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The Strangers Next-door: A Case Study of Chinese Migrants in Brno

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There have been many researches and studies on migrants in the Czech Republic. Foreign residents currently account for about 4 % of the Czech population, i.e. 434 000 persons. (Blahoutová 2013) Brno, as the second largest city and the capital of Southern Moravia region, is known for its cultural and ethnic diversity. Migrants from many countries have been residing in this city since decades ago. Yet, among the researches, comparatively very little is conducted about Chinese migrants. (Moore and Tubilewicz 2011:611) To put it in a nutshell, what some of the researchers have found out is that the “imagined community” of Chinese in the Czech Republic is rather not as intact and integrated as the others are. (Moore and Tubilewicz 2011; Moore 2002)

Theoretical underpinning of my paper is the concept of transnationalism. Rather than concepts implying massive ethnic settlements, like “ghetto” or “ethnoburb” (Li 1997; Miller 2003; Edginton, Goldberg, and Hutton 2003), to what extent is it more suitable to grasp the residence and business strategies taken by the Chinese migrants under study? Transnationalism is sometimes understood in somewhat elitist terms such as “there has arisen a transnational capitalist class comprising TNC (transnational corporations) executives, globalizing state bureaucrats, politicians and professionals, and consumerist elites in merchandising and the media” (Vertovec

2009:8). For my purposes, however, transnationalism is taken in its more profane form, described as “migrant transnationalism” that is focused more on life of middle-or even lower class migrants (Vertovec 2009:13). Many have argued the characteristics of “transnational migration”, including “homeland/newland connections” (Levitt and Schiller 2004:1005), such as emotional attachments to the place of origin and ongoing communication, collecting funds to be sent back to the families known as remittance, lobbying on behalf of political interests in their home country etc., can be found in the past, for example in the European or Asian diasporas in the United States in the nineteenth century (Chang 2004; Christiansen 2003; McKeown 1999). What is different about contemporary transnationalism is the growing intensity and complexity of the relationships between transnational and home context. Telecommunications and international financial services, governmental departments specialized in dealing with either foreign nationals or its own populations abroad, and cultural prestige of multiculturalism and identity politics have changed the field (Vertovec 2009:15-6), at least in the places of my research interest.

The extent to which migration has changed in the last 20 to 25 years, taken Central and Eastern Europe into consideration, is arguably immense. In addition to the above mentioned factors bringing about the change, there are other facts suggesting application of transnational theoretical framework has to be applied with caution. First, post-socialist countries opened up to the migration very fast. There were only 37 177 foreign residents living in the Czech republic, i.e. the respective part of the Czechoslovakia, in 1985, 159 207 in 1995 and 278 312 in 2005. (Czech Statistical Office 2003) Second, there was not the tradition of massive foreign settlements of the kind which is common in the United States, Great Britain, France, or Germany. With citizens of the neighboring countries excluded, there were only two countries whose nationals counted more than 5 000 residents in the first half of 1990s: Ukrainians (14 230 in 1994) and Vietnamese (9 633 in the same year). Third, Central

European countries, as well as Bulgaria, struggle with the uneasy integration of Roma ethnic minority who really are the only minority that created something like a “Romatown” which is often a place of deep social exclusion. The topic of migrants seems to be often dealt with at once with the topic of Roma, who are citizens (MigrationOnline.cz 2013; Siskova 2004).

When it comes to Chinese diaspora, these specifications are even more pronounced. The number of Chinese citizens residing in the Czech republic fluctuated from over two thousand persons in the first half of the 1990s, to slightly over four thousand at their end, down to about three thousand after the year 2000, with steady growth to 5 579 persons in 2011 (Czech Statistical Office 2013). To conclude, I believe it is not only methodologically justified to search for an alternative to ethnographic approaches to the studying of Chinese migrants, but also to consider it of utmost theoretical interest. Methodologically, it aims at finding a better perspective to analyze the existing data and to design tools for investigation. Theoretically, it may help to explain better the phenomena in question (Levitt and Khagram 2007). In the present case, how to avoid the theoretically tempting yet empirically false conclusion that the lack of community means the lack of collective support and the lack of social control? What data to use and what method to collect in order to explain this seeming paradox?

