

Michele Statz, *Lawyering an Uncertain Cause: Immigration Advocacy and Chinese Youth in the U.S.*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2018, 256 pp., Paperback: \$27.95, ISBN 978-0-8265-2209-2

My overall impression of *Lawyering an Uncertain Cause* is as follows: after every paragraph, this book makes the reader wish for a photographic memory to capture every fact, story, and insight that Michele Statz expertly presents. At first glance, she purports to focus on the niche issue of how undocumented, Fujianese youths migrate to the United States, and how their lawyers and the legal system sculpt the youths' motivations and stories to fit into a preconceived narrative of unaccompanied youth. However, this book covers this issue and much more without feeling overwhelming or complicated, making it applicable, — I would even venture to say mandatory — for any adult who seeks to better understand the dichotomies between adults and children, moral and legal issues, or even expectations versus realities.

To fully appreciate this review, I believe that it's best to understand the two players involved: Michele Statz, the author of *Lawyering an Uncertain Cause*, and Myself. Statz is an anthropologist of law, and an Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota Medical School. Before beginning her field research for *Lawyering an Uncertain Cause*, she spent many years living in China, where she studied Mandarin and Tibetan. This novel is the product of her interviews and relationships with twenty-five apprehended, unaccompanied Fujianese youths, as well as interviews with nearly one hundred lawyers. Statz is quick to qualify herself at the beginning of her novel as someone “not having a JD [...] not a young person, Chinese, or a young migrant” (22); however, I believe that these qualities, or lack thereof, enable her to remain a documentarian and anthropologist who can be both impartial while also actively involved in the dialogue. Like Statz, I too can qualify myself as distinct from the actors in *Lawyering an Uncertain Cause*. I am a law student, but not yet a practicing attorney, and I am an adult, yet I am still considered a young person, given that I'm in my early 20s, and because I have always been a full-time student. Statz's personal qualities shaped the way in which she interpreted her research, just as my qualities shaped the way in which I read and enjoyed her novel.

The theme of this book is the legal and factual context of undocumented, Chinese teenagers migrating to the U.S. from the Fujian Province. Each year, around 1500 Chinese youths between the ages of 15 and 17 migrate alone to the United States. The majority of these youths come from the Fujian Province in China, specifically, the villages near the provincial capital of Fuzhou. The motivations for why these youth migrate are rooted in parents' expectations and desires, older friends' encouragement, and socioeconomic pressures to succeed financially. Once these youths are apprehended at U.S. borders or ports, they are quickly introduced to overworked and underpaid attorneys and civil servants from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

Many of the attorneys who begin working with the Fujianese youths are “cause lawyers.” Statz defines such lawyers as “individuals who use legal skills to pursue political or moral commitments. Importantly, these commitments include but also transcend direct client service” (2). Although the goals of some of these lawyers exceed the interests of their clients, the Fujianese youths' goals focus on beginning work so that they may return money to their families in Fujian, and so that they may begin to pay off their debts. Most of them end up accumulating enormous fees while migrating: the average fee owed to smugglers — “snakeheads” — is around \$80,000 USD (4). These youths also strive to be able to receive high school degrees, GEDs, or even college educations. At a minimum, they seek to be able to remain in the U.S. legally by obtaining such permissions as a T-visa, or status accorded through Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJ). This is a very general overview of the subject matter covered in Statz's book.

Statz begins her novel with a lengthy initial chapter that functions as an introduction. In this chapter, she explains her interest in the topic of undocumented, Fujianese youth, and also the various conclusions that she reaches regarding the dynamics between what these children want, versus what their attorneys want as they navigate the legal processes involved in migration to the U.S. In Chapter 2, she provides an overview of the relevant components of the immigration system for unaccompanied minors. She also discusses issues of bureaucracy, restrictions on time and funding, and as well as the various barriers that attorneys face while representing these clients, including the fact that almost all of their Fujianese clients are teenagers. This chapter also delves into the topic of “cause lawyering” in terms of how lawyers define their cause, and how their clients’ individual interests relate to the overarching cause. This is followed by a lengthy discussion of Fujian and the youths’ personal perspectives in Chapter 3. At this point, Statz discusses the motivations behind migration to the U.S., as well as the cultural understanding of family and responsibility. In Chapter 4, Statz returns to the ways in which attorneys shape the Fujianese youths’ stories and motivations to conform to a perceived working narrative. This includes the reduction of family, age, and culture to simplified categories that will ideally satisfy categorical, statutory language. Chapter 5 traces the dramatic, personal journey of a specific Fujianese youth through his time in the U.S. legal system. Chapter 6 provides Statz’s own views and commentary regarding the impact and necessity of the narrative forced on Fujianese youth by their attorneys. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes Statz’s reflections as an anthropologist.

Lawyering an Uncertain Cause is thoroughly interesting and well-researched. For much of her research, Statz correctly relies on her one-on-one interviews with undocumented, Fujianese migrants, as well as many attorneys who work within various facets of the field. She is also unafraid to provide her own thoughts throughout the novel, as she compares and contrasts her data. For example, Statz writes:

I remain unsure about the nature of Nelson’s work, though many of the cause lawyers I interviewed readily identified private, Chinatown-based attorneys like Nelson as allied with snakehead smuggling organizations. At the same time, a noted scholar of Chinese migration referred me to Nelson, and in our conversation he exhibited a deep understanding of and concern for Fujianese youth. While his motives may be disparaged in certain circles, I appreciated Nelson for his knowledge and, in hindsight, for unintentionally serving as something of a wrench in the professional dichotomy many nonprofit cause lawyers extol—namely themselves as needed moral and political activists in contrast with conventional lawyers (or, worse, sinister snakehead attorneys) as value-neutral “hired guns” (112).

By writing in this manner, Statz actively includes herself in the narrative. Though the novel touches on legal issues and institutions, the writing and explanations provided make it enjoyable to lawyers and non-lawyers alike. In fact, I believe that any adult seeking to be well-rounded should read this book. I imagine that Statz’s training as an anthropologist and professor makes her especially adept at understanding the degree to which certain topics and terms need to be defined for the reader; as such, she allocates an appropriate amount of time to explaining and expanding on relevant facets and perspectives as a means of bringing her readers along for the ride.

In terms of constructive criticism, there were times while reading when I thought that the writing style felt overworked. This was particularly evident in Chapter 1, as Statz endeavors to provide both an introduction while also inserting constant quips regarding her overall thesis. For example, Statz writes:

To illuminate this dissonance, I deliberately document the practices and aims of attorneys alongside—and sometimes against—the agency and age-specific positionalities of young

Chinese migrants in removal proceedings. Without diminishing a young person's tenuous legal status or her unique social and emotional needs (Atkins et al. 2008; Goździak 2008), my research engages young people's expert understandings of legality and inequality (Ozer 2016; Stepick and Dutton Stepick 2002) and, throughout, acknowledges that identities are "forged in relation to law, in accommodation and in resistance to it" (Coombe 1995, 795) (8).

Such paragraphs left me feeling rather confused, even if they are really only apparent in the first chapter. I am also left wondering how Statz's work will engage with the overall dialogue concerning undocumented, Fujianese youths. Does she hope to urge attorneys to shift the ways in which they approach cases? or does she hope to simply inform both the attorneys and youths about her understanding of the issues as an anthropologist? The answers to these questions are unclear as the novel is concluded.

Overall, I believe that this novel takes a relatively unknown issue and presents it to the audience in a way that leaves the reader feeling informed and improved as an individual.

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