

Chinese Migrants in Metropolitan Cities Abroad: Reconsidering Agency, Interactions, and Belonging

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Abstract

At the interface of Chinese diaspora studies, migration studies, and urban studies, this introduction argues for a shift towards city-based migration studies. The city is understood here not as a self-contained social cosmos, but as a globally and socially embedded urban level that opens up a more flexible perspective on the unfolding of migration processes at the micro, meso, and macro levels. It begins with a brief overview of recent trends in Chinese diaspora studies, global migration and urbanisation trends, and debates in critical geography on multi-scale urban theories. Then, it raises the question of the empirical feasibility of such an approach and argues for conceptualising migrants' agency as a starting point for migration research, rather than pursuing a policy-driven, normative approach. Finally, it presents the five empirical contributions to this Special Issue. They are based on fieldwork in Paris, Berlin, Manchester (UK), Mexico City, Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek.

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Keywords

Chinese migrants' agency, metropolitan cities, Chinese diaspora, urban scale

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Introduction

This Special Issue (SI) explores recent developments in the Chinese diaspora through an urban lens. While there is a rich and nuanced body of research on Chinese migrants abroad, it is mostly framed as international or transnational migration, migration between nation-states (Chan and Koh, 2018; Wang, 1991; Wong and Chee-Beng, 2013; see research review in Levy, 2024, in this issue). This is not surprising given that migration research in general is characterised by a separation between research on internal migration on the one hand, and on international migration on the other hand, a separation also in terms of the respective epistemic communities. Internal migration is approached as rural–urban migration, while international migration is approached as movement between nation-states. Against the background of this division, only comparatively little importance has been attached to cities in international migration research.

In order to justify why metropolitan cities are not only destinations of international Chinese migration, but also an urban scale that offers new and rich perspectives at the interface of Chinese diaspora studies, migration research and urban studies, this introduction proceeds in three steps. It begins with a brief overview of recent trends in Chinese diaspora research and, against the background of global development trends in migration and urbanisation, develops the argument for a turn towards city-based migration research that does not view the city as a self-contained social cosmos, but as part of a multi-scalar arrangement within which the urban scale forms an important entry point. Subsequently, the question of the empirical feasibility of such an approach is raised and the importance of focusing on a conceptualisation of migrants' agency as a starting point for migration research, rather than pursuing a policy-driven, normative approach is elaborated. Finally, the five empirical contributions to this SI are presented. They are based on fieldwork in Paris, Berlin, Manchester (UK), Mexico City, Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek.

Recent Trends in Research on the Chinese Diaspora

Previous studies of Chinese migrants in metropolitan cities abroad use various terms such as overseas Chinese, Chinese diaspora(s), and Chinese transnationalism – more recently also digital transnationalism (Sun and Yu, 2022; Tan, 2017). The related “politics of naming” cannot be discussed in detail here (see Chan and Koh, 2018: 4–6). Discourses on the urban settlements of the Chinese diaspora revolve around questions of the growth and transformation of Chinatowns and the emergence of new types of Chinese/Asian communities or settlements, such as ethnoburbs (Li, 1998; Wong and Chee-Beng, 2013; Zhou and Yang, 2022). Last but not least, the extent to which the Chinese state (or diaspora state) is a central reference point for conceptualising Chinese overseas populations, given its increasing global economic and political importance, is under debate (Schäfer, 2021; Thuno, 2022; Zhang, 2019).

Based on the concept of “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007), Guo (2022) describes more recent patterns of the Chinese diaspora as forms of hypermobility, hyperdiversity, and hyperconnectivity. With an estimate of well over 45 million, overseas Chinese are

