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Unbounding 'Chineseness': Placing *'Huaren'* Transmigrants in London

Janard Liew Jian An

Migration Research Unit

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Supervised by Dr Claire Dwyer

This research dissertation is submitted for
the MSc in Global Migration at University College London

ABSTRACT

Echoing postcolonialists' arguments that English is a language that is ill-equipped to capture the complexities of other cultural lifeworlds, this dissertation proposes using *huaren* as a semantical and conceptual corrective to 'unbound' the catch-all 'Chinese' lexicon from a particular state (PRC), race (the yellow emperor's seed) and essentialised culture. In so doing, perspectives that regard Chinese mobilities as an *a priori* phenomenon are inevitably debunked, not least for the rapidly rising number of international *huaren* students worldwide. Drawing on ethnography and in-depth interviews conducted with 21 London-based transmigrants who identify themselves as ethnically 'Chinese', I examine the dynamic ways they go about conducting themselves as a group and as individuals in their daily social transactions with one another and with 'others' across learning and leisure spaces. Be it the motivations/logics ordering their mobilities, politics of difference encountered or strategies adopted to negotiate membership terms, it is clear that these processes of embodiment are thoroughly individual and shaped by the dynamics of two or more overlapping regimes of culture, power and knowledge. As such, we must desist from speaking of modern 'Chinese' migrations as one coherent transnational community and recognise the essentialism of classification systems.

Keywords: Chinese / huaren / transnationalism / mobilities / migration / London

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preamble

Chinese migration(s) has become so diverse that it is increasingly difficult to engage it in the singular (Pieke, 2007) but three overlapping trends, each contributing to the production of naturalised or foreign-born Chinese, can be discerned. The longest-serving pattern *Huashang*, established by Chinese merchants, artisans and miners in various parts of East-Southeast Asia, encompassed the Southern Fujianese in Japan, the Philippines and Java, the Hakkas in West Borneo and the Teochius in Thailand (Poston *et al*., 1994; Wang, 2006). *Huagong* on the other hand involved the movements of large numbers of (usually male) labourers, peasants and the urban poor (Ng, 2003). Despite being largely transitory, Huagong was an important current e.g. 'gold rushes' that settled many Chinese outside Asia, such as Europe, North America and Australasia. As opposed to the huashang and huagong who did not leave China of their own volition, well-educated professionals comprising the third flow *Huaqiao* emigrated for non-economic reasons voluntarily (Rae & Witzel, 2008). However, the point is not so much on why these Chinese migrants sojourned, but that those who did and chose to settle down ended up transformed and indigenised over time. In some cases, this entails the shifting of whole populations into new and hybrid identity categories (Reid, 2009). Their different backgrounds and biographies thus make it difficult to conceptualise them (and their descendants) as uniformly sinicised.

Set against such a historical context, the tendency for the lexicon 'Chinese' to conflate nationals from the People's Republic of China (PRC) with those who are citizens of other nation-states but share similar racial origins is rendered particularly pronounced, echoing postcolonialists' arguments that English is a language that is ill-equipped to capture the complexities of other cultural lifeworlds (Sidaway *et al.*, 2014). As Suryadinata (2010) posits, it would be more instructive to view 'Chinese' in heterogeneous terms. Hence whenever necessary, *huaren*[1] (华人) will be the diction used which has the advantage of not equating the ethnic Chinese in question as *zhongguoren*[2] (中国人) unassumingly (Chua, 2009). For Wang (1993), 'Chinese' also risks connoting the possibility of expansionism towards other regions if used politically and when used culturally, suggests a grandiosity which is at best misleading and at worst boastful. As globalisation intensifies and brings forth 'new' waves of huaren migrations, such longstanding tensions and complexities surrounding what constitutes 'Chinese'/'Chineseness' will inevitably deepen. It is therefore important to unpack (or at least attempt to) the different subjectivities subsumed under this blackbox. In other words, huaren is not only used as a semantical corrective to 'unbound' (Reid, 2009) Chineseness from a particular state (PRC), race (the yellow emperor's seed[3]) and essentialised culture but also serves to ideologically debunk Chinese mobilities as an *a priori* phenomenon, not least for the rapidly rising number of international students worldwide.

1.2 Study Context

[1] Used in this dissertation to refer to all ethnic Chinese *irrespective* of nationalities (Tan, 2010)
[2] Mandarin term meaning PRC nationals, subset of *huaren*
[3] Deity who is usually regarded as the common ancestors of all ethnic Chinese in popular folklore

Although higher education is increasingly being fashioned into a major international industry (Findlay *et al*., 2012), knowledge acquisition has long existed as a major rationale driving human migration. What have changed in the last few decades are the rate, scale and intensity of such movements. According to Kang (2013:1), UNESCO reports over 2.8 million students enrolled in tertiary educational institutions outside their countries of origin which is a 53 percent increase over the 1999 figures.

Despite increased competition from other 'cheaper' but no less comparable locales (e.g. Hong Kong, Singapore), the United Kingdom (UK) continues to exist as a much sought-after destination for higher education, attracting even individuals from the equally popular United States and Canada (British Council, 2014). London in particular outpaces other cities in the UK to emerge as the 'top choice for international students looking to study abroad' (StudyLondon, 2017). This is hardly surprising considering that the English capital houses the highest number of top-ranked universities than any other city in the world (*ibid*) and is consistently touted as a hotbed for cultural experiences (Favell, 2006).

While London as a destination for academic excellence and cosmopolis is well-established, I contend that it continues to serve as a fertile study ground for three reasons. Since London plays host to an ever-moving turnstile of individuals from varying backgrounds, it is undoubtedly one site where different huaren transmigrants may be found. Indeed statistics published by the UKCISA (2017) reveal that many of the top sending countries (Fig.1.1) are places where significant ethnic Chinese populations can be

discerned.

Top Ten non-EU sending countries

Country	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14
China (PRC)	91,215	89,540	87,895
Malaysia	17,405	17,060	16,635
United States of America	17,115	16,865	16,485
India	16,745	18,320	19,750
Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region)	16,745	16,215	14,725
Nigeria	16,100	17,920	18,020
Saudi Arabia	8,570	8,595	9,060
Singapore	7,540	7,295	6,790
Thailand	6,095	6,240	6,340
Canada	5,980	6,075	6,350

Fig. 1.1: Top non-EU sending countries for Higher Education (UK)
Source: UKCISA (2017)

Second, the correlation between mere presence and multicultural sensitivities is by no means automatic. The ostensible lack of alternative 'Chinese' identifications, compared to the South Asian diasporas, under the London/UK ethnicity regulatory framework (Fig. 1.2) is a case in point. Lastly the great emphasis placed upon education mobility is one that is traditionally associated with Chinese culture[4] (Zhu, 2016; Huang & Yeoh, 2005), a sentiment corroborated by many interviewed. It is with respect to these three aforementioned rationales that I contextualise my study on huaren transmigrants in London.

[4] Well-known proverb by Chinese philosopher Mencius who describes how "a good mother is ready to move three times to give [her] children a good education." (Kang, 2013)

Non-UK Domiciled Student Numbers by Ethnic Group 2016-17

Ethnic Group	Undergraduate	Graduate	Total
Asian or Asian British			
- Bangladeshi	15	21	36
- Indian	270	349	619
- Pakistani	74	79	153
- Other	675	786	1461
Subtotal	1034	1235	2269
Black or Black British			
- African	73	156	229
- Caribbean	15	41	56
- Other	6	43	49
Subtotal	94	240	334
Chinese			
Chinese	2976	2811	5787
Subtotal	2976	2811	5787

Fig. 1.2: Non-UK Domiciled Students by Ethnicity
Source: University College London (2017)

1.3 Aim(s) & Research Questions (RQ)

Using huaren student-migrants in London as a window, this dissertation aims to advance a '*less* anticipatory stance… [towards] the conceptualisation of Chinese transnationalisms and mobilities' (Lin, 2012:138) through three interrelated sets of research questions:

1) What are the motivations and logics underpinning huaren transmigrants' journeys into London?

