

FRANK N. PIEKE PÁL NYÍRI METTE THUNØ ANTONELLA CECCAGNO

TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE



*Fujianese
Migrants
in
Europe*

Transnational Chinese
Fujianese Migrants in Europe

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AND ANTONELLA CECCAGNO

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Preface

This book presents the findings of a three-year (1999–2001) research project on Fujianese migration and transnationalism in Europe that was funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its research program on transnational communities (grant number L214252012). Although I was the grant recipient and coordinator of the project, the book presents a genuinely collective effort of all four authors. In addition, the efforts of a fifth scholar, our fieldworker in Fujian, who wishes to remain anonymous, were absolutely indispensable.

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A shorter version of Chapter 2 will be published in the *International*

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*Introduction: Conceptualizing Chinese Migration in
a Global Age*

CHINESE IN EUROPE have come and gone for well over a century. Hailing from many different countries, including those where Chinese often are only one of several ethnic groups, Chinese in Europe have many different nationalities, attachments, and migratory histories. Chinese migration to Europe thus consists of many different flows, and the vast differences in the timing and especially the volume of these flows make the Chinese community in each European country a unique configuration. Furthermore, since the late 1970s, Chinese immigration in Europe has undergone a fundamental change. Not Hong Kong or Southeast Asia, but the People's Republic of China itself has become the chief source of Chinese immigrants.

Among the new Chinese migrants in Europe, in the 1990s the Fujianese rapidly became a small but prominent group. Part—albeit by no means all—of Fujianese migration is irregular. Fujianese migration facilitators or “snakeheads” (*shetou*) have rapidly become the most visible expression of some of the changes taking place in Chinese migration worldwide, and not the least in Europe.¹ Although Fujianese are only a recent migratory flow and account for a relatively small minority of Chinese migrants to Europe, they have become in many ways emblematic of the changes taking place in Chinese migration at large. A better understanding of the dynamics of this flow will also highlight some of the most salient issues and current and future policy choices confronting the governments of sending and receiving areas alike.

To migrants, the many forms of “legal” and “illegal” migration constitute a continuum of alternatives rather than activities that are very

different from each other. Which side of the boundary between legal and illegal movement and residence migrants find themselves on, and to what extent they employ the services of paid migration brokers, varies greatly from individual to individual. Legality or illegality is also influenced by the locality the migrant sets out from and by the immigration regimes of destination countries, which have changed over the ten-plus years of large-scale migration from Fujian to Europe. Migration of Fujianese between individual European countries and over time has varied considerably. In Germany, for example, asylum seekers who lodged their applications between 1997 and 2001 were not permitted to work, resulting, according to our informants, in the departure for the United Kingdom of a large number of Chinese migrants without residence permits. The Netherlands, unlike Britain and Germany, does not detain or deport anyone claiming to be an unaccompanied minor; such migrants are provided accommodation in flats and education. At the same time, jobs in the Chinese restaurant sector in the Netherlands are scarce. Thus, at least until some recent changes in enforcement, many Chinese migrants who applied for asylum in the Netherlands claimed to be unaccompanied minors.

Europe provides an important point of comparison for the study of Chinese international migration and the overseas Chinese, a field that has tended to focus on the older, larger, and better-known Chinese communities, particularly those in North America. The great variety in immigration regimes within a small geographic area, the newness of immigration, particularly in eastern and southern Europe, the rapid changes forged by the fall of the Soviet bloc and the unification of the European Union, and the highly contentious nature and fluidity of immigration policies make Europe a virtual laboratory for the study of Chinese international migration. From a Chinese perspective, the northern, eastern, and southern parts of the continent present a vast frontier of highly developed economies, where they nevertheless face little competition from established Chinese communities. These frontiers are either directly accessible through the former Soviet Union, or indirectly accessible by way of the old and relatively large Chinese communities in the metropolitan areas of northwestern Europe, which themselves continue to attract significant numbers of newcomers. Furthermore, Chinese migration to Europe is rapidly diversifying, both in the areas of origin of Chinese migrants and in the number of student, business, and professional migrants. It is following patterns similar, but

not identical, to changes in Chinese migration to North America two decades ago.

