

Beiträge zur Regional- und
Migrationsforschung, Band 4

Maggi Wai-Han Leung

Chinese Migration in Germany

Making Home in Transnational Space



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Beiträge zur Regional- und Migrationsforschung

Herausgegeben von Thomas Geisen

Bei den „Beiträgen zur Regional- und Migrationsforschung“ handelt es sich um die Schriftenreihe des Institutes für Regional- und Migrationsforschung (IRM) (www.irm-trier.de). Für die Aktivitäten des Institutes bildet die geographische Einheit der Region einen wichtigen Bezugspunkt. Daher soll die Komplexität und die Vielschichtigkeit regionaler Entwicklungsprozesse untersucht werden, von besonderem Interesse sind dabei die Formen und Bedingungen regionaler Mobilität. Neben der Regionalforschung ist die Migrationsforschung der zweite Forschungsschwerpunkt des Institutes. Hier geht es um die Untersuchung der Ursachen, Bedingungen und Folgen von Migrationsprozessen. Beide Bereiche werden letztlich aufeinander bezogen, um die Bedeutung und den Zusammenhang von Migrationsprozessen für regionale Entwicklungen aufzuzeigen und in ihrer Relevanz zu analysieren. Im Rahmen der Schriftenreihe „Beiträge zur Regional- und Migrationsforschung“ werden neben eigenen Forschungs- und Publikationsstätigkeiten auch innovative Forschungsarbeiten Dritter veröffentlicht.

Contributions to Regional and Migration Research

Edited by Thomas Geisen

“Contributions to Regional and Migration Research” is a publication of the Institute for Regional and Migration Research (IRM) (www.irm-trier.de). This series reflects the activities of the institute which focus on the geographical unit, “region.” Regional processes of development will be analyzed in their complexity, especially regarding their impact on manners and conditions of regional mobility. The second main research topic is migration research which focuses on the reasons, conditions, and consequences of migration processes. Both fields of research relate to each other and will be used to analyze migration processes and their relevance to regional development. In addition to the publication of own research findings and publication projects, there are also other innovative and informative research results in the series, “Contributions to Regional and Migration Research.”

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Finally, I take full responsibility for any errors that might appear in this book.

Hong Kong, 2004

Maggi Leung

1. Introduction

For most people migration is about mobility, movement from place to place. Migrants *do* move from place to place. But the places where these sojourners make their homes are as important an identifier in their stories as are their movements. This book is about the processes of home-making among ethnic Chinese migrants in Germany. Considering the economic, social and psychological aspects of home-making, it seeks to deepen our understanding of the ways in which individuals and communities leave their homes, establish new ones and maintain multiple homes in transnational space. "Home" in the sense employed here is more than merely a roof with four walls. Rather it is a multi-dimensional and dynamic place whose foundations are laid both into the ground and into one's heart. Home can be a place (a country, a village or a house), a social unit (family, extended family or community), or a perception (a feeling of belonging or being sheltered); home can acquire different meanings for an individual with changing times/space. Where precisely migrants feel at home (or not) informs their identities, their perceptions of life's quality and chances, as well as their further mobility plans. Hence in migration research, an understanding of migrants' ideas of home and the processes involved in their making a home is at least as important as charting their movements across space.

In this book "home" and "home-making" are explored in relationship to two increasingly popular concepts found in today's migration literature, namely "diaspora" and "transnationalism". These two notions may be said to share a love-hate relationship with "home". Either a specific home or an original homeland is usually considered to be at the heart and soul of a diaspora. Diasporic communities are conventionally understood to be reminiscing and yearning to return to their former home. In contrast transnational living is commonly identified with complete unrootedness and transience. Transnationals are constantly on-the-go, jet-setting so to speak, being here and there, cruising around the world with the bearable lightness of their homelessness. This book questions such presuppositions. A diaspora is here viewed as a dynamic social space where many possible ideas of "home" and "belonging" can co-exist. Nor is transnationality here identified deterministically with constant mobility and aloofness. Instead an effort has been made to anchor these transnational transactions and understand them as very concrete activities.

Conceptualising “home” among migrants is particularly intriguing to the researcher. More so than for those who have not moved, migrants are frequently involved in imagining, creating, unmaking and moving homes. How do migrants establish homes through their mobility? What factors do they consider when they anchor their homes in transnational space? How free are they to lay a claim to a home place or to feel as though they belong? How do these feelings of “being at home” and “belonging” affect their life strategies and future mobility plans?