2) How are politics of difference encountered by huaren transmigrants within different spaces?

3) What are the strategies adopted by huaren transmigrants to negotiate (re-invent, subvert or perpetuate) the ideals imposed upon them?

Subsumed under these questions is a constellation of phenomenological queries best answered at the everyday level.

1.4 Dissertation Map

Having stated my research aim(s), questions and context, the following is divided into six sections. I first explicate the theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation before outlining the research design adopted. These are succeeded by three chapters detailing my empirical findings, each answering the aforementioned research questions. Finally, I revisit the key claims presented and propose possible directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL GROUNDINGS

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I review relevant literatures on (i) Chinese Migrations and Transnationalisms, (ii) International Student Mobilities and (iii) Everyday Encounters, all of which this study draws from, is positioned in and hopes to contribute towards. Following which, I explicate on how this theoretical trinity is apposite as the conceptual framework for this dissertation in addressing extant lacunae identified.

2.2 Chinese Migrations & Transnationalism (CMT)

In earlier studies such as Skinner's (1956; 1963) seminal explorations of the Chinese in Thailand, themes on cultural integration (Ohki, 1967) and assimilation (Amyot, 1972) tend to dominate. However as the volume and speed of human flows intensified especially since the 1980s, patterns of Chinese mobilities came to be multidirectional as well (Pieke, 2007). Instead of simply pairing a sending place in China to a destination elsewhere, there now exist multiple centers of origin and destination. Since then, the field of Chinese migration has duly expanded its focal to examine the dynamic relationships between overseas Chinese and nation-states (Godley, 1981), the cultural frontiers of Chinese ethnic and racial identities (Crossley, 1990; Tan, 1993), Chinatowns (Yeoh & Kong, 1994; Christiansen, 2003) and the politics of return (Ho, 2012; Ley & Kobayashi, 2004) among others. Perspectives grounded in transnationalism in particular, emphasising the 'momentary' (Nyíri, 2003) and strategic 'self-fashioning' (Mitchell, 1997), have proven so

popular that 'flexible accumulation' (Ong, 1999) has emerged as *the* paradigm through which understandings on contemporary 'Chinese' migrations have been framed. For these scholars, a sense of ethnicity and national integrity as tied to a particular history and territorial border is unsettled by the cultivation of transborder ties, promoting what Kahn (1998:22) calls new kinds of 'post-national' identities (Soysal, 1994). Additionally not only is culture conceived as highly malleable under post-Fordist capitalism, proponents also insist that present-day Chinese mobilities must be seen as *purposeful* pathways or 'ungrounded empires' (Nonini & Ong, 1997) that migrants skilfully carve out for themselves rather than mere statistical events (Ley & Waters, 2004). From this perspective, the 'new' Chinese migrants differ from their predecessors – who move less readily but more permanently – and are markedly discerned by their propensity to forge transnational social, economic and familial lives across multiple countries (Mitchell, 1995; Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2002). As Lin (2012:138) aptly outlines, "their mobilities radically challenge 'traditional' notions of citizenship and belonging, introducing a range of alternative spatial formations and modes of accumulation in different parts of the world" (Hannerz, 1996). Such conclusions however are largely modelled after the experiences of well-to-do Hong Kong and Taiwanese 'astronaut' elites (Li *et al.*, 1995; Olds, 1998) or what Sklair (2001) terms the hypermobile transnational capitalist class who possess the requisite incomes and professional networks to do so.

As such, alternative currents have called for the need to consider migratory motivations that exceed financial gains (Studemeyer, 2015; Conradson & Latham, 2005a) and by extension, a broader and less definitive take on those culturally identified as 'Chinese' (Barabantseva, 2011). A case in point is Ho (2011b) who foregrounds migration as

'accidental' experiments that equip Singaporean-Chinese with outlooks that may not necessarily augment their future employability. As Pieke (1999) reminds us, what constitutes success and what migrants thus hope to achieve by moving away is discursively constructed and therefore varies with *time* and *place*. Indeed, Preston *et al.* (2006) and Waters (2009) reject straitjacket theories of hypermobility and proffer that 'flexible citizenship' should be used more thoughtfully for the long-term, Canada-based Hong Kong emigrants they spoke to do subscribe to notions of settlement and rootedness. Drawing on expertise from different national contexts, Ma & Cartier's (2003:9) edited volume likewise argues that the spaces inhabited by ethnic Chinese transmigrants are not so much "'deterritorialised' structures of economic domination but place-centered and network-based ones with porous boundaries whose real extents are changeable in association with intra-diasporic contexts and events". Be it a focus on the decision-making phase (Teo, 2003) or settlement experiences (Waters, 2006), these scholars are unanimous in propounding ethnic Chinese transmigrants as active, multiply-placed agents whose positionings are influenced by a constellation of previous migratory histories, re-migration, local political processes and social relations as well as the status and influence of China in the globalising world (Tan, 2013; Chan, 2005; Pann, 1998). In doing so, the 'stickiness' of geography in shaping cultural identities and mobility logics is underscored. Concurring, this dissertation considers both veins that subscribe to flexible strategies as well as those that examine other less quantifiable motivations and practices in order to more fully appreciate how huaren transmigrants navigate a dynamic world.

2.3 International Student Mobilities (ISM)

Although crossing borders for the pursuance of knowledge has always featured in both the 'old' and 'new' Chinese migration orders (Pieke, 2007), it is only in recent years that internationally mobile students have accrued sustained attention of their own (King *et al.*, 2010). Frequently interpreted as an accumulation process whereby international credentials are valorised over locally awarded ones (Waters, 2012), this utilitarian rationale forms the basic premise upon which positivistic approaches to student migration are rooted. While a grasp of the institutional policies and broader structural inequalities (Geddie, 2015) within which education mobilities take place is certainly instructive, it is the more *people*-focused strand that I am most concerned. Within this qualitative-centric scholarship, two orientations can be observed.

For anthropologists, sociologists and geographers who tend to draw their theoretical referents from Appadurai (1996), Faist (2000), Glick-Schiller *et al.* (1994) and Levitt (2001), international students are usually conceived as subjects of mobility whose embodied 'desires, practices and experiences in relation to capital formation, citizenship and belonging in a transnational field characterised by uneven sociocultural and power geographies are the aspects most foregrounded' (Yang, 2016:13). Fong (2011) for instance traces the disparate ways members of Dalian's one-child 'singleton' generation pursue, be it real or imaginary, social, cultural and sometimes legal citizenship in the developed world through higher education (Baas, 2010). In contrast to such degree-level and often 'spontaneous' forms of education migration, Waters (2008) looks at familial inflected variants of movement from Hong Kong to Canada, which usually involve children at a far younger age (primary/secondary levels) and plans for permanency. Other themes which form the prism through which the lives of transnational students are refracted and

understood include race/racism (Collins, 2006), class-specific exclusionary tactics (Xiang & Shen, 2009), social im/mobility and the reproduction of (dis)advantage (Brooks & Waters, 2009; Waters, 2005), neoliberalism (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011), gender and household strategies (Huang & Yeoh, 2005). Despite being conducted across varying contexts (and foci), these research have surprisingly yielded very similar conclusions, namely that the anticipated rewards associated with an international education are *not* always apparent and in some cases only undertaken to avoid 'failure at home' (Ackers, 2008; Sin, 2009; Kajanus, 2015).

