

The Chinese in Europe: Origins and Transformations

Gregor Benton

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people all round the world, including in Europe, saw the Chinese among them as aliens, a prejudice that survived into the present century. This attitude peaked in 1900 with the Yellow Peril scare, which predicted Chinese would swamp the world unless the West acted. The attitude was practically universal. It was especially entrenched in Europe, which had no tradition of transoceanic immigration and feared it as an unknown. It was also found in countries formed by immigration, like the United States, where any migrant could be an American patriot – but a Chinese migrant couldn't. In the 1960s, even some academics went along with the idea that Chinese immigrants are clannish and inassimilable, by studying Chinese communities outside China as if they were outposts of China rather than part of the societies around them and using them to formulate theories about China, as if the difference between Chinese society in China and Chinese society overseas was minimal.

Those who did look seriously at Chinese overseas were more interested in the big communities of Asia and America than the smaller, poorer, less influential communities in Europe. Even today, commentators often ignore the Chinese in Europe, but less so than used to be the case. There are three reasons for the change. Governments in Europe have started to take multiculturalism and minorities – including the Chinese – seriously. China is emerging as a new superpower. And Chinese migration to Europe has rocketed.

I start my talk with a brief history of early Chinese migration to Europe. One of my arguments is that there is not one Chinese community in Europe but many. The best way to capture this diversity is by exploring it as a process.

Chinese in the early twentieth century paid little regard to Europe's frontiers and criss-crossed them at will. Their European migrations were continental in scale. The first to settle, in the nineteenth century, were sailors who jumped ship in Liverpool, Hamburg, Marseilles, Amsterdam, and elsewhere, where they set up small Chinatowns. Most were Cantonese. As seafarers, they found it easier than land-tied immigrants to stay in touch with co-nationals in ports across Europe and the world. Their Chinatown economy revolved around cooking and laundering, jobs they were familiar with from life at sea.

Gregor Benton, Professor Emeritus of Chinese History at Cardiff University, Visiting Professor at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, has worked for many years on overseas Chinese migration and settlement. The following text is his contribution to the 8th European Catholic China Colloquium "Chinese in Europe – Trends and Catholic Perspectives," Freising, September 16–19, 2010. A German translation of this text was first published in *China heute* 2010, No. 4, pp. 229–235.

The second group, numbering hundreds, walked from China into Western Europe, along the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway, or came by sea. Most were from two counties, Qingtian 青田 in Zhejiang 浙江, a coastal province, and Tianmen 天门 in inland Hubei 湖北. Both counties had a tradition of migrating within China. The Qingtianese peddled soapstone statuettes and other trinkets. The Tianmenese were acrobats and healers. The Qingtianese spread all over Europe after 1900, hawking goods around towns and villages. Some set up tiny communities. They kept in touch with one another across Europe but kept apart from other Chinese. None seems to have reached Britain, where Cantonese held sway.

A third group arrived in the Great War, when the Allies hired hundreds of thousands of men from all over China to dig trenches in France, Belgium, and Russia. Thousands stayed after the war and spread across Western and Northern Europe. Most settled in France, where many became factory workers, the only Chinese in Europe to have done so. They rarely interacted with the Cantonese and Qingtianese.

A fourth important stream in the twentieth century were Chinese from European colonies: British colonies like Malaya and Guyana; Dutch colonies like Indonesia and Suriname; French colonies like Mauritius and Vietnam; and Portuguese colonies like East Timor and Mozambique. Tens of thousands of Chinese from Indochina went to France after the Vietnam War in 1975. These migrants differed from the other groups: they had citizenship in Europe. Most knew English, Dutch, Portuguese, or French. Many were educated, relatively wealthy, and resourceful. They had experience of living outside China as a minority, and they took old ethnic institutions with them to their new destinations. Few had much to do with the already settled groups of Chinese they encountered in Europe.

The fifth, and last, early stream of Chinese to Europe, starting in the 1950s, were peasants from Hong Kong's New Territories 香港新界. As Commonwealth citizens, they were free up until the 1970s to settle in Britain, where they entered the restaurant niche and competed successfully against established Chinese owners. When the restaurant sector in Britain became saturated, some moved to the European mainland.

Some people talk about the Chinese in Europe as if they were a single entity, but they are not and never were. The five streams I have listed were united only by a Chinese ancestry. The seafarers, the wartime labourers, and the petty traders had little or no contact and lacked a common language. Sometimes one group worked for another, but the relationship was difficult and rarely lasted. The mainlanders were cut off from China by the Second World War and Mao's Revolution, and their children assimilated. Chinese from European colonies were even more likely to assimilate. The Hong Kongers kept up a tie to the New Territories, but the tie weakened in the 1970s, when laws were passed preventing new immigration. The Hong Kongers brought over their families to beat the ban and settled down to run takeaways and educate their children.