Because of the very theme and object of my study, I did not attempt at a kind of ethnographic research. That would require settling in an “ethnos” for a period of time, to study its everyday life and practices in order to reconstruct meanings and values on which they are supposedly based, as well as the way the practices produce and reproduce collectively owned meanings. As I indicated above, there is not such a physically existing, spatially coherent “ethnos” to go to. If anything, it would resemble going to a local village but being only able to meet with and talk to a single

family. Therefore, observation of this family would require years to see its members to actually participate in all or at least many of the practices that drive the whole “village”. To reconstruct meanings underlying the functioning of the village at large would be almost impossible.

The alternative is to base my own reconstruction on the report provided by the family in question. Even though they do not actually participate in all the practices going on in the “village”, they do have a practical knowledge of them. They could activate it should there appear a situation that requires them to. For example, the assumption that my participants have practical knowledge typical of a large number of other persons of the same kind could not be taken as granted. However, my experience from the talks with Chinese migrants in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Bulgaria suggests it can be accepted. This practical knowledge is my goal.

The technique I chose to uncover the practical knowledge about strategies available to dispersed migrants was mainly semi-structured research interview. There was a core of topics I wanted to discuss, but I deviate from it in some respects. Ideally, I would probably choose less structured interview, but not being a very experienced interviewer, I was afraid I would not manage to improvise with sufficient skill during the interview and I only had this one family readily available for the study. I believe that at least partially, negative “suggestive” or “guiding” effect of such pre-ordained questioning can be balanced that I am not a total stranger to the field. As a Chinese living abroad, I am not totally ignorant of the various strategies taken by Chinese migrants in a Central European country. However, this personal experience served as nothing else than early corrective tool.

The case under study is a Chinese family in Brno, the members of which are mostly involved in the catering business, namely restaurants and fast-food booths. As the

pilot study of my research project about the transnationality of Chinese migrants in the Czech Republic, I spotted a long-established Chinese restaurant in the center of Brno and made an appointment with the boss whom I assumed to be the “gate-keeper” of the family. Different than what I expected, he sent a “representative” to the interview to speak for the whole family. According to the “representative”, the family has all-together 19 members from two generations. Six members from the first generation are siblings and cousins of each other, and the other 13 are respective spouses and off-springs. To divide it further, the six core members are from two families, later referred to as A and B in this paper. From family A, there are two brothers, referred to as A1 and A2. From family B, there are four brothers and sisters, referred to as B1, B2, B3, B4.

Mr. A1, the “representative” showing up at the interview, came to Brno in 2011 with his wife. They had been living in Italy since 1998 before relocating. The couple has a Chinese fast-food booths near the center. “My relatives are here.” was the first thing he said when responding to the question why they left Italy. For him, the care from family members are very important for the life abroad, which he later emphasized repeatedly that Chinese migrants usually depend on the help of relatives in foreign countries. He felt good that when there are many Chinese, they could take care of each other. Another reason for him to come to Brno is his cousin Mr. B1. A1 remarked that in the recent years, the economy in Italy seems to be at a halt and the competition among Chinese is too fierce that many restaurants go into vicious competition. They tented to set the price very low which inevitably affected the business. Mr. B1 then told him it is better in Brno. He introduced him to the situation here and helped him to set up the bistro. Yet, he has not ended his business in Italy completely. His plan is try both places for now. He has the permanent residence permit in Italy, therefore he can go back there whenever he wants in case the bistro in Brno does not turn out well in the end. He would hope to be in Brno after all, as he said: “Here I have the warmth from relatives.” After working for others and himself

over ten years in Italy, he has finally realized that he needs something of his own, which is also better for his children in the future. He does not do much of other things, but just wants to earn money. The Chinese restaurant business here seems to be more promising than that in Italy, so he would like to stay in Brno where there is family and a bigger chance of some financial gain.