identified as the third largest diaspora (after German and Irish; Guo, 2022: 854). A narrower definition includes only the first-generation Chinese, that is, those who were born in China, comes to around 10 million (Goodkind, 2019: 2). In addition to the size and the long migration histories of overseas Chinese, it is the tendency to be globally dispersed to almost every country in the world that Guo highlights as their hypermobility. He expects that Chinese migration to major immigration countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States will continue to grow, but believes the greatest increase in Chinese migration to occur in African countries due to increased economic and political ties (Guo, 2022: 855). He argues that essentialised characterisations of overseas Chinese mystify Chinese diasporas and obscure their substantive diversity in terms of their origins, occupations, migration histories, citizenship, language, educational background, different religions, and socio-economic status. To illustrate the diverse groups of the Chinese diaspora in Vancouver, Guo introduces (a) descendants of pre-1980s immigrants who call themselves Old Overseas Chinese (老华侨, *laohuaqiao*); (b) immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan since 1980; (c) recent mainland immigrants from all mainland provinces; and (d) Chinese transmigrants from Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, Peru, Jamaica, South Africa, and other places (Guo, 2022: 855, 856; Wickberg, 2007: 189, 190). Another characteristic of overseas Chinese, Guo argues, is that they maintain links with their homeland (侨乡, *qiaoxiang*) through visits and remittances, and more recently through donations, business, and infrastructure investment. A new type of hyperconnectivity, he argues, is created by a globalised economy in a digital age, enabling transnational business networks to engage in hypermobility. Transnational Chinese diaspora organisations are also seen as important, as they can act as a bridge between the individual and society, the local and the global (Guo, 2022: 860).

Piserevskaya and Scholten (2022) have criticised the fact that transnational migration research, while justified in its ability to capture social dynamics beyond the nation-state, has failed to capture the more local dynamics of mobilities and diversities. As evidence that this research deficit has already been recognised, the authors point to the increasing number of studies examining migration and diversity at the urban level (Piserevskaya and Scholten, 2022: 250). However, they note as a shortcoming that more than 80 per cent of the studies they analysed show a clear geographical bias, with 45 per cent dealing with North American cities and 36 per cent with European cities (Piserevskaya and Scholten, 2022: 250, 251). Following Glick Schiller and Caglar (2009), Piserevskaya and Scholten (2022) argue for the development of a comparative theory of locality that aims at a more nuanced understanding of urban diversity. Later, Glick Schiller and Caglar extended their own approach in a much-discussed book on *Migrants and City-Making* (Caglar and Schiller, 2018). Different from a comparative approach to the study of migrants and city-making, but nevertheless inspired by theoretical debates on the question of urban scale (Brenner, 2019), this SI aims to use an urban lens to explore the situation of Chinese migrants in overseas metropolises by reconsidering their agency, interactions and belonging from a multi-scalar perspective.

An Urban Lens From a Multi-Scalar Perspective

At least three general arguments can be made as to why an urban lens may in many cases be more appropriate than the nation-state level for analysing the dynamic developments and recent challenges of (Chinese) diasporas. This concerns cities as a level of migration research, future perspectives of global migration and urban development, and theoretical debates on the question of the urban scale.

(1) “Cities, with their high concentration of migrants,” the World Migration Report 2015 has argued, “often from different places of origin, offer a unique spatial domain for researching and understanding the dynamics of migration, urbanization and the intersection of national and local governance and policy [...] Cities can offer a natural spatial field for studying the dynamics and outcomes of migration on the ground.” (IOM 2015: 22)

In addition, international tensions and conflicts are increasingly reflected in everyday urban life. This is particularly true in the broader context of economic and political relations on a global scale when studying local Chinese diasporas.

(2) From a long-term perspective and on a global scale, the increase in migration and rapid urbanisation are processes that are closely intertwined. Urban forms of society are becoming more widespread around the world, and immigration plays an important role in this process. As we already know, immigration is not only to be understood as a change of place from A to B, but also in its various forms as onward migration, remigration, and circular migration. Moreover, from the subjective perspective of migrants in the city, migration is accompanied by an increased sense of insecurity about one’s future place of residence. Since 2007, the world’s urban population has outnumbered the rural population (in China since 2011). The urban population is expected to increase by 1.5 billion in the twenty years between 2018 and 2038, while the number of megacities (with more than 10 million inhabitants) and emerging megacities (with more than five million inhabitants) is likely to exceed 100. This future urban growth is expected to take place in Asian and African countries. Nevertheless, the majority of the urban population is predicted to live in cities with less than one million inhabitants by 2030 (Kraas et al., 2019: 24, 25; Trask, 2022: 50).