At the other end of the spectrum are studies that narrow in on the *student* rather than migrant aspects. Typically written by communication specialists, psychologists and educators, this equally hefty body of work 'deals primarily with matters that arise in relation to the mobile student as a cross-cultural learning subject' (Yang, 2016:13). One corpus has looked into the academic and linguistic problems international students have expressed difficulties in, with PRC-Chinese students making up a considerable empiric (Huang 2005; Liu 2015; Arkoudis & Tran 2007; Lan 2015; Zhang 2011; Wang 2015). Also of concern are the apparent gaps that exist between international students' imaginaries and aspirations for cosmopolitan lifestyles and competencies on the one hand and their lived realities on the other (Liu, 2016). By far the majority has examined the various 'shocks' – 'culture shock' (Ward *et al.*, 2001), 'communication shock' (Aveni, 2005; Flowerdew & Miller, 1992) – that plague international students. This dissertation however echoes recent calls for a more balanced approach (Soong, 2016) that recognises student-migrants as occupying a broad field of meanings – beyond its constituent parts –

that deserves perusal, particularly at the level(s) of everyday encounters where difference are most intensely experienced and negotiated (Findley *et al.*, 2012; Fincher, 2011).

2.4 Everyday Encounters (EE)

In a recent stocktaking account, Wilson (2016:2) (re)affirms the imbroglio between encounters and mobilities by underscoring how the former is 'central to understanding the embodied nature of social distinctions and the contingency of [migrant] identity and belonging'. Rather than reified or given, difference – including intra-categorical divergences – is taken to be always in the midst of *becoming* (Massumi, 2002). Hence if static conceptualisations designating 'Chinese migrations' or 'Chineseness' as fixed entities are to be debunked, attention needs to be paid towards the everyday articulations that render such divisions *noteworthy* (Valentine, 2008). Extant scholarship forwarding the central role(s) encounters play in the un/making of borders under conditions of migrant-led diversification (Ye, 2016a) have hitherto highlighted the (extra)ordinary *spaces* where people are ensnarled and curtailed as well as the practices that transpire within these sites (Piekut & Valentine, 2017).

If societies are not repositories of 'equal differences' but structured in and by spatialised relations of power' as Clayton (2009:483) argues, attending to the highly nuanced principles belying shared micropublics then surely allows us to better appreciate how coexistence with diversity are contingently shaped and lived (Valentine & Harris, 2016:913). Schools and universities for instance are often theorised as opportunistic sites where 'people are thrown together and required to engage with each other and work

together in a common activity [learning], in the process enabling unnoticeable cultural questioning or transgression' (Ho *et al.*, 2015:660; Amin, 2002). However as demonstrated by Hemming (2011) and Andersson *et al.* (2012), learning spaces are not exempt from hierarchical articulations of religion, race, ethnicity, gender and class which continue to inflect who are included/segregated despite tropes of pluralistic inclusivity. Beyond containers of an essentialised 'chopsticks culture', Chinatowns are more accurately described as ideological constructions where ever-evolving host society attitudes towards incoming Chinese peoples are given concrete shapes (Anderson, 1987; Wong, 2013). As Yeoh (2009) enumerates, the mechanisms encoding Chinatown landscapes could range from discriminatory colonial principles to conservationist values seeking to attract the tourist dollar. Aside from schools/universities and Chinatowns, sites like housing/neighbourhoods (Clayton, 2008), workplaces (Ho, 2011a) and cafes (Laurier & Philo, 2006) have likewise received scholarly scrutiny, each underscoring the discursiveness of spatialities in *prescribing* how people ought to behave. Viewed this way, material spaces/places are more than just passive backdrops. Rather, they provide the groundings around which particular identities are inhabited, mediated and/or stigmatised (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014).

Indeed, 'encounter' should not be taken as an empty referent for any form of meeting or simply about the converging of bodies but how difference(s) is situationally utilised during contact to establish identity boundaries instead. Like Harris (2009:197) posits, 'what and how we eat, how we dress, and the bodily ways we interact with culturally diverse leisure and media' have ethical ramifications for managing diversity, prejudice/discrimination and the negotiation of social difference in our everyday lives. Extending such sentiments,

Highmore (2008) contends that the consumption of 'exotic' Indian food by Anglo-Celtic British men must be seen as negotiations with transformative but ambivalent potentials. In other words, ritual gestures of food-based commensality at the shared table can either foster new, positive relations/identities across difference or calcify borders due to ignorance of the other's food taboos. Apart from pragmatic skills and knowledge of cultural difference, the possibility of relativising diversity through less cognitive, more-than-representational elements have not been overlooked (Swanton, 2010; Rhys-Talor, 2013). Using Chinese migrants in New Zealand as a proxy, Wang & Collins (2016) advance that ethnic solidarities can be forged through the 'felt', affectual dimensions generated (Bissell, 2010; Chee, 2010). For Fincher & Shaw (2011), it is the production of fear and anxiety during encounters that cement racial antagonisms. Bodily co-presence then is clearly an '*indeterminate* process punctuated by conflicting ideas… and by the periodic destabilisation of social identities' (Nagel & Hopkins, 2010:6). In order to paint a less anticipatory picture of Chinese mobilities, I cannot overlook the everyday spaces of encounters huaren transmigrants are mired in as they negotiate the terms of their multicultural membership (Halvorsen, 2015).

2.5 Conceptual Framework: *Huaren* Geographies (HG)

It is evident from the review above that existing literatures examining the plurality of ethnic Chinese and their attendant traveling modes tend to do so from the perspective of a *single* subgroup e.g. PRC-Chinese or Singaporean-Chinese and their lives in the (usually non-Chinese majority) host countries (see Hibbins, 2004; Yeoh & Willis, 2005; Tan, 2004; Peterson, 2012 for notable exceptions). Culling relevant ideas from the

aforementioned strands of work, I thus propose huaren geographies – comprising components i) geography; ii) difference/subjectivities and iii) simultaneity – as a conceptual framework for correcting said lacunae. Not only is this research novel in bringing different huaren transmigrants within the same analytical frame, I also give due emphasis to the politics of encounter between them which has the potential to both reinscribe and interrupt 'preconceived categories and boundaries' (Leitner, 2012:829).

If migration fundamentally involves the traversing of multifarious spatial and social sites (King, 2012), paying attention to the multiscalar geographies that migrants encounter and inhabit seems indispensable to any analysis of 'Chinese' subjectivities etched across the transnational canvas. This includes the material, social and imaginative spaces that are part of the itinerary, place specificities and 'stickiness' (Bondi & Davidson, 2005) as well as the moving *body* – both corporeal and representational – itself (Brickell & Datta, 2012). Crucially, spatiality is understood here to relationally produce, and is conversely produced by, subjectivities (Nightinggale, 2011; Sibley, 1995). Filtered through such 'counter-topographic' lenses (Yeoh & Pratt, 2003), the active role(s) space/place plays in moulding the thoughts, motivations and actions of mobile actors and conceptualising Otherness (Cohen, 2004) is taken seriously. Examining socialisation sites beyond universities is hence necessary because not all locales in which huaren student-migrant identities are articulated carry equal weight. As Yuval-Davis (2011:6) contends, a geographical perspective is essential insofar as it 'links the interrogation of concrete meanings of categories and their boundaries to specific contexts which are *shifting* and contested, rather than just abstracting ontological and epistemological enquiries'.

Subjectivities not only take and make place (Clayton, 2009) but are (re)worked at through relational fields of constructs and hierarchies that have been afforded significance as well (Dixon, 2017). Thinking of identities as *constructed* forwards the perspective that boundaries delineating us/them are neither inherent nor inevitable but historically produced and spatially embedded (de Leeuw *et al.*, 2011). Difference such as 'Chinese' are therefore emergent – come into being and exist to fulfil specific purposes (Banks, 1996) – and processual – circumstantially valorised, maintained or suppressed (Ma, 2003). However, notions of primordialism do matter for 'the association with one's Chineseness rests foundationally on generational lineage as well as phenotypical attributes' (Chee, 2010:6). In other words, we cannot sidestep the irreducible physiological traits which also contribute towards the performance of multiple and malleable Chinese identities (Chan & Tong, 2000). Although race and ethnicity are taken as the primary points of departure, migratory bodies are also understood to be powerfully marked/structured by *intersecting* axes of class, nationality among others that 'affect their access to resources, and mobility across transnational spaces' (Pessar & Mahler, 2003:817; McDowell, 2008).

