Conceptualizing the Chinese World:
Jinan University, Nanyang Migrants, and Trans-Regionalism, 1900-1941

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My doctoral dissertation (expected completion 2010-2011) is a project which links the historiographies of both modern China and Chinese migration while being informed by the latest multidisciplinary scholarship on transnationalism. Many historians have tended to address the perceived Euro-centrism in pioneering American scholarship on modern China (including the work of John King Fairbank) by emphasizing domestic developments which occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Numerous historians of Chinese migration lack training in Chinese history. Their writings therefore do not sufficiently deal with developments in China despite their Sino-centric “Chinese diaspora” rhetoric which emphasizes the role of the Chinese mainland as the point of origin for migration. I instead argue that there is a need for a more balanced understanding of China’s place in the Chinese world. Greater emphasis on Chinese migration and maritime activity (particularly after 1800 when migration out of China began to peak) can constitute a new non-Eurocentric and non-isolationist approach towards understanding China. Additionally, my approach places equal importance on both destination countries and the point of origin in research on Chinese migration by examining their interactive relationship. Doing so enables me to avoid being Sino-centric. I chose as my case study the history of Jinan University (Jinan Daxue) (now based in Guangzhou, but founded in Nanjing during 1906) because it was the first school in China for Chinese migrants and their offspring who wished to return to the mainland for their studies. Educational institutions have been under-examined in studies on modern China and Chinese migration. Also, there are no monographs in any language on this illustrious institution’s history beyond official and semi-official accounts. Through an analysis of Jinan’s history, I hope to shed light on governmental policies on education, migration and maritime activity during the late Qing and Republican periods in Chinese history, and how such attitudes related to other policies. More importantly, I am especially interested in the experiences of the people who studied or worked at Jinan since many of them travelled between China and other regions such as the Nanyang (Southern Ocean or South Seas) (now Southeast Asia, which was the key destination for Chinese migration). These students, researchers, and alumni interacted with non-Chinese peoples and influences, a reflection of the multi-faceted, trans-regional nature of the Chinese world. My concept of “trans-regionalism” builds on ideas related to transnationalism, and thus emphasizes the need to contextualize China against the broader backdrop of East Asia and Southeast Asia.