(3) Theoretical debates in critical geography on urban studies have called for the city not to be seen as a self-contained cosmos – parallel, so to speak, to the critique of a hermetic approach to the nation, which has been accused of “methodological nationalism.” Instead, from a political economy and capitalism-critical perspective, proponents of this approach call for the city to be understood as a level (scale) within a multi-scalar arrangement (for the genealogy of this debate, see Brenner, 2019: 46, 47). In this sense (but without adopting a conceptualisation of practice that marginalises the role of empirical research), our claim that “cities – not countries – are the preferred destinations of global migration” should not be understood as an alternative framework for studying migration dynamics only at the urban scale. Rather, it should serve as an urban lens that shares an understanding of scales as locally,

regionally, nationally, and globally constituted and negotiated entry points for an analysis of migrants in the city in general and, in the context of this SI, for an analysis of Chinese migrants' agency, interactions and belonging in particular.

How can such a multi-scalar approach be applied to empirical migration and urban research? Rebecca Williamson reflects on the challenge of conceptualising and applying a multi-scale research approach to migration and social transformation in an era of neoliberal globalisation (Williamson, 2015: 18). Among other methodological challenges she identifies the study of migration across multiple socio-spatial levels or scales. She seeks to understand how specific localities are embedded in processes of neoliberal globalisation and how international migration unfolds across macro, micro, and meso levels. Rather than studying migration across "levels," that is, a taken-for-granted assumption of a hierarchical ordering across global, national, and local levels, she argues that the idea of scale (or a multi-scalar approach) "allows for a more flexible conceptualization of the way in which migration is reinforced, contested and made meaningful at various levels of power and in different sites" (Williamson, 2015: 19). This also includes her questioning of how migration itself shapes the constitution of such scales. Migrants, she argues, can act as urban "scale-makers": through their participation in the labour force, as agents of gentrification or urban rebranding, or as mediators in transnational organisations. This would not only expand their scope of agency, but also shape the conditions of migrants' urban incorporation (Williamson, 2015: 22).

On the question of how to trace the theoretical and analytical relevance of a multi-scalar approach in empirical migration studies, Williamson directs our attention to Xiang (2013). Xiang proposes a multi-scalar ethnographic approach that allows for the study of how transnational migration is constituted through different scales. He explores multi-scalar ethnography as a method of fieldwork, analysis, and writing. Such an approach can describe "how movements are constituted at different scales [...], how migrants' scale-making projects intersect with state scale management, and how we can locate different sites analytically" (Xiang, 2013: 282). He argues that each site and actor can be located simultaneously at a taxonomic scale (building blocks of nested hierarchies of spaces of different sizes) and at an emergent scale (actor-centred and activity-specific) (Xiang, 2013: 284, 285). Xiang's considerations provide stimulating entry points for further reflection on how multi-scale methodologies might be made fruitful in further migration and diaspora research.

Reconsidering Chinese Migrants' Agency, Interactions, and Belonging

At the intersection of Chinese diaspora studies, migration studies, and urban studies, the SI expands our understanding of new research trends on agency, interactions, belonging, and, not least, urban integration. In contrast to policy-driven migration research, which, like policymakers, approaches the concept of integration from a normative perspective (in the sense of a unitary modern nation-state) (Spencer, 2022: 224), the contributions to this

SI question such an understanding of integration and instead examine concrete negotiation processes, dynamics, and contexts of urban coexistence on the basis of original empirical research. The concept of agency is understood here neither as a theory-distant concept nor as a concept of purely individual action, but rather as part of an interdependent social dynamic of structure and action (Merkel, 1994). From such a perspective, it is possible to contribute to migration research that – as Hein de Haas has urged – goes beyond functional approaches that characterise migrants as “rather soulless individual utility-optimisers,” and beyond historical–structural accounts that describe migrants as “rather passive victims of global capitalist forces” (de Haas, 2021: 8). While both approaches provide insights that should not be ignored, he continues, the main challenge is to develop a deeper understanding of migration that takes into account both agency and structure.

Also, in contrast to the focus of recent research on the relationship between a Chinese state flexing its muscles in its international relations and presenting itself as a powerful diaspora state and the responses of transnational Chinese diaspora populations (Leung, 2022; Thuno, 2022), the contributions to this SI focus mainly on the interactions of Chinese diaspora actors with their host cities (or with the lack thereof). As individual or collective actors, they negotiate private and public urban spaces with other local populations, migrants and non-migrants, governmental and non-governmental actors, within the neighbourhood or at higher levels of their host cities.