Few Chinese except those from former colonies entered the mainstream economy. In the early days, white workers gave Chinese migrants a hostile reception and barred them from jobs in industry. The Chinese reacted by creating their own small economy, an ethnic niche, on the margins of the main economy. This early experience of racist exclusion survived in the collective memory of later generations, and was refreshed by new experiences

of discrimination. Members of other ethnic groups – West Indians, South Asians, etc. – asserted their rights to jobs and fair treatment, but Chinese never made a fist. Even within each segment there was scant collective spirit. Instead, Chinese competed with each other. Each family sought private salvation in hard work and, for the youngsters, study.

Changes in the Chinese Presence in Europa since the 1980s

Such was the situation until around 1980, when developments in China led to big changes in Chinese emigration across the world, including to Europe. After Mao's death, China's travel regime was liberalised. Chinese were again able to go abroad. Some reinvigorated the traditional communities. Others opened up new frontiers.

Previously, the Chinese in Europe came from just a few counties in Guangdong 广东 and Zhejiang. Now, a more broadly based exodus began. Some new migrants came from old sending places, but most came from places like Fujian 福建 and northeast China with no tradition of migration to Europe or no tradition of migration at all. Some worked in Chinatown as cheap labour, others branched into new sectors. I now want to talk about changes in the Chinese presence in Europe, and to look in particular at four trends:

- New Chinese migration to Russia and Eastern Europe
- New Chinese migration to Southern Europe
- Human trafficking, a crime to which Chinese are especially vulnerable
- The experience of Europeans of Chinese descent

These topics cover a wide range of Chinese, from the least safe and settled to the most. But even Chinese who prosper meet threats as well as opportunities; and even Europeans of Chinese descent encounter substantial odds.

New Chinese Migration to Russia and Eastern Europe

Russia and Eastern Europe are major destinations for the new migrants. Moscow had Europe's first Chinatown, established in the seventeenth century by traders who crossed the border China shares with Russia. Chinese migrants played a big role in the Russian Revolution of 1917, but their community was destroyed by Stalin's purges in the 1930s. Eastern Europe has a much shorter history of Chinese immigration. Not until the 1980s did Chinese arrive in large numbers, after the post-Mao reforms led to the opening of Far Eastern and Siberian Russia to Chinese, which led to a boom along the border. Using the trans-Siberian railway as their conduit, traders took goods to European Russia and to Eastern Europe, in a shuttle trade. Hungary, Eastern Europe's most open economy, was a favourite destination. By 1991, Hungary's Chinese population had shot up from around zero to 40,000. At first the shuttle traders sold their goods at stations along the railway track. Later, they graduated to open-air markets and shops.

These migrants have remained more mobile than Chinese in Britain, France, and the Netherlands. This is partly because their migration is new and exploratory. It is also because some Chinese see Russia and Eastern Europe as poor, unpromising destinations, mere transit points for onward migration to the West.

These new migrants come from more provinces and more social backgrounds than those who founded Western Europe's communities. So they have not divided into dialect groups like other overseas Chinese, and Mandarin is their lingua franca.

How many Chinese live in Russia and Eastern Europe? It's impossible to say. In 2000, around 237,000 were registered in Russia, but most were commuters rather than settlers, and this figure did not include undocumented migrants. Most lived in hostels, an indication of their transitory nature, or of official barriers to their regularisation. Most Chinese in Eastern Europe and European Russia run their own businesses. Most in the Russian Far East and Siberia work in agriculture, forestry, and building, for a pittance – \$7 a month in 1993.

In eastern Russia, fewer Chinese have switched from the shuttle trade to a settled existence than in European Russia and Eastern Europe. This is because the cost of the shuttle is less (for China is closer) and eastern Russia is rarely a final destination. In European Russia and Eastern Europe, shuttle traders form companies and become legal residents where possible. Most give up carrying their goods by train and use containers to transport them. Yet they keep strong links with China and travel back seeking business opportunities. This is because they have better contacts with enterprises in China than Chinese in Western Europe. Also, China is closer and they themselves are less settled.

