

HOME IS CALLING? OR HOME IS ON THE MOVE? RETURN CHINESE MIGRANTS OF NEW ZEALAND AS TRANSNATIONALS

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Introduction

Chinese immigrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) are the most recent arrivals among all new ethnic Chinese immigrants of New Zealand.¹ Most of them started to arrive from the mid-1990s while the number of migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan started to drop sharply because of a combination of immigration policy changes in 1995 and the onset of the Asia economic crisis in 1997 (Ip, 2003). After that, the number of migrants from the PRC continued to rise (Henderson, 2003). The data from New Zealand Immigration Services shows that the PRC contributed the second-largest number of residence approvals in New Zealand between 1997 and 2006 (68,275), just after Great Britain (86,998).

Although the increase of the "China born" cohort was dramatic, this cohort has been comparatively neglected by the academic immigration studies within the New Zealand context. Considerable research attention on New Zealand's recent Chinese immigrants was often given to the arrivals from Hong Kong and Taiwan who contributed the majority of the business immigrants and were highly likely to adopt frequent commuting habits after immigration (Beal, 2001, Ip, 2001). Some micro-level research on PRC migrants has been conducted in recently years (Henderson, 2003, Ip, 2006). However, one of the most salient features of the new PRC immigrants that have not been scrutinised closely and comprehensively is their constant mobility.

This paper draws on the results of my recent fieldwork in Shanghai and Beijing, where I conducted in-depth interviews with 27 Chinese migrant returnees from New Zealand (NZ). It aims to explore the motives and implications of their return journey in the transnational context. It in particular aims to identify their motivation for returning

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1 "New Chinese immigrants" refers to Chinese who immigrated to New Zealand after the open-door immigration policy of 1987 came into force.

to China, and ascertain what their future movement and settlement might be in a transnational framework. The research on which this paper is based is the first of its kind within the New Zealand context. The reasons behind the return and further movements those new PRC immigrants pursued are crucial in understanding the relative position of NZ as an immigrant intake country which is increasingly dominated by short or medium term residence rather than long-term settlement.

The traditional explanation of return migration as a linear process in which a temporary sojourning experience followed by a permanent return “home” might be challenged in the way of adopting transnationalism as a framework to research on contemporary return migration. This article argues that nowadays transnational mobility of international migrants brings a new twist to the idea of return migration. The traditional meaning of return migration gives the emphasis on the assimilation narrative and tends to obscure the significance of the return trip “home” (Wyman, 1993). Mark Wyman implied that only unsuccessful migrants would return to the sending country. In the more recent post-1945 period, return migration in some studies was regarded as a long prospect and undertaken on retirement (Byron and Condon, 1996, Thomas-Hope, 1999). A more recent repatriation has been portrayed as a so-called brain exchange, complicating the earlier emphasis on a brain drain to the countries of the global North. In developing countries like China and India, an emergent high-technology industry has led to return migration by people who had moved to western nations, but who now see career and entrepreneurial opportunities in their countries of origin (Ip, 2006, Iredale, et al., 2002). These ways of looking at return migration conveys a sense of finality that completes the movement circle of ocean crossings. However, current transnational mobility and development have complicated the tale of return migration, given the fact that return migration for many migrants is not a final adjustment; rather, it is a transitional stage in their continuing journey with further movements ahead. Therefore, return migration might be conceptualized very differently within the transnationalism framework.

Methodological Notes

In-depth face-to-face interview was used to collect data from participants. Interview questions were asked to obtain their motivation of returning to China to, their experience of re-entry, their sense of home and identity, and what their future intentions might be.

Among those 27 returnees participants 13 were male and 14 were female. The average age of the participants was 38. The majority of the participants had formal tertiary re-education in NZ, seven obtained bachelor degree, and 15 obtained Master degree in various disciplines. Fourteen participants kept their Chinese passport and the rest had New Zealand citizenship. At the time of the interviews conducted between November 2007 and February 2008, all had returned and settled in China for at least one year. The majority of them held high-paying professional jobs. In four cases, the participants had already made up their minds to return to China prior to immigrating to New Zealand. They matched the profile of a typical returnee cohort as people who are well-educated, bilingual, in early career and with considerable earning capacity.