This book explores the home-making processes of Chinese migrants in Germany. While a body of literature on overseas Chinese in Europe is slowly taking shape (e.g. Benton and Pieke 1998, Christiansen 2003), the present book ventures into a research terrain that is mostly uncharted. Accounts of the life experiences among Chinese in Germany have been scant and non-theoretical. This work sets out to expand our empirical knowledge of contemporary Chinese migration to Germany and to address the conceptual silence in the existing body of work. Before turning to the theoretical concepts that frame this research, an overview of migration issues specific to the German context is in order.

To Be or Not To Be ... An Immigration Country

As a matter of fact, one out of every four people in Germany is a migrant. There is however hitherto no comprehensive concept [for immigration]. We consider the so-called Stüssmuth-Commission a historic document because it confirms that Germany is an immigration country.¹ (Translation)

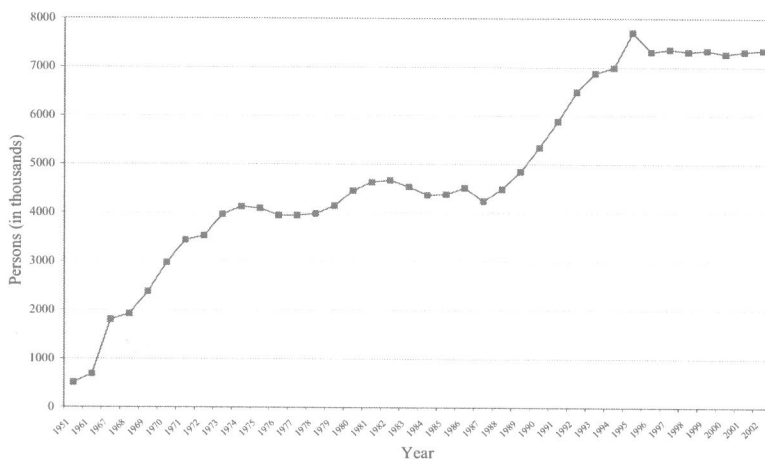
(Ausländerbeirat Saarbrücken: 28)

Over seven million people without German nationality officially live in the Federal Republic, comprising 9% of the total population (Figure 1). It is quite astonishing to realise that only recently did one read in the above quoted statement from 2002 the “fact” that Germany had become an immigration country. This statement of confirmation issued by the Foreigner Affairs Office in Saarbrücken serves to counterpoint the insistence by conservative politicians and a large portion of the German public that “*Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland*” (Germany is not an immigra-

¹ The so-called Stüssmuth-Commission, or officially the Commission on Immigration, was set up in 2000 to review Germany’s laws on nationality and immigration. The Commission submitted a report in 2001 with a set of recommendations regarding labour migration, refugee protection and the integration of foreigners.

tion country). The decades-long denial of the fact that foreign-born people are de facto immigrants rather than guest-workers had rendered a discussion about even the conception of a well-functioning multi-cultural society virtually impossible.

Figure 1: Number of Non-German Nationals in Germany (1951-2002)



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (2003)

Nevertheless discussions about these “guests” took place. Rather than talking of immigrants, another rubric was used. Disregarding how long they have lived in Germany, whether they were born there or have ever lived in places outside Germany, these members of German society are “foreigners” (*Ausländer* or *Fremde*), a group mainly composed of guest-workers (*Gastarbeiter*), asylum seekers and ethnic German settlers (*Aussiedler*). Debates about them became heated in the late 1950s to early 1960s, when the impact of the recruitment of these so-called guest-workers began to be felt. *Ausländer* were often represented in the press and media reports as undesirable and problematic, used as scapegoats for socio-economic problems, such as persistent unemployment, rising criminality and a lack of economic growth, especially since the mid-1970s.

While the development of a comprehensive political and socio-economic concept for immigration was, more or less, abandoned by the polity, the *Ausländerproblem* (foreigners’ problem) has been repeatedly used strategi-

cally during election periods (Hillmann 2001). The electoral success of conservative politicians campaigning to tighten immigration controls demonstrates that a conservative and intolerant aphorism continues to find resonance among a significant portion of the voting public.² A telephone poll published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (March 23-24, 2002) reveals that 52% of the eligible voters, who were interviewed, believed that there were too many foreigners living in Germany, while only 39% considered the number of foreigners in Germany to be appropriate.³ Some opinion polls suggested that nine to 25% of the 60 million German voters would support an anti-immigration party in the 2002 election (Migration News 01/2002).

