



A search for a place to call home: Negotiation of home, identity and senses of belonging among new migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Research on transnational emotions places particular emphasis on the notion of 'home' to migrants because of its centrality in identity construction, especially the sense of belonging. This paper charts out how the concept of home, sense of identity and social spaces are shaped during increased mobility and transnationalism among highly-educated and skilled new PRC migrants.¹ Drawing theories from 'emotional transnationalism', 'critical geographies of home', 'material geographies of home' and 'translocal geographies', this paper engages with a critical analysis of the emotional spaces of home and identity and belonging based on the author's personal experience and reflection as a migrant herself and empirical data collected from 47 in-depth interviews with migrants who are originally from the PRC and have demonstrated great transnational mobility and intentions. This paper demonstrates the significant value of using an autobiographical approach to interrogate research questions and empirical data in transnational migration studies. It also makes theoretical contribution to the understanding of how increased transnational mobility shapes migrants' ideas of home, sense of identity and emotional relations with different space/places.

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1. Introduction

The arrival of significant numbers of well-educated and skilled PRC migrants in New Zealand began in the mid-1990s.² Rather than pursuing economic ambitions, most new migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) chose to migrate to New Zealand to seek a pleasant lifestyle and natural environment to enjoy a safe and relatively peaceful democratic society while at the same time having the opportunity to obtain Western education and gain advanced overseas credentials. These experiences and credentials have considerable value in the global job market, and are highly transferable internationally (Friesen and Ip, 1997; Ho, 2003; Ip, 2006).

Following their acquisition of New Zealand residence/citizenship, PRC migrants have demonstrated considerable transnational mobility as manifested by their on-going movements and close contacts with their country of origin. A recent report from New Zealand's Department of Labour indicated that PRC migrants are 10th on the long-term absence list with 23 per cent absent from New Zealand for six months or more at the survey point late in 2007 (Merwood, 2008: 122). Attracted by the booming economy in their homeland, or better opportunities for career and business development elsewhere, PRC migrants in New Zealand are either

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¹ New Chinese migrants in the New Zealand context is a term that usually refers to Chinese who migrated to New Zealand after the introduction of the Immigration Policy Review in 1986, which abolished the 'traditional origin' preference for British migrants. Among the new Chinese migrants, the three major sources are immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC. These three groups plus Chinese from other countries (e.g. Malaysia, Indonesia etc.) are all categorized as new Chinese migrants in New Zealand. New Chinese migrants are distinct from the early Chinese migrants in New Zealand. The early Chinese migrants were mostly uneducated male peasants from rural Southern China, and they migrated primarily because of the economic opportunities found in the gold mines in the Western world and the tin mines and plantations in Central America. However, the majority of contemporary Chinese migrants are highly educated and possess specialized skills or financial capital, which lets them qualify and meet the entry criteria of New Zealand.

² Between 1996/97 and 2002/03 immigrants from Great Britain, China, India and South Africa dominated New Zealand's international migration system. The year 1997 was the first time that the PRC featured as the second largest source country for New Zealand's immigrant intake, just after Great Britain. More recent data from the New Zealand Immigration Services (NZIS) shows that Great Britain and the PRC were the top two contributors of New Zealand's immigrant intake from 1987 to 2009.

returning to China, moving to a third destination,³ or engaging in long-distance commuting between New Zealand and either China or Australia (Liu, 2011a). They are operating in a transnational social space in which their lives span geographic, cultural and political boundaries that allow for a combination of lifestyle choices in two or more places (Castells, 1996; Faist, 2000a, 2000b; Pries, 2001). Their relationships with home are shaped by the transnational social space they have developed, which link the homeland (China) and new world (New Zealand) and contribute to constructing their identities and senses of belonging.

Drawing on theories from transnational migration scholarship (Glick-Schiller et al., 1995), especially theories of 'emotional transnationalism' (Wolf, 1997, 2002), 'critical geographies of home' (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012), 'material geographies of home' (Datta, 2008) and 'translocal geographies' (Brickell and Datta, 2011), this paper provides a critical discussion of the emotional dimension of transnationalism of migrants from the PRC, with particular reference to the notions of home and identity. Within humanistic geography and more recently within feminist geography, there is a renewed fascination with the concept of home as an important subject to understand human movement (Ahmed et al., 2003; Blunt, 2005; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Young, 1997). It is hoped that this paper can extend understandings of some of the key themes in academic debates surrounding the relationship between home and transnational migration, and identity and belonging.

In presenting my argument, an autobiographical approach is taken. I begin with reviewing the diverse literature on transnational migration, especially that literature dealing with the relationships between the journey, emotion, identity, belonging and home (Ahmed, 1999; Ahmed et al., 2003; Basu, 2004; Blunt, 2007; Butcher, 2003; Datta, 2011; Pratt, 2004; Rapport and Dawson, 1998a; Skrbis, 2008; Wiles, 2008). Then I reflect on these debates in the light of my own personal story of returning to China as a temporary returnee to do my PhD field research and my sense of uneasiness surrounding understandings of home and identity when I moved between different countries. This autobiographical narrative sets the scene for a critical analysis of the empirical data collected from 47 in-depth interviews with participants and is woven through the substantive discussion of how PRC transnational migrants conceptualize notions of home, identity and sense of belonging.