Because of these closer ties with China, some academics see the new migrants in Russia and Eastern Europe as transnational citizens, who come and go at will in the new global age. This is a positive and optimistic view, but not a very convincing one. In considering the new migrants, one must distinguish between ordinary Chinese and the *élite*. Transnational mobility and the cosmopolitan life remain a dream for most. Some observers argue that the proliferation of Chinese transnational political organisations in Russia and Eastern Europe supports their theory, for these organisations vigorously protest their patriotism and maintain close ties with China. However, their membership is usually thin. Their legitimation lies in their leaders' personal contact with Chinese authorities, not any social work they do in the community. They are not really relevant to ordinary Chinese. The most one can say is that Chinese traders in Russia and Eastern Europe are more dependent on China for capital, goods, and business information than Chinese in Western Europe, and this ties them more strongly to the Chinese state.

Transnational ties of this sort are due in part to the newness of the communities. As migrant communities, they are by definition more closely tied with their sending places than older communities. It is interesting to note that the oldest of the new Chinese communities in Eastern Europe, in Hungary, are evolving in a similar direction to the older communities in Western Europe. Mixed marriages are common and the children are bilingual and study at Hungarian universities. In short, they are becoming Chinese Hungarians.

But most Chinese in Russia and Eastern Europe have not yet begun to settle in the same way as in Western Europe. They retain strong ties to China, and many still ponder more promising options than the poor and unstable transition economies of Russia and Eastern Europe. This reluctance to sink roots is strengthened by the growth of anti-Chinese feeling in these places.

New Chinese Migration to Southern Europe

Another new destination is Southern Europe. There have been tiny Chinese groups in Spain, Portugal, and Italy for a hundred years, but today's communities are tens of thousands strong. Newcomers were drawn to Southern Europe in the 1980s by pre-existing ties to the old communities, but since then their economy has evolved quite differently from the traditional niches. This is because of developments in both Europe and China. I will look mainly at Prato in Tuscany, where 90 per cent of Chinese are from Wenzhou 温州 in Zhejiang. Much of what I say also goes for other parts of Southern Europe.

Prato was for centuries a stronghold of the European textile industry, run along family lines, but in the 1980s this industry entered into crisis. The Tuscan family itself was changing. Big firms became more flexible and effective, so family firms were less able to compete. New migrants from Wenzhou began to take over parts of the textile enclave, which Italians were already vacating. They reproduced old Tuscan practices, also using family resources. They did not create the Tuscan crisis, although they are often accused of that. Their presence in Tuscany was a product of the crisis, and a response to it.

In China, Wenzhou became famous after Mao's death for developing a family-based system of workshops. In the early 1980s, thousands of Wenzhounese travelled around China selling buttons, bags, clothes, and shoes made in Wenzhou and set up thousands of small factories in other places. They also started going overseas, including to Tuscany. Wenzhou capital flowed abroad, to Italy, France, and Spain, and eventually started flowing back to China. Today, overseas Wenzhounese invest hundreds of millions of Euros in Wenzhou enterprise.

In the past, China's governments usually cared little about the fate of their nationals overseas. Today, however, Beijing and Wenzhou are keen to facilitate this migration and local authorities compete to establish themselves as migrant-exporting regions, like the old ones in Guangdong and elsewhere.

The Chinese experience in Tuscany has many novel features, and some observers call it a "new model." Chinese in Tuscany engage in manufacture rather than trade and services, like other Chinese in Europe, and are more integrated into the wider economy. Yet in other ways the model is older than it looks, and the idea that it represents Chinese migrants' liberation into the economic and social mainstream and a new way forward is an illusion. Most migrants work for Chinese, producing goods for consumption by non-Chinese. They try to avoid competing with local whites and instead compete with other Chinese, in sectors the Italians are vacating. When they manage to breathe new life into these sectors, organisations like the Northern League accuse them of taking Italian jobs. So it is not surprising that many Chinese in Prato view themselves as excluded from Italian society or confined to its lowest rung.

Human Trafficking

Many new migrants in Europe were at one time or still are illegal. Twenty per cent of global migration is illegal. However, there is much variation between countries and among different groups of Chinese. In the UK, few Fujianese have the necessary papers, whereas

in Hungary most Chinese do. In Italy, Portugal, and Spain illegal migrants have repeatedly been legalized by amnesties.

Illegal Chinese immigration and human trafficking by snakeheads are hot topics of debate in Europe. Trafficking causes endless misery for tens of thousands of migrants, and is associated with two mass tragedies: the suffocation of 58 Chinese in a lorry at Dover in England in 2000, and the drowning of 23 Chinese at Morecambe Bay in 2004.