While transnational subjects may be privileged individuals who maintain multistranded connections – meanings, resources, practices – that stretch across the fabric of two or more socio-spatial boundaries (Van-Hear, 2014), their simultaneity also suggests that they are potentially neither here nor there i.e. routed but rootless (Yeoh *et al.*, 2003). To avoid assuming an automatically transgressive or emancipatory stance (Yeoh, 2005), theorisations of simultaneity must additionally weave together politics of urban encounters (Ho, 2017a), especially when co-ethnics are involved, for it is a 'nearness that involves distanciation and difference' (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001:7). Refracting huaren

mobilities through these juxtaposing metaphors – centre/margin, proximity/distance, here/there, inside/outside – is thereby instructive for while 'their identities are constantly reconfigured through the transmigration process, [they are concomitantly] adjusted situationally to the local dynamics of who else co-inhabits the city with them' (Ho, 2016:2382; Collins, 2012).

To summarise, HG is a conceptual lens concerned with the emplacement, agency and dynamism of mobile ethnic Chinese actors. It is hoped that researching along these fronts will produce enriching perspectives extolling the diversity that exists within the 'Chinese' gloss as well as the impacts of co-presence in an era of increased connectivities.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have created a map of existing research within and beyond geography. Doing so not only allows me to situate my dissertation within the relevant debates, it also elucidates how my study can plug in existing gaps and contribute towards wider theoretical building. Correspondingly, it underscores how huaren geographies as a conceptual framework is germane to my aim of painting a less determinate view of 'Chinese' mobilities.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

The qualitative data presented in this exploratory study draws on the narratives constructed by 21 transmigrants (Table 3.1) who identify themselves as 'Chinese' in multifarious ways. While this sample is not meant to be statistically representative, their individual stories are still plausibly inductive of broader issues/themes (Hay, 2017). Aside from personal contacts, respondents were sourced and snowballed through i) a huaren-dominated student accommodation in Stratford; ii) LSE researcher working on similar themes/topics; and iii) fellowship group from a Chinese church. No more than five were recruited from any one lead to avoid saturation.

S/N	Pseudonym	Identification(s)[5]	Age Range	Gender	No. of Yrs. In UK/London
1	Laoyi	People's Republic of China (PRC)	30s	F	<1
2	Adriana	Taiwanese	20s	F	<1
3	Gwendolyn	Macanese	20s	F	<1
4	Shawn	Hong Konger (HK)	20s	M	<1
5	Elias	Hong Konger (HK)	20s	M	5/1
6	Nina	Taiwanese	20s	F	<1
7	Zac	Taiwanese	20s	M	<1
8	Cassie	People's Republic of China (PRC)	20s	F	<1
9	Holly	People's Republic of China (PRC)	20s	F	<1
10	Miranda	People's Republic of China (PRC)	20s	F	<1
11	Irene	Malaysian	20s	F	15/1
12	Mary	Malaysian-Singaporean	20s	F	<1
13	Autumn	Canadian-PRC	20s	F	<1
14	Fiona	Singaporean-HK-Malaysian	20s	F	1
15	Rina	Canadian-HK	20s	F	<1
16	Ben	American-HK	20s	M	<1
17	John	Danish-British-HK	20s	M	5
18	Odette	British-HK	20s	F	>20
19	Drew	Canadian-Taiwanese	20s	M	2
20	Katie	Filippino-PRC	20s	F	3

[5] Includes nationality and ethnic affiliations professed by the interviewees

21	**Lawrence**	Singaporean	20s	M	<1

Table 3.1: Selected Profiles of Respondents
Source: Author's Own

3.2 Ethnography

Ethnographic immersion was the obvious choice for two reasons. The first being that the method's proclivity for 'uncovering the processes and meanings that undergird socio-spatial life' (Herbert, 2000:550) lends itself well to my intention of studying the everyday proceedings of huaren transmigrants. Secondly, observant participation (Kearns, 2000) formed both the starting point and backdrop of my research. As a Singaporean-Chinese student-migrant, I am as much the researcher as the *researched* for the field (e.g. university) is not 'out there' but 'in here'. Examining what other huaren do – and conversely what I do via their perceptions of me – and the cultural meanings that shape their/my actions (Silvey, 2003) occurs regardless of intent. As such, I found myself on a round-the-clock watch and noted down relevant thoughts and informal responses gathered. For my acquaintances who are also my interviewees, I had the luxury of observing any disjuncture between their stories and actions. While the empirical findings are based on responses elicited from interviews, my ethnographic enmeshment meant I was able to advantageously draw upon personal experiences/understandings to i) conceive and refine context-specific questions; ii) interpret the interviewees' stated explanations which also iii) shaped/skewed what *I* perceive to be significant issues that deserve interrogation. This echoes feminist theorisations that all represented data are political, dependent on the researcher's own *partial* standpoint (Haraway, 1988).

3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

As the goal of interviewing is to give voice and 'probe an issue in-depth to gain access to the meanings that people attribute to different experiences in different contexts and to understand the reasons people do what they do' (Bosco, 2017:1; Cloke *et al.*, 2004), I find it a method particularly suited to my goal of deconstructing metanarratives surrounding 'Chinese' mobilities. All interviews were taped with permission, transcribed and translated (Mandarin, Cantonese) into English for analysis. Specifically, interviewees were asked to provide examples of their everyday encounters with racially/ethnically proximate and distant others within different contact zones. To elicit a range of responses, I alternated between playing the devil's advocate in some circumstances while concurring in others. While I did include a couple of generic questions directed at my respondents' lives before London, I later revised the schedule to be more biographically-guided for their personal and prior histories had important bearings on their current journeys. Likewise, 'huaren' was subsequently moulded into an interview theme. Such reorientations happened not only because these issues came up in the interviews but were also enabled by the fact that our conversations remained semi-structured. In keeping the interviews loosely guided, respondents are afforded greater power to decide the research direction (Silvey, 2003). Put simply, this is a co-produced piece of research.

3.4 Reflexivity

As Al-Hindi & Kawabata (2002:110) incisively argue, 'thoughtful reflection on one's research practice, one's subjectivity relative to that practice and self-criticism and change

where warranted would certainly improve the process and outcome of methodologies'. Indeed, my positionality proved to be highly ambiguous and inhibited my study as much as facilitated it.

For instance, several respondents expressed difficulties elucidating their thoughts on 'Chinese'/'Chineseness' even though they could fluently share their migration experiences. Despite said questions being deliberately left open-ended, responses like Odette's (F, British-Hong Konger) still emerged:

> I: What does being ethnic Chinese or having Hong Kong roots mean to you then?
> P: It's just a thing. I don't know how to explain.

Such truncated rejoinders were initially frustrating because they appear to reveal nothing. The non-verbal cues – blank looks, hesitance – only began to make sense once I started dwelling on her declaration of being 'neither Chinese or British'. It seems a 'cultural gulf' (Robina, 2001) between us was accidentally erected after I revealed my literacy – vis-à-vis her illiteracy – in Cantonese. In accepting my authenticity as a Chinese 'insider', her own insecurities as the Other were amplified, hence the reticence. Thus, I made it a point to send my respondents copies of their transcripts. Through this practice, they were given opportunities to reaffirm/refine their previous opinions, rectify possible mistakes and/or furnish additional responses which only occurred to them after the formal interviews or those they found difficult to convey on a face-to-face basis (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). While only some did the aforementioned, such follow-up procedures undoubtedly exacted greater 'clarity regarding the information collected as well as… [facilitated] a more equitable balance of power between the researcher and participants' (Bosco, 2017:6).

