sociopolitical transformation. Contemporary diasporas are marked not merely by movement but by the production of hybrid identities negotiated within asymmetrical structures of class, gender and state power. Memory functions as a critical site of mediation, enabling displaced subjects to reconstruct belonging through ongoing reinterpretations of past and present.

Scholarship on diaspora has largely focused on transnational displacement, collective memory, and the politics of return. Postcolonial theorists such as Hall and Bhabha have reconceptualized identity as dynamic and relational, emphasizing hybridity and positionality. However, comparatively little work has examined how internal migration within rapidly industrializing nation-states complicates classical diaspora models. This study



contributes to that emerging conversation by reading contemporary Chinese narratives through an expanded diasporic lens.

Avtar Brah, in *Cartographies of Diaspora*, emphasizes that diaspora must not be reduced to simple movement. She argues that diaspora is marked by the imagery of “journey,” but “not every journey can be understood as diaspora” (Brah 182). What distinguishes diaspora, according to Brah, is the formation of communities in displacement and the presence of what she calls a “homing desire,” which is distinct from the literal desire to return to a geographical homeland (Brah 197). This formulation destabilizes essentialist notions of origin and reframes identity as dynamic and relational.

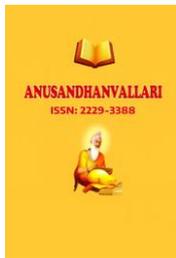
Similarly, A. N. Dwivedi in “Diasporic Writings in English” observes that immigrants “exercise a great impact on the culture, society and history of that country” (Dwivedi 1). His statement underscores that diaspora is not merely about loss but also about cultural transformation and participation. Shrawan K. Sharma in “The World of Diasporic Poetry in Canada” further elaborates that diasporic consciousness includes “desire for the return to their roots, feelings of nostalgia, remembrance of the homeland with the sense of loss that informs the diasporic consciousness and the experience of a painful process of acculturation and adjustment” (Sharma 15). Together, these perspectives illuminate diaspora as a field of tension between belonging and alienation. These formulations implicitly assume cross-border migration, thereby leaving internal displacement under-theorized.

In *Pearl of China*, ideological nationalism under Mao does not merely produce political repression; it manufactures internal exile. Willow’s arrest reveals how the state converts intimacy and transnational association into criminality. The denial of due process illustrates what diaspora theorists identify as enforced estrangement: displacement need not involve crossing borders when one’s social and political belonging is revoked within the homeland itself.

In *Factory Girls*, migration appears voluntary, yet structural constraints circumscribe agency. Surveillance of workers where even casual social interaction becomes suspect reveals a disciplinary regime reminiscent of Foucauldian control, though embedded within capitalist production. Migrants are technically mobile, but withheld wages and contractual precarity immobilize them economically. The metaphor of being “caught” (Chang 5-8) signals entrapment within industrial modernity rather than physical coercion. Wu Chunming’s declaration, “to die poor is a sin” (Chang 83) articulates an aspirational ethic shaped by neoliberal transformation. Migration, therefore, is not solely a narrative of victimhood; it is also a project of self-fashioning. Yet this self-fashioning occurs within asymmetrical structures of class and gender. The migrants’ inability to consume what they produce exemplifies Marxian alienation, reinforcing their estrangement from both commodity and self.

Despite China’s rapid economic growth, migrant lives remain precarious. Chang vividly characterizes Dongguan as a landscape of “materialism, environmental ruin, corruption . . . stress, striving, and chaos” (Chang 37). The inability of workers to afford the very products they manufacture echoes Marx’s theory of alienation, wherein labourers are estranged from the commodities they produce.

Min’s prolonged imprisonment, extended and reduced according to her marital association, demonstrates how identity becomes administratively constructed by state authority. As she observes, “My sentence depended not on what I had done but on whom I was connected to” (Min 212). The individual is thus stripped of autonomous subjectivity and redefined through political affiliation. Professional competence and intellectual agency become irrelevant under ideological scrutiny. This condition closely parallels Marx’s description of alienation, wherein “the worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces . . . and becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates” (Marx 71). More fundamentally, Marx argues that alienated labour estranges the individual from “his own body, external nature, his mental life and his human life” (72). In Min’s narrative, this estrangement extends beyond economic labour to political existence itself: the



state's revocation of legitimacy renders the subject internally exiled, geographically present yet symbolically expelled from the social body.