Why do people turn to traffickers and what can be done to stop them? The root cause lies in the rich countries' immigration policies, and the solution is to end or loosen discriminatory immigration regimes.

The term trafficking is rarely defined with clarity and precision. It is often equated with people smuggling, but the two differ radically. Smuggling implies the consent of the person smuggled, whereas trafficking relies on deceiving or using or threatening to use force against the trafficked person, usually after the journey starts. Smuggling ends when the journey ends, but the traffickers subject their victims to forced labour until they have paid their debt to the trafficker, which can take years.

The extent of trafficking is hard to quantify. In the 1990s, US sources said that each year 100,000 Chinese were trafficked to Europe, for a fee ranging from US\$10,000 to \$50,000. This fee was usually in the form of a loan on which interest of up to 30 per cent was charged, deducted from wages. Those who don't pay are beaten, ransomed, or tortured. The victims are helpless, for they are illegal and rarely speak local languages.

The snakehead is not the only beneficiary. Chinatown employers also exploit the trafficked workers' illegal status. They pay them badly, work them long hours, house them poorly, and bully or beat them.

Beijing is not happy with this trafficking, which fuels crime in China and harms China's image, so it has passed laws against it. But Beijing is more worried about the violation of its borders than the violation of the victims, who are often punished alongside the trafficker if they are caught or return to China. There is insufficient provision for intergovernmental cooperation to fight the traffickers, and China lacks appropriate laws on forced labour, which is an inevitable outcome of trafficking.

European governments also dislike the trafficking, but also do little or nothing to improve the treatment of Chinese and other migrant workers. In 1990, the United Nations created the Migrant Rights Convention, which extends universal human rights to all migrant workers, but none of Europe's migrant-receiving countries has ratified it.

The Experience of Europeans of Chinese Descent

Trafficking is a misfortune of the new migrants. I end by looking at a group opposite in circumstance and character, but who also face problems many commentators ignore. I refer to younger Chinese born in Europe.

How do Europeans of Chinese descent think of themselves? What is their identity? And how do other Europeans view them? People often assume that identity is instinctive and automatic, but this assumption is untrue and dangerous. New generations, immigrants' children and grandchildren, do not stick to the ancestral identities they inherit. Instead, they create new identities, which add to the changing national identity of the

country of their birth. These new identities are not replicas of the stereotyped Britishness or Frenchness or Italianness politicians talk about. They synthesise ancestral heritage with habits and outlooks of the countries where the young people make their friendships and relationships and go to school and work. Young people, especially migrants' descendants, question the state-sponsored idea of identity, with its nationalist assumptions of a homogenous culture. These youngsters are not sojourners or exiles from China. Yet they are also uncomfortable with the sharp boundaries between cultures that states tend to favour. Their world-view is more likely to be fluid, and rich with subtle inflexions.

The Chinese are among the most divided of Europe's ethnic minorities: divided by language, origin, class, and – with the passage of time – generation. They are scarcely less diverse than the indigenous Europeans. Few other ethnic minorities are as varied. Other ethnic groups are united by their identity, especially where ethnicity overlaps with, say, religion. The coincidence of ethnicity and Islam is an example: it provides a strong cement for some minorities. The Chinese, however, have no binding church.

Here is an awful irony: Chinese lack a unifying distinctiveness, but people perversely imagine them as cohesive to the point of clannishness and bound by common interests. Even Europeans of Chinese descent suffer this misperception. Members of dominant communities question their loyalty and see them as “immigrants” or members of a “diaspora” who are not legitimate inhabitants of their homeland. They assume that anyone visibly Chinese belongs to a separate, cohesive community. But these youngsters are cultural and political citizens of their place of birth, which is their homeland.

Why is this important? On the whole, Chinese in Europe in recent years have suffered less discrimination than in the past and less than other non-white ethnic groups. However, violent attacks against them are not unknown. In Rome, fascists demolished shops owned by minorities, including Chinese, and beat up the owners. Chinese in Belfast have been repeatedly attacked. Anna Lo, an ethnic Chinese member of Northern Ireland's Assembly, received a death threat when she spoke up for displaced Roma. In Russia, many people see Chinese as a demographic threat and some politicians want them expelled. This happens because dominant communities wrongly see them as outsiders.

Chinese are vulnerable to bigotry in the UK because of their dispersal across urban suburbs and villages, a pattern dictated by the takeaway trade. They are also vulnerable in the Chinatowns in Paris, Milan, and Budapest, which present concentrated targets. Up to now, the attacks have been sporadic and limited, but sinophobia is on the rise in Europe. The anti-Chinese pogroms in Indonesia in the late 1990s show how nationalism can explode into xenophobic violence.