Finally, work on migration to North America, and particularly to the United States, tends to reflect the attitude of many Americans and migrants alike that the United States is everybody's destination of choice, that all other destinations are second best, or perhaps just steps along the way. Western European studies of migration often display a similar attitude, though usually slightly more qualified. Furthermore, both North American and western European studies tend to perceive international migration as a relatively straightforward process that attracts people from peripheries to the global cities (Sassen 1991) that are centers of the world: New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Vancouver, Toronto, Berlin, London, and Paris. Yet the recent nature of much Chinese migration to Europe and the importance of peripheral or formerly peripheral areas in southern and eastern Europe as destinations make it a lot more difficult to ignore the fact that, worldwide, most migration, including that of Chinese, takes people to places that seem, at first glance, curiously nonobvious.

When we first started thinking about conducting research on the Fujianese in Europe in 1997, we were very much influenced by the literature that was then beginning to appear on illegal Fujianese migration to the United States, following the rude wake-up call provided by the grounding of the *Golden Venture* in New York harbor on June 6, 1993, with 286 illegal Fujianese migrants on board (K. Chin 1999; Kwong 1997; N. Liu 1996; Smith 1997; Xinjing 1995a, 1995b, 1995c). That literature highlighted the commercialization and criminalization of migration and the abuse, extortion, and suffering of migrants during transit and after arrival at their destination. We assumed that Fujianese in Europe were either castaways abandoned by migration facilitators on the way to the United States, or else people who could not afford the more expensive passage to that country. In short, we expected that the world was the snakeheads' oyster and ignored the relevance of the agency of migrants and the specific dynamics of individual migratory flows.

Transnational Ethnography

This book presents the findings of a three-year research project on Fujianese migration to Europe.² Although the project's research methods were broadly ethnographic, combining informal conversations and

participant observation with formal interviews and a household survey, our topic compelled us to pioneer new ways of carrying out a global and multi-sited ethnography. The newness and breadth of the phenomena we wished to study, coupled with the speed with which they changed even during our project, required much more than a serial conventional ethnography of more than one place carried out by the same fieldworker, but involved five researchers working simultaneously in different localities. Furthermore, each main locality of research, both in Europe and in China, was visited several times by the same or different researchers in the course of just three years. These two features of our research enabled us to study the connections between the processes of migration, settlement, and transnationalism up close and almost in real time as they unfolded simultaneously in different sites.

In January 1999, we began gathering basic information about immigration, through-migration, and employment patterns in selected European countries: Britain, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Romania, and Russia. Subsequently, we carried out exploratory research in Fujian province. During the second phase of the research, from September 1999 until April 2001, the project focused on three countries in Europe—Britain, Hungary, and Italy—that were selected on the basis of the exploratory research of the first phase. While acknowledging that each European country is unique, we chose Britain to represent the core countries of Chinese settlement in northwestern Europe, Italy to stand for the southern frontier opened up in the 1980s, and Hungary as the hub of the new eastern frontier of the 1990s. Each in its own region plays a key role in the new Chinese migration, and each is therefore a prominent point on the Fujianese map of Europe. Britain, with the oldest and one of the largest Chinese communities, had become the destination of choice for many Fujianese in the 1990s, also because of its close links with other Anglophone countries, such as the United States and Australia, that are major destinations for Fujianese migrants. Hungary occupies a pivotal place in the exploration of eastern Europe by Chinese migrants in the wake of the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1989–90. Hungary is also a gateway to southern and western Europe. Italy became the main Chinese destination country in southern Europe in the 1980s, also attracting many Fujianese in the 1990s and providing a template for future developments elsewhere in what to Chinese migrants is the European periphery.