As the opening quotation from the Foreigner Affairs Office in Saarbrücken suggests, there can no longer be any excuse for turning a blind eye to the living and working conditions of almost 9% of the population. Indeed a concept that offers to improve the life chances of migrants will also contribute to the welfare of the nation as a whole. Considering the persistent tendency towards negative population growth, numerous politicians, academicians, representatives of religious and NGOs have acknowledged the positive contribution migrants make in helping to sustain the social welfare system and German economic growth (for a more detailed discussion, see Chapter 5). The political debates are saturated with numerical estimates – how many migrants Germany needs, how many points they should have to accumulate to qualify for naturalisation, how much integration costs might be, and so on. This book attempts to provide grounded materials that uncover the life stories and sentiments of a small number of these individuals. It represents a modest effort to extend our understanding of some of the migrants who have chosen or are destined to make (one of) their home(s) in Germany. Through a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese migrants, it is hoped that inferences can be drawn that may permit a better understanding of the stories and experiences of other migrant groups as well.

² Recent examples of the manipulation of anti-foreign and anti-immigration sentiments as election campaign tools include the success of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Hessen in 1999, that of the Schill's Party in Hamburg in 2001 and, more recently, that of the CDU in Sachsen-Anhalt in April 2002.

³ When asked specifically about the immigration of needed skilled professionals, 57% of those interviewed supported a simplification of the process while 39% did not.

Rethinking “Home”

Home is probably the initial place with which we identify ourselves – an important place often taken for granted. But home is not simply a physical space. Rather it is in fact a complex concept acquiring multiple associations that change in time and space. The notion of home is particularly intriguing for those who are often en route, crossing borders either physically or mentally. Migrants, especially transmigrants and those in diaspora, are examples par excellence. As these individuals’ lived environment extends beyond national borders, they become embedded in webs of transforming social relations that stretch across geographical and cultural boundaries (Massey and Jess 1995). Consequently their feelings of home and sense of belonging can be anchored with respect to different places. As there is no single migration experience, migrants attach a variety of meanings to “home”. For some, home is the place where they were born. It is a place redolent in nostalgia, a place to which they can no longer return. Some consider home to be the lived experience of a locality, beginning when they first set their feet down; for others, home is a destination for which they have left or a prospect to which they have aspired. Home is not always anchored on stable, solid ground. While some leave their homes behind when they go on their journeys, others make home as part of their migration, bearing their “mobile homes” with them in the manner of snails; some have multiple homes in different locales.

This multiplicity of homes can be examined under a geographic lens. “Home” signifies places existing in a diversity of scales. It can be a country, a city, a village, a neighbourhood, a house or apartment where one usually (and hopefully) feels anchored and safe, where one belongs. Unfortunately such safe haven is not always possible as evidenced by the myriad of people who have had to flee their homes. In the Chinese language, the many aspects of “home” are vividly captured by the vocabulary. *Jia* is home, while one’s country is *guojia*; one’s home village is *jiexiang* while one’s original home is *laojia*, which is a more general term that can be applied to a whole array of homes existing on varied geographic scales.⁴ Depending

⁴ A note on transcription: In this book, all Chinese terms are phonetically transcribed in the Mandarin *pinyin*, except in a few cases where proper names are transcribed in another way (such as in other Chinese languages or by using the Wades-Giles transcription system). Mandarin Chinese *pinyin* is here used because it is commonly used in literature and widely understood. This does not indicate a bias towards Mandarin Chinese over other Chinese languages, such as Cantonese or Hokkien spoken by many Chinese overseas, nor a partiality for the *pinyin* system over others.

on one's background biography and the circumstance under which one has to identify home, the location of home ranges along a geographic scale reaching from household to the whole planet Earth (e.g. a slogan like "The Earth is our Home!").

Revealing the diverse and dynamic meanings migrants attach to the concept of "home" represents one way to challenge an essentialist notion of cultural identity. Shifting and multiple senses of belonging among migrants with shared original homelands and migration biographies calls to question the erroneous assumption that "the Chinese" or any migrant group comprises a homogeneous community possessing shared, stable identities and interests (Bhabha 1994b, Jackson and Penrose 1993, Nagar 1995). It is equally important to recognise similar diversity amongst those who have not moved, who are already at home. Compressing all Chinese migrants together is jejune; so too is identifying all Germans as "locals" and classifying them as part of the same group. Such insight mandates a deconstruction of the conventional majority/minority axis and recognises the complex and dynamic relationships that exist among both migrants and locals in multi-cultural societies.