Back to China: Home is calling?

There were various reasons for those participants to make their return journey to China. The strength of the Chinese economy and the potential of the huge Chinese market were undoubtedly important factors to propel the homewards movement. For example, Michael, an insurance claim broker based in Shanghai who now regularly travels between New Zealand and Shanghai and whose wife and children still stay in Christchurch, mentioned: "I really dislike being separate from my wife and children geographically, but if I drop my business in Shanghai and go to NZ permanently, the life quality of my family would decline dramatically. You see here, in Shanghai, bigger population means more clients and more money". Even though he used to be employed by an electronic company in NZ, the income was not high enough to sustain for his family a high quality life.

Simultaneously, the migration experience, especially the re-training and re-education in NZ, equipped those returnees with special skills and knowledge to take on the opportunities and challenges offered by the China market. Almost all participants emphasized that their immigration experiences and their studying in NZ gave them the strength and advantage to embrace their current work and future life.

Even though the economic motives are overwhelmingly strong, they were not the only factors prompting return. There are other factors beyond economic considerations. The desire for career development is another main reason driving those PRC migrants homewards. To many of them, the higher professional satisfaction in China was an irresistible attraction. Compared with China, the job market and entrepreneurial opportunities in NZ are relatively limited. When China's market is booming, many overseas Chinese would like to return for better prospects. Chris, who is now a finance analyst in Beijing, expressed his dissatisfaction with his career development in NZ: "I used to try many ways to establish my own career in NZ, but I just felt that it would never happen in NZ". When the interviewer asked him whether his wife who is now still in Auckland to finish her PhD is happy about his leave, he answered: "She is more than happy. She truly understood that I was unhappy about my career development. As a man, you are nothing if you cannot have a successful career. It is not only about money, for me it is more about my self-esteem".

Some non-economic factors which drive the return journey were also significant. The interviews conducted in China revealed a much more complex and unfinished set of personal and family trajectories. To many of them, taking care of their aging parents plays an important role in their decision to go back to China.

Reunion with the family back to China is also an important reason for return. Wendy and her husband and son are all NZ permanent residents. However, her husband and son have never been in NZ for long-term. Wendy stayed in NZ for six years and finished her MBA. She commuted between New Zealand and Beijing frequently during those six years. She recently returned to Beijing because her family needs her back. As many transnational Chinese immigrants did, family members were strategically stretched across the two sides of the Pacific Ocean according to different needs at different stage of the life cycle. When one stage of the life cycle has achieved its goal,

migrants will move to another stage with different strategies to satisfy the overall goal. The “astronauting” technique was applied to many Chinese migrant families in response to family needs that can be fulfilled more satisfactorily at one site or the other. In this way, parents, siblings, children, and husband and wives scatter on different continents. When the goal of this stage has been achieved, “astronauting” experiences would be discarded, and returning to the original places for the family members who scatter outside is definitely one choice of many.

For many of them, the desire of going back to an old comfort zone of familiar surroundings also contributes to their return journey. Wendy continued her reasons to return: “To be honest, we can have more in China rather than in NZ, both materially and spiritually. For me, the spiritual gain is more important. I have many friends here, my family is here, and my parents”. The cultural milieu of China was comfortable, familiar and therefore highly reassuring, offering a familiar language, familiar social environment, and the closeness to family and friends.