2. Home and identity in transnational migration research

The scholarship of transnational migration (Glick-Schiller et al., 1995) has long focused on migrants' physical and geographical mobility and engagement across more than one locale. However, migrants' transnational engagement can be also emotional (Skrbis, 2008). Transnational migration studies have increasingly turned to inquiries about the emotions and feelings of individuals when they move between places (Baldassar, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2008; Gu, 2007; Mar, 2005; McKay, 2005; Nyiri, 2001; Ryan, 2008; Viruell-Fuentes, 2006). The notion of 'emotional transnationalism' or 'symbolic

transnationalism' that addresses life experiences and feelings of migrants when they are on the move has been explored in studies by, for example, Datta (2011), Espiritu (2003), Mitchell (1997), Viruell-Fuentes (2006) and Wolf (1997, 2002). The notion of home is at the center of explorations of transnational migrants' identity and sense of belonging in the writings of Ahmed (1999), Basu (2004), Butcher (2002), Haller and Landolt (2005), Pratt (2004), Wiles (2008), and Wise (2011). These works are important because home is 'a powerful motif' (Basu, 2004: 27) for understanding how people experience their migratory journey and conceive of their possible future movements (Blunt, 2005; Rapport and Dawson, 1998b). This aspect of study is a significant dimension of contemporary transnational scholarship that opens up new approaches to and methods for research on transnationalism.

In migration, individuals leave their existing home (conceptualized as a house, household or a particular geographical locality) and travel to another place with which they are less familiar, to reside either temporarily or permanently. While such migration involves a departure from the old home and the attempt to establish a new one, research suggests that migrants, especially first-generation migrants, never completely leave their original home behind, or totally arrive at a new one. Many previous studies have found that migrants employ the word 'home' to refer both to their immigration destination and to their place of birth or origin (Christou and King, 2006; Lewin, 2001; Muggeridge and Dona, 2006). Transnational movements 'involve a splitting of home as a place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience' (Ahmed, 1999: 341). In this context, the meaning of home thus becomes more complex and multi-dimensional. Rapport and Dawson point out that traditional notions of home have 'little conceptual purchase in a world of contemporary movement' (Rapport and Dawson, 1998b: 7).

In line with these valuable points, considerable effort has been put into addressing the immaterial aspect of migrants' home. As Wiles suggests, home is an ambiguous concept (Wiles, 2008). It can be perceived not only as a physical location of dwelling but also as 'a space of belonging, intimacy, security, relationship and selfhood' (Gorman-Murray and Dowling, 2007). For many transnational migrants, home may evoke an emotional link to where they are originally from or maybe nostalgia that often relates to a longing for their national home (Hage, 1997; Wiles, 2008). For others, home becomes 'a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination' (Brah, 1996: 192). Mallett suggests that 'Home is a place but it is also a space inhabited by family, people, things and belongings – a familiar, if not comfortable space where particular activities and relationships are lived' (Mallett, 2004: 63).

While home is usually perceived in an emotional way in association with a sense of protection, comfort, joy or positivity, Brickell (2012) indicates that alternative associations with negativity and alienation should not be neglected. For many instances, home is perhaps of a potential site of emotional struggle, ambivalence, violence, fear or conflict. Others claim that home might usefully be viewed less as a fixed and static object, and more as, a dynamic process (Gorman-Murray and Dowling, 2007) that involves seeking personal security and emotional commitment and/or self-discovery (Brown, 2000: 50; Valentine, 2001: 73). Blunt and Dowling call this process 'home-making practice' (Blunt and Dowling, 2006: 199) where an on-going and mediated interaction between self, others and place is taking place. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2003) see home as an integral part of the continuous, always changing, practices of 'uprooting/re-grounding' enacted by migration.

Following such academic acknowledgment of emotional aspects of home-making (Pratt, 2004), recent work has undergone 'a material turn' (Datta, 2008: 518). Incorporating theories of translocality that consider the physical and social conditions of particular

³ The third destination for many Chinese migrants of New Zealand usually refers to Australia. Based on the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement, New Zealand and Australian citizens were not subjected to controls by the immigration point system in either country before the Australian policy change in 2001. Before 2001, it was a fact that many Chinese migrants stepped into Australia after gaining New Zealand citizenship because the immigration criteria in New Zealand was more relaxed than that of Australia. Such migration trend was called 'back-door' entry, a negative comment used in Australia referring to the sharp increase of New Zealand immigrants who was born outside of New Zealand. The 2001 immigration policy change in Australia introduced stricter controls over the access to welfare by New Zealand citizens. This policy change effectively reduced the influx of New Zealand citizens into Australia, including those who were born in Asia.

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