The second phase of fieldwork in Europe entailed systematic inter-

views with more than one hundred migrants in Moscow (Russia); Budapest, Szeged, Nyírbátor, and Szombathely (Hungary); Mainz, Stuttgart, and Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany); Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Sneek, and Tilburg (the Netherlands); Paris (France); Oxford and London (Britain); Madrid and Valencia (Spain); and Rome, Prato, Terzigno, and San Giuseppe Vesuviano (Italy). These interviews were supplemented by interviews with employers, landlords, police, lawyers, employment agencies, community workers, and others professionally involved with Fujianese migrants. Simultaneously, detailed ethnographic research was carried out in two sending communities in Fujian. These two villages had likewise been identified during the first phase of research. They were selected because they were located in areas that, more than other localities in Fujian, specialized in migration to Europe, namely Fuqing municipality south of the provincial capital Fuzhou, and inland Mingxi county in Sanming prefecture. In total, 106 interviews were completed with officials and villagers. A questionnaire was administered to half (81 of the 162) of all emigrant households in the fieldwork village located in Mingxi county (equal to 26 percent of all households in the village). In March 2001 we also carried out exploratory research on the Fujianese in New York City, which, as the hub of the overseas Fujianese diaspora, foreshadows and has an important impact on many developments in Europe. We completed all of the field research for the project in June 2001.

In addition to the observations, interviews, and more informal conversations that are the mainstay of ethnographic research, we systematically read Chinese newspapers published in Europe and Fujian. Although we gathered statistical data from government agencies and officials in China and Europe where and when we could, we found most of these data of limited value.³ Many records were incomplete, included only legal migration, or applied categories of analysis that were unsuited or simply too broad for our needs. Gathering our own quantitative data proved almost impossible owing to the illegal nature of much Fujianese migration. In only one of our study villages in China did we manage to conduct a village survey. Although we also explored the possibility of conducting a survey in one or more European countries, we abandoned the idea when we found that it would be impossible to construct a reliable sample population. For these reasons, this study regrettably cannot provide reliable numbers of migrants from Fujian to Europe; we have resisted the temptation to present our own or our informants' estimates, figures that in our experience are often mis-

takenly cited as authoritative facts in the literature and in policy documents.

Ethnographic research is therefore the most appropriate way of researching a topic like ours that is largely unexplored by previous research and that involves activities and sensitivities that cannot be confronted using more formal and intrusive research methods. Our work on "problems that manifest themselves in intensely local forms but have contexts that are anything but local" (Appadurai 2000: 6) is as much about the details of local places and communities as it is about the networks and connections linking these places to a transnational social space. A "global ethnography" (Burawoy 2000) such as ours presents specific challenges for ethnographic methods as conventionally used in anthropology and other social sciences. Traditionally, ethnography takes place in a particular field site and assumes a particular locality, community, and culture. The challenge of ethnographic fieldwork that wishes to map a particular transnational social space is not merely that it almost certainly must be multi-sited; this is in itself nothing new in anthropological fieldwork (Marcus 1995). The real challenge of such fieldwork is to recognize that place and community do not unproblematically exist out there awaiting the ethnographer's gaze. As Gupta and Ferguson put it, "Instead of assuming the autonomy of the primeval community, we have to examine how it was formed as a community out of the interconnected space that always existed" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In other words, place and community are products, and the object of ethnographic research is to elucidate the social processes that imagine, produce, and challenge specific places and communities, ranging from Benedict Anderson's nations to humble villages in the countryside and marginal migrant groups in the global cities of western Europe and North America.

Ethnographic work in and about transnational social space is much more than a choice of methodology and procedures; it is also a matter of the questions the fieldworker takes to the field: ultimately, the ethnographer's field site is not just the place where research happens to take place; instead, its existence as a place of belonging is the key problem to be investigated. In what way, to what extent, and under what circumstances is a migrant from a particular village in Fujian a member of a local Chinese or Fujianese community in a European city or country? Conversely, when do the same migrants imagine themselves to belong to a "transnational" community of fellow villagers or fellow Fujianese dispersed across Europe or North America, or both? When and for

whom does the village or area of origin, or China as a whole, become the focus of a sense of belonging? What are the biographical and political mechanisms and implications of such belonging, and what are the culturally constructed conceptions of place, community, and belonging that inform such choices and processes?