For some of the returnees, the emotional link with China as their “home” is the reason for their return. Some interviews revealed how emotional link with China conditioned the decision of return. Echo, who quitted her job as a programme manager from a NZ university, is now working as a trade development executive in Shanghai. She mentioned that her emotional link with her birth place, Shanghai, could be accounted as an important driving force of her return, even though her parents are still in Hamilton: “Anyway, home is calling. Here is my home. Hamilton is my home away from this home. My real home is in Shanghai”. For her, the emotional link with Shanghai called for her nostalgia and memories, and returning to her hometown supposed to complete her migration narrative. The interview with Wendy also revealed a similar tendency to perceive China as her national home where she can return to: “I am a Chinese, and China is my country. My home is here. Here is a place where I feel I belong to. In NZ, even though they offer you citizenship, I could not find the feeling of being home”.

As can be noted, the majority of the PRC migrants are highly educated, and a sizeable number obtained New Zealand qualifications and work experiences. The author suggests that when those migrants made the move back to China, many did so not because of their failure to settle down in NZ; rather it is because there are better opportunities in China. Equipped with their English proficiency, NZ qualifications and professional skills, they are able to take those opportunities. The opportunity for professional advancement and to “play a bigger role” in China’s market and economic development is the most important factor for return migration decision. Other factors beyond the economic reason, such as family consideration, the patriotic ride and emotional link with China also should not be underestimated.

New Zealand or China or somewhere else? Home is on the move?

Giving the pull-back factors exerted by the bigger China market to PRC migrants, one important question of return migration is whether there is an expiry date in their return journey. To fully understand the motives and implications of return migration in a

transnational context, the interviews conducted in China continued to ask for the future movement plan of those returnee participants.

Some of them have a definite plan to go back to New Zealand in the future. Wendy explained her future plan: "I'll be with my son in Auckland for his high-school education after he finished his intermediate in Beijing. Bilingual is an advantage for his future. New Zealand's education will benefit him as well". It is common that when the children of the family are young and at their school age, the focus of one's life is on the family obligation and the consideration of giving children a relatively good education. This is not, however, the end of one's journey. The subsequent movement plan in one's future goes with his/her shifting motivation at different stage of the life course. Just like what Wendy continued to say: "Once my son enters university, I can be free. It means that my task has been accomplished. I want to go to Australia afterwards and my husband can go there with me".

When the education-led return back to New Zealand for children is pervasive, retirement is another significant prospect which frequently associated with the decision of returning New Zealand in the future. For many, it is the time to move away from bustling metropolitan urban centres and to a quieter environment with enough savings to sustain a good quality of life in NZ. For example, Max, an owner of a head-hunting company, saw his immediate future in China: "I'll give me at least ten more years in Beijing. My career is here, and I like to be here now. This is an exciting place, which makes me feel involved. I feel that I am a participant and creator in this city. In NZ, there is little chance for me to participate". When the interviewer asked for his further plan, he said: "NZ is good for long-term settlement. People enjoy the natural environment there, and so do I. I'll go back to New Zealand after retirement for sure".

For some, it is a time to go "home". Michael, the owner of an insurance company in Shanghai, referred his reason to go back to New Zealand as going back "home": "I'll go back to NZ after ten years. My home is there. You see, my wife and two children are in Christchurch". In his statement, "going back to home" means to return to the immigration destination country after life savings have been secured through working in the homeland for certain years. Here, "home" is incorporated as a part of one's immigration narrative, but the true meaning it conveys is markedly different from the conventional meaning of "home" as immigrants' national home.

The education-led and retirement-led return to NZ suggests the strategy of a double return, first from NZ to China for work and career development, and then with the prospect of a later return to NZ for children's education or retirement. It is here that the transnational longing of skilled PRC returnees leads to a novel trajectory through a seamless social space that crosses oceans and national borders, passing from their native place as a work playground to their adopted place of rest. Moreover, some saw returning to NZ as yet another temporary move, for example, Wendy's future plan to go to Australia. In the meantime, some saw returning to NZ as a final adjustment upon retirement, if not sooner.