In parts of Europe, anti-minority, anti-immigrant sentiment is more and more shaping state policy. In response, youth movements, ethnic organisations, and civil-rights campaigns have arisen in some minority groups. This has not yet happened among Chinese, but it might do if current trends persist.

Chinese outside China have always suffered ethnic stereotyping. A new element in the stereotyping of young Chinese in some European countries is the idea that they are a “model minority” destined to do outstandingly well at school and work. But while many young Chinese thrive, this stereotype perpetuates wrong beliefs. It implies career success

is a Chinese propensity, and downplays the disproportionate number of Chinese in Europe who don't "succeed." It implies Chinese are different from other minorities. It isolates them by falsely raising them above the rest. And it obscures the discrimination even Chinese professionals encounter: they need better grades than white colleagues, they must perform better for the same pay, and they bump up against Chinese-resistant glass ceilings. Although the "model minority" idea is light years away from the Yellow Peril one, it also has a sinister implication: that Chinese are superhuman, not just human. So the "model minority" idea is another obstacle for Chinese to overcome.

Summary

1. There is not one Chinese community in Europe but there are many.
2. These communities are based on the pioneers' place of origin in China or outside China, their "dialect," the circumstances and time of their arrival in Europe, and their material and cultural resources.
3. The communities are split along lines of class and generation.
4. Relations between the different Chinese communities, and within each, are not necessarily harmonious or based on a belief in mutual interest.
5. A graphic illustration of this is Chinese entrepreneurs' exploitation of the victims of snakeheads.
6. Despite these differences, majority whites tend to see Chinese as a single community, and as clannish, introverted, and bound by internal solidarity.
7. This perception of Chinese as a united community and a potential threat was most marked in the early twentieth century, but it never went away.
8. Today, xenophobic views about Chinese are resurfacing. In Italy, Ireland, Eastern Europe, and Russia, attacks on Chinese are increasing.
9. The exclusion of Chinese from mainstream jobs consigned them to ethnic niches. At sea, they worked below deck. On land, they did catering and laundering.
10. These were women's jobs that most male whites shunned: by doing them, Chinese avoided competing with organised white male labour.
11. Some Chinese groups occupy different economic niches, others compete in the same niche, or one group works for the other, before going independent.
12. Chinese have practised self-exclusion from mainstream jobs because of the collective memory of racism.
13. The Chinese economy in Prato and Budapest looks different at first sight from that in Liverpool and Amsterdam. At bottom, however, both are ethnic enclaves, based on the principle of Chinese exclusion.
14. Chinese today are increasingly pictured as a model minority. This depiction ignores their special problems, and the disproportionate number that fail.

Select Bibliography

- Benton, Gregor – E. T. Gomez, *Chinese in Britain, 1800–2000: Economy, Transnationalism, Identity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave 2008.
- Benton, Gregor – Frank Pieke (eds.), *The Chinese in Europe*, London: Macmillan 1998.
- Christiansen, Flemming, *Chinatown, Europe: An Exploration of Overseas Chinese Identity in the 1990s*, London: Routledge 2003.
- Gao Yun, “Chinese Migrants and Forced Labour in Europe,” Working Paper, International Labour Organization, 2004.
- Li Minghuan 李明歡, *Ouzhou huaqiao huaren shi* 歐洲華僑華人史 (The History of the Chinese in Europe), Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe 2002.
- Nyíri, Pál, *Chinese in Eastern Europe and Russia: A Middleman Minority in a Transnational Era*, London: Routledge 2007.
- Pai Hsiao-hung, *Chinese Whispers: The True Story Behind Britain’s Hidden Army of Labour*, London: Penguin 2008.
- Pieke, Frank N., “Introduction: Community and Identity in the New Chinese Migration Order,” in: *Population, Space and Place* 2007, No. 13, pp. 81–94.
- Pieke, Frank N. – Pál Nyíri – Mette Thunø – Antonella Ceccagno, *Transnational Chinese: Fujianese Migrants in Europe*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2004.
- Rouilleau-Berger, Laurence (ed.), *Nouvelles migrations chinoises et travail en Europe*, Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail 2008.
- Wu Bin, “Chinese Migration and Wenzhou’s Development,” in: G. Johansen – R. Smyth – R. French (eds.), *Living Outside the Walls: The Chinese in Prato*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2009, pp. 238–260.