The two children of Mr. A1, one born in China and the other Italy, are currently staying with their grandparents back in China, because his situation at present is not very stable in the new place. He would like to wait till he and his wife settle down before bringing his children out with them again. His wife sometimes goes back to see them and usually they just call or video chat with their children every few days. He has noticed that, in the beginning, the children were fine with it, but now they are a little reluctant to talk to them, which makes him feel regretful. It is also why he plans to have the children here next year as soon as they adapt to the new environment. He said he would send their children to local Czech schools, but at the same time continue with their Chinese education by himself. It is important for him that his children keep learning Chinese language and culture.

Mr. A1's brother A2 came to Brno together with him. He is single and went to Italy as the first destination two years earlier than A1. He was also the reason why A1 chose Italy to stay, rather than France, where he had always wanted. "I chose Italy because my brother is there. I wanted to go to France, but there was no relative. Usually we go to a country where there are relatives." His brother A2 went to Italy for the same reason, that his uncle was there before him. And same for his uncle, his classmate was there. A1 concluded that the process of migration is like a chain reaction. One brings another, and another brings yet another. Their village became empty just like this. Young people leave the village one after one, leaving only the elders and

children home. However, there has been a new trend these years. Many people who were abroad saw that their village has been developing well and just returned.

For those who remain, anyway, the life in Europe is not a paradise as they imagined. Once they are abroad, they would find out work is the only thing they can do. There are too little leisure activities. For most of time, taking A1 as an example, he just surfs the internet or chats with friends in China. Chinese rarely have some get-togethers. The main reason, as Mr. A1 pointed out, is the busy working schedule everybody has. For Chinese migrants in the catering business in Brno, it is common practice that each of them takes only one day off in a week. They do it in turn. It is hard to arrange any meet-ups with others this way. Not only does the intensive working affects the socializing among Chinese migrants themselves, it also leaves no time for them to make local friends, as A1 puts it: "We ourselves seldom go out to have fun, (let along with Czechs)." Moreover, language is another barrier which is difficult to over come that hinders the integration with local society. Mr. A1 feels quite isolated from the locals as he does not speak Czech well. He still has not been adjusted to the life in Brno after more than one year of stay. There are comparatively much more Chinese in Italy, according to him. It is very likely to run into a Chinese there, unlike in Brno. He does not have any Czech friends, nor communicate much with other fellow countrymen. A result of this is the absence of a concentrated residential area for Chinese migrants. Chinese migrants who work in restaurants prefer to live somewhere near their work place or that is convenient for commuting. Some people from the same restaurant arrange to share a rent together.

The lack of language skills is troublesome for communicating with locals. In times when Czech communication is needed, Mr. A1 goes to his cousin B1 for help. For instance, they went together to the Foreign Affairs Office to deal with some

administrative procedure for A1 after his arrival. He prefers to count on his relatives who are also an outsider of the Czech society than the existing Chinese migrants associations. He believes the purpose of establishing the associations is purely selfish. Chinese migrants in Brno are, for A1, self-protective and careless about other people. It is not anything different with the associations. He hopes there could be some that solve practically problems for Chinese migrants, unlike what there are now, which focus majorly on how to make a nice name of themselves to draw investment from China or when they go back to China for their own benefits. They speak nicely here in front of the Chinese migrants, but do very little in real.

Being isolated in this society with no intact community behind him, reading Chinese news online is one of the few things A1 does in his free time. He likes reading news to know what happens in China, especially local news. He thinks no matter what he does or how well he does it here, he still want to return when there is any good chance. For now, he puts all his heart here to work and prepare for his children by giving them a better environment and receiving good education. He would wish to place his children under the good influence of western education philosophy and meanwhile teach them to carry on the good aspects from Chinese education as well. He said he reminds his children all the time that they have a Chinese heart by keeping in his family their original life-style. For example, when there are some festivals, they still celebrate them the traditional Chinese way like at home. There is a family dinner with other members on Chinese New Year with home-cooked snacks and dishes.