Although most of my respondents gradually opened up as rapport was created, some remained wary. My engagement with Miranda (F, PRC), who explicitly questioned my professional and personal integrity on several occasions, is one case. Despite sounding amicable during the pre-interview liaisons, she started scrutinising my research motives and constantly deflected the questions raised as soon as the recording started. In one memorable instance, she commented that my choice of the word 'huaren' is illustrative of the poor command of Chinese language that Southeast Asians possess. Although I was outraged over her blatant arrogance, I continued the conversation with smiles and platitudes because I also had a nagging feeling that something in this encounter was useful. Upon contemplation, I realised I had been 'slipped' (Skelton, 2001) into the position of an 'outsider' by Miranda because of my less than ideal command of PRC-Mandarin. However this does not mean that my initial sense of what was important was disproved. Indeed, being 'read' (Malam, 2004) as an outsider actually yielded very rich revelations for there were no presumptions of prior knowledge and Miranda became very motivated to discuss the dissociations between us. Also, it reminded me to remain open-minded (Cope, 2017) and view these unexpected themes as rich illustrations than outliers.

CHAPTER FOUR

'CHINESE' MOTIVATIONS

4.1 Introduction

The ongoing focus on flexible, capitalistic accumulation tied to skilled mobilities including student migrations has tended to occlude other rationales associated with such movements (Ho, 2011b). This chapter thus explores the diverse motivations and logics underpinning huaren migrants' sojourns to London in order to reframe debates surrounding 'Chinese' mobilities and transnationalisms. Specifically, I chart some of the economic and non-economic factors, in both the receiving and sending contexts, that have influenced their choices and subjectivities. Looking at pre-departure situations is instructive for it acknowledges that migrants' journeys begin from somewhere, that they are 'as much about those who stay and the contexts from which they begin as they are about mobility and relocation' (Lee & Pratt 2011:225).

4.2 Economic

One recurrent thread that surfaced repeatedly was indeed about the (potential) value of an overseas education. My informants' narratives emphasised that they intentionally chose London so as to maximise the chances of securing a respectable career either back home or their next port of call. Analogous to Beaverstock's (2005) findings, many are confident that an international stint will endow them with the intellectual and social capital necessary to realise their career aspirations. For Shawn (M, Hong Konger),

coming to London was non-negotiable if he truly wished to contribute to Hong Kong's creative industries upon his eventual return:

> "I do have other cities to choose but the most international, with close relations with other *Asian* cities is London."

Such sentiments that equate overseas education as a means to a larger goal or 'high cost-performance ratio' in Cassie's (F, PRC) opinion are likewise echoed by Gwendolyn (F, Macanese) who capitalised on her university's academic reputation to legitimise her decision:

> "Before I came here I struggled between X and Y. In the end I gave up Y and one of the reason is that London is really a big city, multicultural city so if I come here I shouldn't have any homesick kind of stuff. Also because of the fame of this school. X is very famous for this program."

For these career-minded individuals, they envision a geographical advantage that is accrued to them through having studied in key global city nodes. Besides 'quality' education, the other symbolic capitals (Waters, 2009) that can be amassed from spending time overseas include English language mastery (for non-Anglophonic speakers) and keen satorial and comportment sense. Pivotally, the transnational practices emergent from these accounts – quotidian, highly-mutable and tied closely to whether the 'best' opportunities can be seized and optimal expectations realised – certainly do seem to parallel Ong's (1999) conception.

Among my respondents, two were in London on governmental scholarships which can be understood as the student variant of intercompany transfers commonly associated with the trajectories of highly-skilled migrants (Millar & Salt, 2008). Instead of corporations,

their mobilities are facilitated and granted by state authorities as one means of shoring up a cadre of well-travelled 'talents'. Although a fundamental term of such scholarships involves the non-negotiable return of its recipients, Fiona (F, Singaporean-HongKonger-Malaysian) makes clear that the decision to study abroad was as much about the maximisation of her own interests as the Singaporean administration's (Collins *et al.*, 2014):

> "I knew I wanted to do a Masters abroad so I started applying for all the potential scholarships. In other words, I saw an opportunity and I took it."

Nonetheless, Fiona's mobility is still contingent upon her contract with the Singaporean civil service. Although such strategic deployment of selected citizens within specific international networks is similar to the way(s) TNCs 'accumulate financial capital through the embodied knowledge of their expert staff in world city client networks' (Beaverstock, 2007:51), I surmise that they differ contextually in at least two subtle ways. Apart from a clause demanding that its beneficiaries return to the city-state as aforementioned, the prohibition of dual citizenships and imposition of hefty fines for non-compliance ensures that requisite commitments are fulfilled. These "logics to re-moor citizens back 'home' are presumably Singapore's defence against the brain drain it has simultaneously set in motion" (Lin, 2012:142), adding a complex facet to the way transnationalism develops among Singaporeans(-huaren).

4.3 Non-Economic

Although everyone talks about an overseas education, understandings surrounding it are highly dissimilar. One stark disparity has to do with how these itineraries do *not* necessarily aid recipients in achieving specific competitive advantages but are loosely guided instead, exemplifying why it is important to avoid interpreting the transnational arrangements of huaren student-migrants in a reductive fashion emphasising enhanced flexibility.

4.3.1 Experimental

Unlike the careerists who mediate their cross-border mobilities with deliberate intentions, 'experimental' migrants came to London without specific end-goals in mind, or whose objectives only became apparent over time. As Lawrence's (M, Singaporean) anecdote reveals, the decision to move to London largely revolved around his desire for self-exploration with career outlooks considered only incidentally:

> "Honestly, I didn't really know what I was doing when I applied for Masters and even accepted it. In fact, I only applied because my friends did and I didn't want to work immediately after graduating. Part of it was also because I wanted to ascertain if academia was for me and I suppose a degree from a good overseas university adds some brownie points to my CV?"

He later shared that an unfunded overseas postgraduate study is fairly uncommon among his social circles owing to the ambivalent prospects of a Humanities degree and the debt such an endeavour would incur. Here, the city-state's goal-oriented Confucianist ethic (Kuo, 1998) becomes pertinent in the micro-disciplining of Singaporean mobilities vis-à-vis the discouraging of 'aimless wandering'. In similitude but framed through the

language of 'Asian values', Zac (M, Taiwanese) talks about how only Caucasians can afford to be '30 years old, married but still studying'. In the popular 'Chinese'/'Asian' imagination, sponsored migratory journeys are still regarded as more favourable (Ye, 2016b).

Crosscutting such 'spontaneities' are desires for risk and adventure, with several respondents professing that they actually made little efforts to find out more about the English capital even after they had accepted the universities' offers. The different and vibrant social/cultural milieu that London is expected to shower them often stems from stereotypical images circulated through popular media. Nina's (F, Taiwanese) story exemplifies such an instance:

> "I'm not sure if you are aware but many Taiwanese actually adore the English accent and as for the expectation, part of it comes from the movie *The Parent Trap*. Basically the movie features a pair of twins but each was brought up in a different country and their contrast convinced me that I prefer the English way of life rather than American."

Although this could be interpreted to some extent as a desire for cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), there also exists an intangible aspect that can perhaps only be attributed to *imaginative* geographies waiting to be lived, albeit imaginaries suffused with racialised discourses involving the complex/hierarchical placing of class, nationality and ethnicity (Ho, 2006). Yet the disillusionments some respondents displayed – citing a mix of 'gloominess' and 'mediocrity' – likewise caution us against romanticising self-initiated and experimented modes of traveling as 'freedom of movement with respect to employers, personal relationships, lifestyle and legal rights' (Ho, 2011b:123).

4.3.2 Lifecourse Needs

Accounts that equate emigration to key lifecourse transitions constitute another significant vein. Like Conradson & Latham (2005a:290), this does not 'imply some heroic Nietzschean project of self-annihilation and self-reconstruction… [but refers instead to a] more prosaic project that is structured both by the act of moving and by the possibilities that London offer'. Although their stints in London are seen as open-ended, those are also temporally bounded to particular life-stages as Ben (M, American-Hong Konger) explicates:

> "I just felt like everyone goes back to school at a certain point especially the place where I worked. A lot of people go to like business school and I didn't want to do that… but I knew I had to come back to school because the logical next step in a career is to get like a more advanced degree, going to an industry I care more about. Yeah, it's kind of like a nice break. London is a lot like New York where I was living before. I guess it's those reasons."