For many of them, they tend to keep their options open. They may have some forward planning in mind, which may not necessarily involve returning NZ. Their

choice of their future playground very much depends on the market demand. However, the consideration of different life stage needs of their family members plays an equally important part in their decision making. Xiao, who works in a diplomatic office, revealed: "I am still young. After I have accumulated some working experience, I'll go to another country, depending on where I can earn more and where I can have a better life".

As can be seen, the transnationalism creates a travel plan between each single social field. When one's social field is enlarged, it means a dispersal of family members on different continents where parents, siblings, children are scattered in different places to best suit their present life stage. The movement under the transnational framework is definitely not a one-way movement, neither is it a two-way movement. It is a movement with multiple ways within a circular cycle which follows its own logic of arrival, leave and further movements.

It is interesting that many of them spontaneously expressed their confusion over the concept of "home" when talking their plans for the future. Lucy, who is working in a French cosmetic retail company, expressed her confused feeling towards "home": "When I left China for New Zealand, I left my home. Now, my only emotional link with China is my parents. I don't really have a home in China to go back to. Therefore, I can go anywhere I want". In this case, the sense of no home facilitates the free movement in Lucy's future. However, most Chinese migrants including Lucy, never quite arrive at their destination, because they never quite left home, because many of them still keep a close tie with their homeland. Conceived in this way, "home" is a problematic nature as a physical place, bound by geographical territory. However, "home" can also refer to the immaterial – the feeling or sense of home that may have no spatial correlated, and "connotes an emotional place – somewhere you truly belong" (Pollock and Reken, 1999). As Richard, another interviewee, declared: "Where I'll go depends on where my home is. Home for me is not a geographic or physical concept, but means where my family is and where my heart belongs".

Discussion

The conventional use of "return migration" conveys the sense of closure and completion in the immigration narrative. But in a transnational era, as those returnee Chinese migrants revealed, return migration extends the linear model of migration to a circular model in which a continuing itinerary with further movements is possible and could be expected or, eagerly awaited. Out of necessity and/or out of choice, those new Chinese migrants would employ multi-local strategy to best suit the different stages of their life cycle, as well as the particular needs of their family members. In this sense, the option of return to both sides of the Pacific Ocean should always be kept open, and so should further movements.

The mobility of PRC Chinese migrants is associated with the economic and political transformations in both China and NZ. On the one hand, the strength of China's booming economy would be considered the most important factor for attracting returnees. This is not only witnessed in the NZ case, but also in other countries of

immigration such as Canada and Australia. On the other hand, as an immigration destination country, NZ's economy is characterized by extensive overseas linkages in addition to its high export dependency, which has a significant impact on patterns of international immigration (Bedford, et al., 2000). The increasing competition for skilled migrants will ensure that NZ remains relatively low on the list of priority for potential long-term high-skilled settlers. Its skilled immigrant flow will be increasingly dominated by short to medium term residents. Under such circumstances, the returnees will continue to play a significant role in the linkages between the two countries.

While economic factors appear dominant in the decision making of returning to China, some non-economic factors can also be crucial. The consideration of the family members' different needs at their different life stages is always involved in the decision making processes. The desire of getting some Chinese education for their children and willingness to take care of the aging parents are evidence. Moreover, the consideration of how to arrange the whole family is always listed as the priority in the future plan of movement.

There are other theoretical issues at stake. For those transnational migrants, "home" has always been a problematic concept, giving that conventional "home" has been disrupted during the transnational movements, and family members located on different continents strategically. Usually, "home" evokes an emotional link with where migrants are originally from or the feeling as they move between places. As the returnee participants revealed in their immigration narratives, "home" sometimes became a nostalgia often related to a longing for the national home (China). During the interviews, "home" and "homeland" were often incorporated in participants' immigration narratives, in particular the narrative of the further movement plan. In the transnational era, "home" becomes difficult to define or redefine, and the detailed analysis on migrants' conceptualisation of "home" during their transmigration processes will serve as a useful reference in the understanding of new Chinese migrants' aspiration and behaviour.

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