The trail of Fujianese migrants led us to many different places in China, Europe, and the United States and involved close cooperation and coordination among five researchers based in as many countries: China, Denmark, Italy, Hungary, and Britain. Most of the fieldwork in Europe was carried out by Pál Nyíri. From his home base in Budapest, Nyíri undertook short visits of between two and four weeks each to the European countries selected for the first and second phases of research. In March 2001, Nyíri also made a similar field trip to New York City. In Italy in the first half of 2001, Antonella Ceccagno carried out an additional twenty interviews with Fujianese in Prato, a central Italian city that is a center of Chinese enterprise in the country and where she has worked with the local Chinese community. Apart from the interviews, Ceccagno's contributions to the book also draw on her long-term research on the Chinese in Italy and her knowledge of the Chinese in Prato.

Research in each European country was never an independent undertaking. Names of people to interview in other countries were always actively solicited, and a few informants were even interviewed in more than one country after they changed residence. Nyíri also joined several highly mobile informants or their family members as they traveled from place to place or country to country for business or in search of work. We also tried to trace emigrants in Europe who belonged to families interviewed in China, but this strategy had to be abandoned because families in China were reluctant to provide information about their relatives, who often resided illegally abroad; and they became very suspicious of our intentions when we pressed politely for the information.

In China itself, an exploratory field trip was undertaken by Nyíri in the summer of 1999 following an earlier trip by Mette Thunø in 1998 before the formal start of the project. These two trips made it clear to us that it would be impossible to carry out detailed field investigations ourselves. Because the issue of illegal migration (*toudu*) was so politically sensitive both nationally and internationally, foreign researchers had great difficulty gaining access to the sending villages. We decided that the only practical way forward was to ask a local researcher to

carry out the fieldwork for us as a part of his own research on the overseas Chinese in Fujian. Subsequently, Thunø undertook to train this fieldworker in ethnographic methods and interview techniques, closely supervising and monitoring his fieldwork from Fuzhou city or her home base in Copenhagen by means of daily or even more frequent e-mail exchanges and telephone conversations. After the fieldworker's return from a field trip, Thunø would receive full field notes in Chinese, which she and the researcher discussed in detail in preparation for subsequent field trips.

This method worked remarkably well, in large part because the local researcher was keen to learn what he saw as modern Western methods of social research. He quickly became a skilled fieldworker who began to ask probing questions himself. However, suspicions of any kind of research ran so high that even this local researcher had difficulty gaining prolonged access to emigrant villages. He could also investigate the issue of emigration only indirectly, which is why he has chosen not to be named in any publications or reports that include data that he gathered for us. Fortunately, we had decided to work in two emigrant villages rather than just one: one located in coastal Fuqing county (municipality), the other in inland Mingxi county (see a later section for more details about our field sites). In Mingxi the local authorities were, on the whole, proud of their achievements in opening up the overseas Chinese "market" and saw the research as an opportunity to gain recognition for their efforts. Only in Fuqing, with its long-standing and intensive involvement in emigration, did the sensitivity of illegal migration have a significant impact on the quality of the information that could be collected, and even there our fieldworker was able to piece together a reasonably complete picture of the deep embeddedness of migration in the local society and culture.

Research in such a broad range of sites across three continents and involving fieldworkers in four different countries poses considerable challenges of cooperation and coordination. Frank Pieke's role was to manage the individual team members and maintain the thematic coherence of the project. E-mail was indispensable, supplemented by face-to-face meetings with individual team members and among the team as a whole. Almost all interviews conducted for this book were held in the interviewees' own language. All interview and field notes were typed out either in English or Chinese, the two languages known by all members of the team. Through routine e-mail contact, all European team members filed their field notes with Pieke, who forwarded

them to the other European members of the team (apart from a brief visit to Fuzhou by Pieke in 2000, contact with the Chinese team member ran almost exclusively through Thunø in order not to arouse suspicions in China). Pieke and the other European team members read all of the field notes and also provided feedback, suggesting further lines of inquiry and explanations based on their own experiences.