At first glance, Ben's movement appears highly utilitarian considering that career progression constituted a key reason for his relocation. However in stressing that he will have to return to his 'real life' back in America four months later, he is also alluding to how London life is but a mid-career reccess. Instead of 'leaving' the labour market like Ben, Drew's (Canadian-Taiwanese) biography below represents the fresh-out-of-university juncture that requires individuals to decouple themselves from the traditional building blocks that have previously oriented their lives. Disentangling himself from the social ties that bind and getting away from all that was familiar (Alberts, 2017) were interpreted as pivotal to personal growth:

> "Not that many people I knew were here. That's part of the reason why I wanted to move to Europe. The first year I moved here I had one good friend who is from here but that came after the decision to move so it was nice to have afterwards so no, social networks is the opposite reason why I moved here."

For Ben and Drew who are interested in more 'periodic' travels, London appears to be a perfect compromise – lively city but too expensive for long-term stay. While the English capital may not be their end game, neither is the possibility of return completely omitted. It is all *contingent* on the normative expectations attached to different phases of their lifecourses (Kobayashi & Preston, 2007). Moving or extended periods of sojourning must therefore be seen as one possible avenue open to the individual. It is 'neither unidirectional nor final [but] multiple, circular… rather than a single great journey from one sedentary space to another' (Lie 1995:304).

4.3.3 Escapism

For a portion of my respondents, being abroad is about 'escaping' from certain power-laden structures that circumscribe their mobilities. Initially, Irene (F, Malaysian) attributed studying in the UK as a 'family tradition' but it became apparent subsequently that leaving Malaysia was precipitated by resentment towards the state-sanctioned pro-bumiputra policy[6] privileging the lives of indigenous Malay-Malaysians above other races. In this case, migration becomes a pathway out of certain unmeritorious ethnopolitics (Koh, 2015) rather than a quest to develop boundaryless/'global' careers:

[6] Gives indigenous Orang Asli and dozens of native tribes in Sabah and Sarawak a generous quota to enter public universities, enjoy cheaper housing and get many government facilities to help them in business such as low-cost loans (The Straits Times, 2017)

> "Going abroad is liberating in the sense that people in the UK are accountable for their actions. Even though discrimination may still exist, those who perpetrate racist acts or use discriminatory language are answerable to a higher judicial power. Another aspect that is liberating is the fact that discrimination is not enshrined in the laws and legislations of the UK, therefore I feel I am able to raise issues with a fair chance that my opinion will be heard and acted upon."

As Yeung (2003) opines, what appears to be economic factors – overseas/Western qualifications – ultimately have social and cultural roots – dissatisfaction with discriminatory policies. Indeed, transnational movement is utilised here as an emancipatory force that 'erodes existing (unequal) status hierarchies and opens the space for mobility across position' (Rao 2014: 875) although this is not replaced with a naïveté that London is free of racial barriers.

For Mary (F, Malaysian-Singaporean), her sojourn is partly motivated by a desire to circumvent the familial logics that delimit her on an everyday basis. Although she still relies on regular communications with her geographically distant kins to assuage the rigours of overseas living, she also expressed a newfound sense of liberation from being away:

> "Mm, maybe like I felt a lot free-er? Back home, my parents are quite traditional so they sometimes impose rules on me which might not apply to my brother because I am a girl. Here, I've more time for myself and I don't have to explain or hide when I go clubbing etc."

Describing her stay as interim, Mary actively takes advantage of the anonymity London-as-distant-land offers her by partaking in activities that are usually frowned upon back home such as staying out till the wee hours and regular drinking sessions. In other words,

moving allows Mary to resist the gendered and culturally-inflected regimes organising her spatial access (or lackthereof). Yet the appeal of London-as-a-cosmopolitan-city in shaping Mary's trajectory should not be sidestepped for it has concomitantly furnished her with a slew of options not available in Singapore e.g. Michelin-graded taster sessions. Viewed this way, migration involves more than just the loosening and reconfiguration of extant oppressive social structures but also a 'wish to close the gap between performance (acting) and ontology (being), a desire to be present-present to both oneself and others' (Holiday, 2001:69).

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter contributes to the burgeoning vein of literature that has started to explore the less calculable indices underpinning 'Chinese' mobilities and transnationalisms. While neoclassical rubrics espousing career/financial rewards continue to feature prominently in the lives of huaren transmigrants, there is also a good deal that needs to be said about the equally nominal self-experimentations, lifecourse needs and escapisms that sojourners seek. This entails a recognition that 'places offer *different* things to individuals…, the value of which varies greatly depending on the… persons involved' (Conradson & Latham, 2005b:162). Indeed by mapping the manifold logics ordering their movements, I forward a perspective that gives due attention to the temporal, social-cultural and spatial situatedness of 'Chinese' mobile subjects for 'self' is not only constituted by the individual himself/herself but broader institutional and societal dynamics – in both the countries of origin and destination – as well.

CHAPTER FIVE

ENCOUNTERING 'CHINESENESS'

5.1 Introduction

If the preceding chapter is concerned with the discursive ideals ordering 'Chinese' mobilities, this chapter focuses on fleshing out the everyday *lived* involvements of huaren transmigrants through their situated encounters in learning and leisure spaces. In so doing, the many complexities, contestations and contradictions that are subsumed under the catch-all category of 'Chinese'/'Chineseness' are brought to the fore. As Wilson & Darling (2016) argue, encounters are more than just a shorthand for the social and material assembling of urban life but engagements – positive, negative or otherwise – that maintain, produce and rework intersecting axes of difference and migrant subjectivities in ways both subtle and overt.

5.2 Learning Spaces

In opposition to existing literature on international education, the kinds of cross-cultural dynamics that unfold within learning spaces – be it migrant-migrant or migrant-local interactions – as narrated by my respondents are not expressed in terms of a 'local'/'foreigner' divide (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Marginson & Sawir, 2011) but via binaries such as 'East'/'West' or 'Asian'/'Caucasian' instead. As shared by Fiona (F, Singaporean-HongKonger-Malaysian) and Nina (F, Taiwanese) below, experiences of exclusions are particularly frustrating because many huaren student-migrants came to London with a strong desire to achieve contact with foreign (usually non-Asian) others:

> "Because Easterners will want to look for Westerners to work with so the latter becomes the ones who have the final say in *picking* who they want to be in their groups. And while Westerners are generally willing to group with Easterners, usually they still prefer to work with other Westerners as well who do not necessarily speak English better than us."

> "I feel like sometimes on a course where there are like 70% Asian people the White people would just talk to themselves and sit on the other side of the class. There will be this implicit divide and it is very unconscious I feel but also a conscious decision to sit with people that look like you. There is a u-shaped desk, and the Chinese people will be on one side and White people on the other."

It is evident from the above quotes that the purported inclusivity of universities is premised upon essentialising racial constructs framed around phenotypes and assumed cultural 'sameness'. Even Fiona who speaks English fluently and had previously spent a semester abroad in London is not exempt from such sequesterings, attesting to how the kinds of 'thrown-togetherness' (Massey, 2005) envisioned actually rest on very narrowly-conceived suppositions that code certain bodies as 'acceptable' and others as less desirable. Understood this way, it is unsurprising for the 'Chinese' identities of huaren transmigrants to be propped up when juxtaposed against a predominantly non-Chinese London society. However Nina's narrative also belies a contradiction upheld by many interviewed, namely that feelings of otherness do not arise solely from misplaced biological logics but by the 'emotional dissonance' (Middleton, 1989:189) generated from unfulfilled 'fantasies of pursuing a global lifestyle characterised by 'whiteness' and life in 'white' society' (Wang & Collins, 2016:91). Put simply, the phantom of a Caucasian-majority environment continues to constitute the parameters of a normative overseas education despite tropes of diversity. While many interlocutors relayed numerous instances where meaningful dialogues were certainly struck up across the Asian/Chinese-

Western/Caucasian divide, such exchanges were acknowledged to be circumstantially facilitated by the uneven demographic composition of their courses/seminars, corroborating Tonkiss's (2013) assertion that the way(s) spaces are designed in supporting the intermingling of strangers cannot be ignored.