An inquiry into the multiple meanings of home among migrants serves more than just to map out their heterogeneity. Without investigating the importance of perceptions of home and belonging among migrants, one cannot really make sense of their adaptation strategies in their new environment and/or their further migration decisions. These perceptions should not be reduced to trivial psychological reflections *because these personal sentiments arise from the concrete processes that shape them*. To be able to make a comfortable home in a new environment, a set of political, economic and social prerequisites must be established. These include, among other requirements, an acknowledgement of their legal status, a guarantee of their civil rights, welfare and protection, a conducive economic space in which their livelihood could be sustained, as well as a social environment that offers acceptance and respect. Drawing on Massey's (1994) formulation of place, "home" may be understood as an intersection of political, social and economic processes which span different geographical levels (from transnational, national, regional, local, household to personal ones), at a particular location and a specific time. Since these processes are dynamic and interactive, home, as a social product of these processes, is thus neither spatially bounded nor territorially stable, but rather open and fluid.

Since home is a complex and multi-dimensional concept, a comprehensive understanding calls for its scrutiny from a variety of perspectives, drawing upon different theoretical traditions. Like different turns of a ka-

leidoscope, the preceding chapters examine different aspects of home and processes of home-making among Chinese migrants in Germany. Drawing from fieldwork, the meanings, which are conditioned by their geographical mobility, that my research partners (or “informants” in conventional vocabulary)⁵ attach to the notion “home” are revealed. These perceptions in turn shed light upon aspects of the German social, economic and political systems, which shape the nature, strategies and outcome of their home-making projects. Depending on the particular circumstances, these home-making projects are carried out beyond the borders of German territory, extending into transnational space.

Conceiving “Transnationalism”

Transnationalism represents one of the most recent developments in the field of migration research in the past decade. In his comprehensive review essay, Vertovec (1999: 447) defines transnationalism as “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states”, where the dynamic ties, linkages or networks can be of an economic, socio-cultural and political nature. Transnationalism signifies dynamic processes made up of changing and fluid relationships between people, states and capital, which are mostly geographically mobile and unfettered by national boundaries. In an increasingly inter-connected world political economy, coupled with the globalisation of production and escalating spatial mobility due to more efficient transportation and communication, transnational phenomena and processes have emerged, intensifying in many different key respects. Ma (2003: 4) considers the study of migration to lie at the core of transnationalism when he notes that “transmigration and diaspora are the most important constituent part of transnationalism.” In addition to the study of transnationality among migrants, research conducted in different disciplines has also mapped out the transnational aspects of capital flow, trade, corporations, NGOs, inter- or supra-governmental organisations and social movements.

⁵ Informants or interviewees are referred to as “research partners” throughout this work. This choice of terminology underlines my belief that the researcher and those researched engage in a co-production of knowledge. I consider those who have let me share their stories as my partners in knowledge co-production, while nevertheless acknowledging my sole responsibility for the given interpretations.

The concept of transnationalism attained its position of importance in the migration discourse of the early 1990s. This body of ideas arose mainly from those scholars of the post-colonial and post-modern theoretical tradition. They challenged the conventional notions of human movements across geographical space subscribed to by other well-established paradigms in migration studies. More specifically, instead of assuming migrants' journeys as permanent, linear and bipolar, advocates of the transnational concept underscore the cross-border circulation and multi-directional movements of people, materials and ideas. In order to capture this fluidity and dynamism of human mobility in their research, such early adherents to this concept, Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992: 1-2) brought forth the notion of transnationalism which they defined as:

... the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement. Immigrants who build such social fields are designated "transmigrants". Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders. Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously.

They further argue that such circulation and exchanges create new or hybrid transnational cultures, identities and community spheres (Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton 1994, Faist 1998, Rouse 1991). Though living and working in transnational space has become more a norm than an exception, it is important to remember that not all migrants are transmigrants, making it quite inappropriate to simply re-label "migrants" as "transmigrants". The definition above serves as a useful guide to proper usage of this buzzword.

The phenomenon of transnationalism is not a new one, even though scholars only recently began to address it within their analytical frameworks. Glick Schiller (1999b), for example, notes that transnationalism can be observed in the migration waves to North America that occurred as early as 1880. Portes, Haller and Guarnizo (1999), however, point out the historical distinctiveness of the contemporary phenomenon with the following observation (217):

While back and forth movements by immigrants have always existed, they have not acquired until recently the critical mass and complexity necessary to speak of an emergent social field. This field is composed of a growing number of persons who