An additional important coordination tool was a list of originally dozens of research questions and an outline of the monograph that we undertook to write together. We frequently consulted and revised these questions and the outline to ensure that our fieldwork adhered to a common agenda and to check our progress in getting at some of the answers. In this way, all of the team members had clearly defined tasks both during the fieldwork and in drafting the chapters of this book. Having five experienced researchers acting as a critical sounding board for each other over a period of three years has helped us focus the mind, tease out conclusions, and most important, complete a project well beyond the capability of an individual researcher in a relatively short period of time. The project and this book thus represent a genuinely collective effort. For this reason, we decided not to attribute principal authorship to the chapters, despite the fact that the first draft of each one was prepared by a particular team member.

Conceptualizing Chinese Globalization

The new Chinese migration of which the Fujianese are a prominent part is one of the most visible exponents of the increasing globalization of China. The term *globalization* captures a great number of processes that transcend and redefine regional and national boundaries. The ever freer flow of capital, information, goods, and people makes its impact felt not only on the world's economy, politics, and population, but equally on culture, religion, and education, reshaping the world we live in (Castells 1996). Yet it is easy to get carried away with the idea of globalization. The much greater interconnectedness of even distant parts of the world shapes a new reality as much as it reconfigures and reproduces established social forms, such as the nation-state, the family, class, race, or ethnicity. In our use of the term *globalization*, we therefore heed the advice of Held and his coauthors and try to avoid the pitfalls of the two extremes in the debate—the proponents of which they respectively dub hyper-globalizers and skeptics—but view globalization as a range of open-ended transformative processes (Held et al. 1999).

A case in point—now often made in discussions on globalization—is that globalization is not simply a one-directional process in which hegemonic impositions from the Western, capitalist center obliterate cultural differences. Globalization and localization go hand in hand, spawning “creolized” cultural forms that are as much locally rooted and unique as they are variations on global themes (Hannerz 1987, 1988, 1992, chap. 7). Yet the challenge of globalization studies is not only to delineate the twin processes of universalization and localization of cultures, networks, capital, and population flows. Such an undifferentiated focus on the global and its counterpoint, the local, fails to appreciate two points. First, in as far as globalization is a homogenizing force, it works in both directions: as non-Western cultures and societies become more global and Western, these globalizing non-Western cultures also insert aspects of their own, globalizing cultures into the global melting pot. Second, and more pertinent to the topic of this book, globalization needs to be seen as taking place in multiple centers beyond the traditional centers of the capitalist world system. Globalization has not created a unified playing field for all social actors, but consists of a great many separate social spaces that are entangled and disentangled in multiple and complex ways. Globalization thus provides a new mode for the expression and production of difference.

In this book we describe the fractured, open-ended, and interlocking nature of globalization from the perspective of Chinese migrants to Europe. In discussions on globalization, China and the ethnic Chinese routinely feature as the prime example of a group, culture, or civilization that has successfully risen to the challenge of a global modernity originating from and dominated by the West. China from this perspective is different and even more exciting than its “Confucian” neighbor Japan. China combines continental size, rapid economic growth, and increasing integration in the world system with large, proactive, affluent, and widely dispersed diasporic communities. China, moreover, had largely cut itself off from the world during the more radical Cultural Revolution years of the Maoist era (1966–76). Consequently, after the onset of the reforms in 1978, China had to reenter the global community almost from scratch. The short time frame and sheer massive scale of Chinese globalization throw into especially sharp relief not only how China itself is becoming more global, but also, and equally important, how Chinese people, ideas, capital, and goods find their way across the globe.

Various concepts have been proposed to capture part or all of these exciting developments, including “greater China,” a “Chinese com-