However to simply understand how classroom micropolitics play out for ethnic Chinese transmigrants in reductive binaries is myopic for their co-presence with other huaren takes place on an even finer mesh. Indeed, some of the most scathing comments induced describe intra-ethnic encounters, with PRC nationals bearing the bulk of the negative evaluations owing to how China is often regarded as the base metric against which other forms of 'Chineseness' are measured/devalued against (Barabantseva, 2011). It is the 'leached culture and degenerate morality' (Yeoh & Lin, 2013:43) of 'other' that helps to define 'self' by positing and mirroring what *could* have been. Shawn's (M, HongKonger) description depicts a situation that resonates with many of my other respondents wherein mastery of the 'right' tongue constitutes a prime axis in determining alignment:

> "No offence but I think there are too many China students, not only in my degree but basically most degrees especially for the Business Administration ones… I think many Chinese students are still not ready to I don't know how to say this, they are not suitable or yet ready to study in a Western-dominated atmosphere which Hong Kongers are."

In claiming distance (Fortier, 2008) via English language proficiency, geopolitical tensions and (post)colonial legacies, we are reminded that ethnicity and race are concomitantly inhabited through other intersecting categories as well. This echoes Yeoh & Willis' (2005) contention that alternate social markers tend to come to the fore when interacting with

huaren from other parts of the world. Even those whose courses are not dominated by PRC nationals, casting doubts on the academic mettle of their 'lookalike' peers was a frequent theme in our conversations. To Ben (M, American-HongKonger), the passivity and/or inability of his 'Asian' coursemates to contribute towards seminar discussions compromises the quality of his learning although he also admits that his 'hard-nosed competitiveness' (Waters, 2003) is illustrative of the Confucian desire for educational superiority instilled in him by his Chinese parents. Regardless, it is undeniable that the presence of racially proximate individuals, in large numbers especially, inspires within the classroom certain anxieties. This usually demand the dual practice (Guibernau & Rex, 2010) of naming and evaluating the other(s) in question as 'lesser' – be it linguistically or embodied values ('inward-looking') – not simply because s/he is different but from external pressures/igorances as well. More importantly in the face of 'immutable' phenotypes, any distinction must inevitably take on less hereditary-centered forms.

Although accounts detailing the kinds of 'us'/'them' divide are aplenty, not every one concurred with such sentiments. Some like Rina (F, Canadian-HongKonger) shared that nine-month long of co-ethnic living has actually convinced them of an 'imagined' Sinic collective (Chan, 1997; Anderson, 1983). Beyond mere conviviality, it is a type of transnational social space (Pries, 1999) where amorphous ethnic affinities are congealed into durable ties of solidarity:

> "If there's anything to add, I feel a lot more Chinese here than I ever was in Vancouver. I think it's because I am much more of a minority here. Especially in class, Asians are less but Hong Kongers are only two. When the conversation or discussion is very Westernised and Eurocentric, I always have a strong feeling to back up, to add into that. I felt much less to be Chinese in Vancouver."

The strong predilection for Rina to speak for her geographically distant but culturally proximate stranger-compatriots who are excluded from class discussions clearly underscores how difference itself can serve to amplify both self-identity and a sense of community, reminiscent of Ho's (2016:2) claim that transversal webs of ethnic ties/connections 'can be mobilised towards nurturing empathetic identification and caring relationships in societies characterised by cultural diversity and social complexity'. Yet it is crucial to note that such instances of ethnic re(dis)coveries or (re)sinicisations also appear to rest on very particular conditions at the macro/national (racial minority) and micro/classroom (Eurocentric discussions) levels. As Elias (M, HongKonger) confesses, ethnic identification is sometimes nothing more than a novel 'resource' he utilises to elevate his academic standing in the classroom setting. In other words, 'Chinese'/'Chineseness' is not an isolated but mutually constitutive set of social relations (Hsing, 2003).

5.3 Leisure Spaces

While the majority of the transmigrants I talked to were more than willing to shed their culturally 'Chinese' skins when emplaced in a university/learning setting, I found this to be less pronounced when they started describing the kinds of company that they surrounded themselves with and the spaces frequented in their idle hours. With the exceptions of three, everyone else shared that their private social circles in London comprise largely, or in some cases entirely of, huaren and mobilised cultural logics of presumed 'sameness' to justify why such material racialisation has taken place. This is

exemplified in Lawrence's (M, Singaporean) account on what comprises an ideal leisure activity for him and his friends, which is a motif brought up by many other interviewees when explaining why they prefer spending time with other huaren:

> "Of course I have many Chinese friends who drink but I think generally a good meal or catch-up over food constitutes 70% and drinking only 30% or lesser while such ratio is usually the inverse for non-Chinese and non-Asians."

Although he does not disapprove of the pub ritual and has even cultivated such a habit in order to build rapport with his Caucasian friends, Lawrence continues to ascribe socialising over drinks as a 'Western' norm that wouldn't necessarily be the first activity that comes to mind when conjuring leisure plans. Corroborating, Shawn (M, Danish-British-HongKonger) opines that his disinterest towards 'mindless' drinking stems from the inebriation (and occasional misdemeanours) that alcohol brings about which impedes the fostering of deeper ties. In the event that food/meals forms the main bonding activity with non-huaren, many respondents express that it sometimes becomes an occasion where divisions are calcified and intended bonding compromised. As Irene's (F, Malaysian) revelation makes clear, the correlation between practices of active inclusion and actual inclusion is not straightforward:

> "Many of my friends would be unwilling to share a meal primarily made up of foods that are extreme to them (ie. offal)"

Owing to divergences over what constitutes gastronomic enjoyment with her predominantly White companions, the 'Chinese' practice of sharing food is rendered nulled. However, the kinds of abjections displayed towards the consumption of innards alongside 'spicy Sichuan dishes' (Elias, M, HongKonger) is shared by non-Caucasian

huaren such as Gwendolyn (F, Macanese) as well. Yet while 'disgust' works both ways, it works *unevenly* as Laoyi's (F, PRC) vignette suggests:

> "I went there [Chinese bakery] during Lunar New Year with an English friend because I felt that the celebrations at Trafalgar Square were too lackluster. However he threw away the bread that I treated him to because he didn't like it. He found it too sweet for his liking. At least huaren will never throw it away in full view I believe but Westerners would."

In contrasting the sensitivities/restraints that Laoyi believes co-ethnics would possess if confronted with the same situation, what appears to be automatic reflexes like gagging may in fact be culturally tempered to respond in certain ways rather than natural. As Highmore (2008:387) eloquently puts it, "what is crucial is that the 'external menace' of abjection has historically been the bodies and sensual orchestrations of… other ethnicities, other 'races'". The incidents described thus far may appear banal but their potentials to upend and unhinge borders of the self/other must not be underestimated, especially when food is involved which is an aspect unanimously touted as integral to 'Chinese' culture.

For Mary (F, Malaysian-Singaporean) however, the initial appeal of a subliminal 'Chineseness that connects us all' was quickly discarded upon prolonged interactions. What emerged instead is an intense process of distancing between Southeast Asian-Chineseness and PRC-Chineseness:

> "I'm not included in their WeChat group. I created an account but she still didn't add me in. There is a distinction between me and the PRC Chinese. I know utilitarian is a strong word but some things happened which made me feel like I was being used but I won't elaborate more on. Yeah, that plays a part but as we spend more time together I

> realised I don't understand their lingo, their inside jokes even though we all speak Mandarin."

Rather than see these disjunctures as endemic (shared ancestry), Mary traces them to 'modern' PRC-Chinese enculturation practices stressing ideologies such as *guan xi*[7] in distinguishing the two 'Chineseness'. It is not that differences were unexpected but when presumed cultural knowledge arbitrage (Yeoh & Willis, 2005) is rendered facile, the ensuing racial disenchantments can be extremely poignant. Indeed as Holly (F, PRC) and Miranda (F, PRC) profess, the type of communication efficiency easily achieved with PRC-Chinese but not usually replicated in their interactions with other huaren makes claiming the latter groups 'one of us' difficult. While such encounters are largely conflict 'free', the marking of non-PRC Chinese bodies as 'strange' (Ahmed, 2000) wholly epitomises the 'double-bind' problem that Ang (2001) avers overseas Chinese face – 'too Chinese' because of how they look but simultaneously 'not Chinese enough' due to 'impurity'.