Besides the brothers from family A, their cousin B1 also owns a small restaurant. He was the boss of the restaurant in the center that I went to in the beginning. He came to Brno in 2001 with his wife. Both of his children were born here. His brother B2 came here the same year like him. He has a fast-food restaurant in the center too

and plans to bring his wife here next year. Their sister B3 is supposed to come to Brno with her husband and open a restaurant as well. Before 2001, Mr. B1 worked in his sister B4's restaurant in a small city. She joined her husband in 1998, four years after he came to CR. Despite the fact that some of his relatives are still to come to Brno, Mr. A1 still mentioned a drop in number of Chinese migrants in the Czech Republic comparing that of the year 2000. "There were some policy changes in CR and growing economy in Western Europe, so many Chinese left for those countries. The residence policy here is very strict, or at least more than that in Italy. My cousin wants his wife here, but they have to wait really long." The turn made toward a stricter policy on residence and business discouraged many Chinese migrants from choosing CR as their first step abroad. Those that were already here had to leave because of the declining business and went to other European countries where they had relatives in.

The fact that the family sent one person to the interview to speak on behalf of all the members indicates one of the features of a "cloakroom community" identified by Moore (2002:458-89) with Bauman's term. Although it was not stated explicitly in her writing, I see this feature as an extension of what she described. As can be implied from the interview later, the relations among the nuclear families which form the family in the case are not as close-knit as one would imagine. In the normal everyday life, each family is an individual unit operating with the others in parallel. The separated units join each other to pick up the group identity, which has been existing invisibly or in ignorance, in need of encountering any source from the host society. Therefore, a representative who is entitled by all to bear the group identity stands out to present their part of the network. In my case, it is the most educated person who is able to express his thought clearly in Mandarin Chinese coming to an interview by a student-researcher from a local academic institute.

It was also repeated said during the interview by the respondent that their course of migration is in the form of a chain. There are two most important pull factors that they consider when choosing the destination of migration, kinship and financial benefits. Thus their stay in whichever society is rather temporary. They stay on the move, which means they would not settle in a fixed location, yet are prepared all the time to leave for a better business opportunity or a shorter physical distance with relatives. Between these two, a more promising financial future takes the upper hand in their decision, concluded from the respondent's narrative. He has kin-network in both Italy and the Czech Republic, but when he was informed of a better business environment in CR, he decided to move, nonetheless, temporarily, until he acquires the certainty of a real increase in financial gains, of which the network, built mainly on kinship, has "a quantitatively impact" (Rauch and Trindade 2002:129).

When being placed in another society, Chinese migrants under this study subjectively intend to maintain their primary identity as being Chinese, which is "both an existential choice and a matter for creative invention", and "also an imposition on the individual by society" (Christiansen 2003:173). The second generation are expected to sustain the identity not surprisingly. The respondent wishes to secure such a position in the Czech society that he is in whatever cases Chinese in the eyes of the locals. There was no mentioning of the willingness to be recognized as a member of the local society during the interview, even for the second generation who were born and brought up here. The position actually echos Simmel's (2007) "stranger", which presents the unity of wandering and fixation. The Chinese family in Brno is not just passers-by in Czech society or moving in or out of CR frequently all the time, nor settling down in Brno permanently in the foreseeable future. They would stay for as long as the conditions are preferable. Meanwhile, they make little effort to forge a formal community or integrate themselves into society (Moore and Tubilewicz 2011:612) for, unconsciously or not, they are aware

of the possibility that they would have to leave at any time. It also explains the problem with local language as a result or side-product of being a stranger. Chinese migrants appear to be quite passive in regard to learning Czech, “discouraged mainly by uncertainty of their long-term future in the country”. (Moore and Tubilewicz 2011:625) For example, the respondent has mentioned that he has a permanent residence permit for Italy, yet he is in Brno now. This way they become the perfect stranger for the receiving society. Their position with “a combination of proximity and apartness, closeness and distance vis-à-vis the majority society” (Ibid) stands out more sharply when they settle in the society, for now.