Contemporary Chinese migrant agencies and interactions in foreign metropolises must be seen in the wider context of the deterioration of Sino–US relations in recent years and the complex challenges of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which have had to be dealt with locally. As a result, there has been a resurgence of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism, which was previously more latent and has a long history in metropolises such as Paris, Berlin, and Mexico City, among many others. The lack of transparency surrounding the outbreak of the pandemic in China in late 2019 and US President Trump’s tweet referring to the pandemic as a “Chinese virus” fuelled anti-Chinese and anti-Asian suspicions and racist attitudes, which were disseminated through transnational social media and reproduced in international media frames and discourses. Related acts of racial discrimination and violence targeted people suspected of being of Chinese or Asian descent.

The destructive and equally disturbing effect of such attacks can be seen, for example, in a change in the relationship of people vulnerable to such attacks to urban public space. While the cliché of Asian migrants as an assimilated and thus largely invisible “model minority” had seemingly formed a kind of protective shield, discriminatory anti-Chinese and anti-Asian statements in public space led to a form of negative visualisation. Anonymity as a feature of the social production and reproduction of urban public space lost its protective effect, and such offensive encounters in public space could lead to a sense of non-belonging for those affected (Suda and Köhler, 2024, this issue).

At the same time, the SI shows how the experience of discrimination and violence leads to collective agency or counter-agency, which can take very different forms, objectives, and trajectories. These can be forms of action at the micro level of the

neighbourhood, the formation of counter-frames at the discursive level, forms of digital and transnational networking, or the creation of new diaspora organisations. It is also clear that the collective actors here no longer correspond to the (already simplistic) term “Chinese migrants,” as the spectrum of people affected by anti-Asian discrimination and violence is not limited to them. The resulting forms of agency and counter-agency are therefore less about issues of common origin and more about shared self-protection and broader common interests and goals. Moreover, such social dynamics at the urban micro level can lead to multiple interactions with institutional and other actors beyond the urban scale. This clearly reveals the multi-actor and multi-scale entanglements at work in negotiations over urban integration or the right to the city.

Contributions to This SI

The five SI articles were among the papers presented at an international online workshop on “Changing Places. Chinese migrants in cities – migrants in Chinese cities,” hosted by Prof. Bettina Gransow, FU Berlin, together with Prof. Katja Levy, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, at the Confucius Institute at FU Berlin in May 2021.

Aurore Merle’s article focuses on the collective action of Chinese and Southeast Asian immigrants in a Paris suburb. This is not a success story of upward social mobility through home ownership in an “ethnoburb,” that is, a suburban residential and commercial area where a minority is over-represented, but which is more open and distinct in form than ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns. Rather, it is a narrative of a restrictive housing market in Paris that has resulted in Chinese and Southeast Asian immigrants acquiring property in a working-class and immigrant suburb characterised by hyperdiversity and heterogeneous housing conditions (private ownership, private rental, and social housing). There, a building housing mainly Chinese families was attacked with fireworks by youths from a neighbouring social housing project. The victims of this attack turned to the public authorities to negotiate their safety concerns. Aurore Merle shares with us the findings of her long-term social action research (autumn 2016 to winter 2017), covering a first phase of mobilisation within the neighbourhood and a second phase when collective action led to a “coalition of interests” with a “living together” project launched by the communist mayor of La Courneuve in the suburb with more than 100 nationalities. She analyses the micro-foundations of collective action and identifies shared insecurity, experiences of racism and a strong sense of injustice as the driving force, rather than a common ethnic background. Aurore Merle shows the efforts and successes of the victims of violence and racism, who, in their search for security, began to overcome the trap of endlessly reproducing the dynamics of multiple racism, questioning the underlying causes and turning instead to engaged citizenship and involvement in the neighbourhood in terms of education and social inclusion, including the creation of a residents’ association.