Language and identity further complicate migrant experience. In Dongguan, local residents speak Cantonese while factories operate in Mandarin, reinforcing insider–outsider divisions. Migrants are often labeled *Waidiren* (outsiders) highlighting their marginal status. Gender intensifies vulnerability: young women face exploitative labour practices, emotional manipulation, and social insecurity. Yet migration also provides limited empowerment through wages, education, and exposure to new possibilities. By situating rural migrants as *Waidiren*, urban discourse produces an internal otherness comparable to transnational diasporic marginalization. The boundary here is administrative and cultural rather than territorial. Thus, internal migration replicates many structural features of diaspora: rupture, memory, negotiation, and unstable belonging.

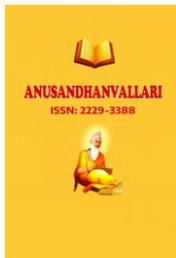
Diasporic subjects continually negotiate the meaning of 'home.' For some, home exists as memory; for others, it becomes an imagined future. Families dispersed across regions embody fragmentation, yet also resilience. Migrants returning to villages often conceal their hardships, reinforcing the illusion of urban success. Assimilation into urban culture may offer opportunity but can simultaneously produce identity erosion.

Stuart Hall reconceptualizes identity as a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a fixed essence. In his influential essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall argues that cultural identity is not something already completed, but something that is "constantly producing and reproducing itself anew, through transformation and difference." He distinguishes between two ways of thinking about identity: one that sees identity as a shared cultural essence, and another that views identity as a matter of becoming as well as being. Hall writes, "Cultural identity . . . is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 225). This perspective is particularly relevant to *Factory Girls*, where migrant women continually reconstruct themselves in response to urban modernity. Their identities are not rooted solely in village origins but are reshaped through labour, language adaptation, and exposure to industrial capitalism. Similarly, in *Pearl of China*, Pearl's identity is neither wholly American nor entirely Chinese; it evolves through historical rupture and political displacement. Hall's emphasis on positionality and identity as shaped by power relations and historical context clarifies how migrants in both texts experience exclusion while simultaneously forming new subjectivities.

Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory deepens the discussion of hybridity. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha introduces the concept of the "Third Space," an in-between site where new cultural meanings are negotiated. For Bhabha, hybridity is not mere mixture but a subversive strategy that unsettles dominant narratives. He writes, "It is in the emergence of the interstices the overlap and displacement of domains of difference that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha 2).

The migrant characters in *Factory Girls* inhabit precisely this "interstitial" space. They are neither fully rural nor fully urban, neither entirely traditional nor wholly modern. Their identities emerge in the overlap between village memory and city aspiration. In *Pearl of China*, Pearl's position between America and China exemplifies Bhabha's Third Space. Her cultural hybridity disrupts nationalist binaries. However, Bhabha also reminds us that hybridity operates within unequal power structures. Migrants negotiate identity within asymmetrical systems shaped by state control, capitalism, and gender hierarchy. Bhabha further argues that hybridity "entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 5), yet in practice, migrants often confront imposed hierarchies.

Robin Cohen provides a sociological classification of diasporas in *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Cohen distinguishes among victim diasporas (e.g., Jewish, Armenian), labour diasporas, imperial diasporas, trade diasporas, and cultural diasporas. His framework helps situate the texts within broader migration patterns.



Cohen writes, “Diasporas are formed by a combination of forced and voluntary movements, and they are sustained by a collective memory of the homeland” (Cohen 26). This typology is useful for distinguishing between the political exile depicted in *Pearl of China* and the labour migration portrayed in *Factory Girls*. The former aligns with aspects of political or victim diaspora under Maoist persecution, while the latter corresponds to internal labour diaspora driven by economic transformation. Cohen’s framework also allows one to complicate the definition of diaspora by including internal migration within nation-states, especially in contexts like China, where rural-to-urban movement produces conditions comparable to transnational displacement.

Both the novels chosen for study reveal migration as a dialectical process simultaneously enabling and estranging. Political exile in *Pearl of China* demonstrates how the state produces internal displacement by revoking legitimacy and belonging. Labour migration in *Factory Girls* illustrates how capitalism generates mobility that is structurally constrained by class and gender hierarchies. By extending diaspora theory to encompass internal migration and ideological persecution, this study challenges the assumption that diaspora requires transnational movement. Instead, diaspora emerges as a condition of negotiated belonging shaped by memory, power, and historical rupture. As Hall suggests, identity is always in process; as Bhabha argues, it is formed in interstitial spaces. Yet these spaces are never neutral they are structured by state authority and economic asymmetry. Diaspora, therefore, is best understood not as loss alone, nor as hybridity alone, but as a continuous negotiation between displacement and self-fashioning.

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