As has been analyzed above, the network within the whole family is liquid and transnational, by which I mean Chinese migrants’ unknowingly regarding themselves as strangers to the host society breaks down the geographical boundaries between the nations. As a stranger in a society, they are not bound anywhere or fixed to any physical location. They, just like the strangers, can wander off easily and freely. The network stretches not only over the family members scattered over western countries, but also reaches the sending place, their homeland. In terms of homeland references, I would place the emphasis on the following three aspects that Boccagni (2011:3) pointed out: (a) migrants’ interpersonal ties with non-migrants; (b) migrants’ interactions with their motherland’s institutions; (c) migrants’ symbolic and emotional ties with their past life experience back home.

The respondent has mentioned his children who are left in China with grandparents. He and his wife keeps frequent contact with them via Internet. Telecommunication in the current informative age is functioning as an essential means of communication for the transnational migrants to keep in touch with their non-migrating relatives. Being abroad, migrants do not wish to sever the connection in any degree (Drbohlav 2003:214). The tie between those abroad and home constitutes a big part of

migrants daily activity. Besides necessary routines for basic needs, such as shopping, the rest of the time is taken up by talking with parents and children back home together with updating oneself with the news about homeland.

The respondent did not depict any interaction as such for himself, but did mention the various Chinese associations in the Czech Republic. According to his description, the associations' purpose of existence is not to provide service to the Chinese migrants in the Czech Republic, what is the expectation and needs of migrants, but rather to draw investment from or in China for developing or benefiting their own business in both countries. It shows that, although not for lower-level small business owners like the respondent, Chinese migrants do not limit their tradings within the Czech border. They are in constant contact with other business bodies in China. It is part of their business activity (Rauch and Trindade 2002).

Being embedded into a different society where almost nothing is the same like their homeland, migrants in the case try at every occasion to keep their Chinese-ness, for instance, the celebration of traditional festivals. The family reconstruct the ritual for such occasions, which for me is a symbolic representation of their past life experience in China. The respondent kept talking about his school life as a young boy. He was comparing all the time the life in China and abroad. I would see this as a type of emotional tie to his life before leaving. Migrants do not stop recollecting their past experience, with symbols related with the past recreated and emotions recalled. These ties prevent the migrants from becoming "national" for being in one country at one moment, but endow them by all means the characteristics for being transnational.

The connection and interaction between the Chinese migrants in CR and those non-migrants in China is not simply a one-way process. On one side, the news about any new development or change in home village plays an important role on the migrants' decision-making on such issues as whether to return or not, or their future business plan. On the other side, migrants' activity abroad influences the home village in no lesser extent. As was informed from the respondent's answers, the chain process of migrants leaving the village has turned it into an empty place with only elders and children. The productive labor force has gone abroad with an expectation of having a better opportunity. Their foreign life and business experience later reaches back to the sending village and introduces into it new perspectives. Non-migrants react in accordance with the returned information and make their own decision to leave or stay. For example, the respondent once mentioned the young people in his village hear about what it is really like in Europe and see the development in the village, thus do not have an intention to go abroad any more.

It seems that in Brno where there is no conventionally-recognized community, Chinese migrants do not try hard to integrate with the host society or seek support or acceptance from the locals, but the network is rather self-sufficient. They depend mostly on the care and help from each other, especially when they need to deal with some affairs that have to do with the host society. There is not a strong body which stand for the whole network that they can easily turn to. Meanwhile, this network stretches over both the receiving and sending countries. Therefore, to understand Chinese migrants under the transnational scope, one should see the liquid and ever-changing network that covers the whole migrating process. I would also draw a brief conclusion from the case study that Chinese migrants in Brno hardly integrate into the host society, because their transnational character enables them to stay a stranger within. Brno, as the temporary place of settlement, provides a promising financial future and pulls the migrants in. Yet the place of origin, being a part of the

transnational network and closely-related with the migrants abroad, is working its role well enough to have its influence shine on the life of migrants that they take it into consideration on every account.

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