Sergio Martínez Rivera’s contribution to a newly emerging Chinatown in Mexico City is also situated at the level of the urban neighbourhood. Based on a pilot study (on a relatively under-researched topic and carried out under the difficult conditions of the

COVID-19 pandemic), Martínez Rivera examines the emergence of a new Chinese settlement and discusses whether it could fulfil the criteria of a Chinatown as previously introduced in his study. He argues that, alongside Mexico City's traditional Chinatown (Barrio de Dolores), which has become increasingly commercialised and less community-based, a new Chinese neighbourhood called Viaducto Piedad is emerging and better fulfils the criteria of a Chinatown, namely: protection from stigma and hostility; economic endogeneity; providing a meeting place for cultural activities for Chinese and other audiences; meeting housing, educational, medical, and recreational needs; and developing a sense of community through the provision of social infrastructure. As obstacles to greater social inclusion of the Chinese diaspora in Mexico City, the author points, among others, to a long history of anti-Chinese racism in the country; aggravating discrimination after the outbreak of the pandemic; language problems; legal requirements for entry and permanent residence in Mexico, and the perception of Mexico by Chinese migrants as a transit space to the US. The author sees approaches to strengthening the Chinese community in Mexico above all in the founding of new diaspora organisations with which the overseas Chinese in Mexico City can identify, and in less selective support from the Chinese embassy, which to date has mainly been aimed at Chinese citizens from large cities, Chinese government employees and large transnational companies from China.

Katja Levy's article on the activities of Chinese diaspora organisations in Manchester, UK, and the following article on Berlin by Kimiko Suda and Jonas Köhler, focus on the pandemic and its impact on the relationship between the Chinese (and Asian) diaspora and local government and urban society. Katja Levy asks whether and how collaborative governance between Manchester City Council and local Chinese diaspora organisations contributed (or could have contributed) to effective crisis management of the pandemic. She identifies the tacit knowledge of Chinese diaspora organisations in Manchester and the information flows about the pandemic through their transnational family networks and close ties with China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as a valuable resource that could have materialised in effective collaborative crisis management. Based on semi-structured interviews with Chinese diaspora organisations in Manchester, and informed by theoretical frameworks of social capital and collaborative governance, Levy identifies five organisational relationships with the Manchester government: from "self-sufficient" (with no interest in and no relationship with the city government) to "networkers" (with regular and intensive collaborative and consultative relationships with the city government). She concludes that, overall, collaborative governance was not effectively implemented because the knowledge of well-informed Chinese diaspora groups was not more systematically sought by the local city government. While the author argues that collaborative governance was less successful in this case, at least the potential for collaborative crisis management in the face of global challenges such as a pandemic has already become quite visible as a suitable governance instrument for the future.

Focusing on urban public spaces, Kimiko Suda and Jonas Köhler analyse manifestations of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic and identify the formation of discursive counter-frames, such as self-representation as "Asian Germans." The study is

based on a quantitative online survey and a qualitative diary survey conducted in 2020. The authors argue that the increase in various forms of perceived racism during the pandemic led to a dissolution of a previous sense of social belonging and a loss of a sense of symbolic ownership in public spaces. Drawing on the concept of the “post-migrant society” (Foroutan, 2019), the authors analyse social change in relation to racism and conclude that, against the backdrop of the pandemic and in the specific context of Berlin, progress was made in establishing counter-frames to anti-Asian racism. These counter-frames were transnationally informed but locally embedded and driven by activist networks in Berlin.

Allen Hai Xiao and Yanyin Zi contribute a comparative study of the positionality of three African cities in the individual geographies of Chinese migrants. The authors turn the more conventional question of urban integration, “How do migrants become part of the city?” on its head, by asking the opposite question, “How does the city become part of the migrant’s life experience and imagination?” The article is informed by a biographical approach to Chinese migrant geographies and is based on ethnographic research on Chinese migrants (mainly traders and petty entrepreneurs) in Lagos (Nigeria), Gaborone (Botswana), and Windhoek (Namibia) between 2011 and 2015. In order to compare how cities are subjectively located in migrants’ urban and transnational experiences and to shed light on migrants’ sense of belonging, the authors analyse the subjective perspectives of host cities and the sense of belonging in some individual migrants’ biographies. While bigger cities as destinations of migration may be seen as more attractive because of the higher concentration of resources or customers, from the perspective of an individual Chinese trader or China shop owner expanding to smaller cities could be a strategy of scaling up his or her business. The authors conclude that the sense of belonging to host cities, as expressed in the individual migrants’ accounts, appears to be relatively loose and fluid for two main sets of reasons, related firstly to their professional activities (transnational activities in the case of traders) and their formal residence status (which may be an overstayed tourist visa), and secondly to their family networks (which may be strong and dominant) and the residence of their children (e.g. left behind in China).


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