5.4 Conclusion

Extending the argument that huaren transmigrants should not be treated as unmoored capitalists, this chapter has demonstrated that paying attention to their '"co-presence', with others, 'in place'" (Yeoh & Willis, 2005:270) provides us with a 'grounded epistemic optic' (Smith, 2001:98) for comprehending the shifting boundaries constructed around 'Chineseness'. Specifically through calibrating our lens towards the taking-place of

[7] Building a network of mutually beneficial relationships which can be used for personal and business purposes but the amount of time spent and depth of relationships developed can be much deeper than business relationships in the West (Business Insider, 2011)

encounters within learning and leisure spaces and the attendant risks and rewards that such contacts entail (Stevens, 2007), I tease out how the socialities bore by these huaren sojourners are contingent and constituted in and by their relations to other people, societal attitudes, discourses, structural inequalities and imaginary geographies (Brown, 2008; Leitner, 2012). The types of values and presumptions about cultural similarities/differences held before, during and after moments of contact are not static (Amin, 2012). Yet the point is not simply that huaren transmigrants experience intra- and inter-ethnic encounters across a range of positive and/or negative registers but about how the indeterminancy of everyday interactions offers us insights into the incongruent ways they claim 'Chineseness' and the role place plays in (re)producing such multiplicities. As Rigg (2004:98) eloquently sums up, 'Chinese' occupies multiple spaces of identity rather than a singular, interstitial social space.

CHAPTER SIX

NEGOTIATING 'CHINESENESS'

6.1 Introduction

If the everyday proceedings of huaren transmigrants are punctuated by slews of enabling and disempowering events of relations that take place across multiple temporalities, I turn to the various tactics that they have adopted in order to negotiate such encounters in this final empirical chapter. As Hsing (2003) opines, uncovering the politics constructing Chineseness requires investigating the actual *practices* of people who label themselves (or are labelled) as such. In other words, the strategies put forth by my respondents to 'make familiar the unfamiliar' (Collins, 2010:56) are likewise part of the unending identity making, unmaking and remaking process.

6.2 Relational Enactments

If London as a place open to unassimilated otherness is seen as fallacious, one tactic is to intentionally present the identity(ies) that is/are likely to be favoured or easily understood in specific situations. Drew (M, Canadian-Taiwanese) provides a telling example of how identity affiliations may well shift throughout the course of varying socio-spatial temporalities:

> "Whenever people ask where I am from, my answer will depend on where I am. If I am in the UK, I would say I am from Canada or if I am in Canada already, I would say Taiwanese. Usually when I'm outside of Canada, like they would really ask you where I am from, I would say I am Taiwanese- Canadian."

Whilst pragmatic, Drew acknowledges that doing so is unlikely to help dispel any misconceptions that people might hold nor quell his own annoyance over said ignorances. By preempting and feeding into the kinds of responses that his conversationist envisions the engagement would proceed, Drew's strategy is one undertaken primarily to reduce the amount of efforts needed to explain his family's complex migratory history or what Ang (2001:29) terms 'a shorthand (re)presentation of self for convenience's sake'.

As Lawrence (M, Singaporean) quips, racialised hierarchies usually serve as the main principles guiding the choice of *performance* despite the presence of other ethnicities:

> "I make it a point to always speak standard English whenever I am in class not just to facilitate discussions but to also reduce the chances of my European and American coursemates seeing me as a typical Asian or worse, a PRC. And by standard I mean a slightly British accented one since we are in London."

His justification to pass off as 'more British than Asian/Chinese' in order to pave relations in very Caucasian settings reflects a malaise that conflates whiteness with 'Western' superiority vis-a-vis 'Asian'/'Singaporean-Chinese' inferiority. Such behavioural changes, as Fiona (F, Singaporean-HongKonger-Malaysian) eagerly shares, are mired in (upper-)classed subjectivities because 'not everyone is able to do so'. Their mobilities within the classrooms, arising from the ability to enact a different subject position, therefore rest on the immobilities/inability of others (Adey, 2006). While inconsistencies may exist between the behaviour these migrants choose to demonstrate and the actual values they subscribe to (Hemming, 2011), we cannot dismiss the cultural belongings such praxes have yielded for its practitioners.

However, how a person sees (or tries to present) himself/herself and how they are perceived by others do not always coincide. If even Odette (F, British-HongKonger) cannot help but feel alienated despite having grown up in the UK, it is fair to surmise that relationally enacting one's identity 'do not automatically remove the barriers faced in encountering others' (Wang & Collins, 2016:95) either. Racialised bodies bearing the phenotypical features that are considered incompatible with the characteristics put forth thus continue to be vulnerable to abjection and spatial exclusions (Ho, 2017b).

6.3 Strategic Essentialism

Since 'we are what we look like' (John, M, Danish-British-HongKonger), some interviewees spoke about embracing rather than downplaying the very kinds of social affiliations that are being propped up against. In reclaiming the 'habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted' (Ahmed *et al.*, 2003:9), they are able to transform feelings of alienation into those more proximate with pride. For Nina (F, Taiwanese) and Adriana (F, Taiwanese), one potent way is to immerse themselves in what the racialised Chinatown landscape has to offer:

> "I found it interesting to be in a place where everyone looks like me. All the food there looked so novel. I guess I was just comforting myself in some way. I felt a sense of familiarity being among a sea of people who look alike, where we are the majority race again."

> "I would say still one of the important place in London for me because I have the need to taste some Taiwanese bubbletea or fried chicken cutlet and also do the food shopping so I still quite depend on that Chinatown."

The kind of affective familiarity or 'propinquity' (Wilson, 2011) described by Nina is evidently sustained on a semi-conscious level that is less mindful and agentive. Here, presence is not simply reducible to co-presence (Callon & Law, 2004) for the solidarity that emerges between her and the other unacquainted visitors in Chinatown play out on more 'affective rather than discursive, conversational registers' (Bissell, 2010:276). Adriana's preference for the groceries sold in Chinatown is similarly couched in emotive terms seeking to reproduce 'contingent fixities' (Clarke, 2004:418) amidst the fluidity of transnational lives. Other reterritorialisations include traversing privatised Asian- or Chinese-dominant churches and recreational clubs as Katie (F, Filipino-PRC) and Fiona (Singaporean-HongKonger-Malaysian) have done so respectively:

> "I'm more at ease in a Chinese place. It's not the language at all. I can't put my finger on it but I jut felt more at home even though I'm the only Filipino there."
>
> "Usually we go to Asian clubs so it's predominantly Asian demographics there. The club owner is Asian, the deejay is Asian, everybody there is Asian. There is not even one White guy."

In 'confining' themselves to the familiarity of Chinese/Asian cultural reproductions, these routines reveal that reclaiming the 'self' entails defining what is not (quite literally in these cases) inside dialectically (Mahtani, 2001). The inclusivity and motivating potentials (faith) of religious spaces in particular are well-noted by my respondents and scholars alike (Saunders *et al.,* 2016). That such clusterings – as social communities, material locales and intersubjective discourses – continue to endure even after huaren transmigrants have become more settled suggests that they are not mere respites where differences are temporarily subsumed. Cassie (F, PRC) explains that it is not about veering towards

people who lookalike, not entirely, but seeking like-minded people:

> "Basically I think ethnic Chinese friends are more reciprocal. We place a lot of emphasis on caring and returning favours while foreigners are more distant and individualistic. With the latter, I usually only engage in very superficial conversations."

Indeed while none of my interviewees disputed that 'Chinese' is a fractured category, many concurred that they do seem to share some sort of ideological commonalities with their huaren mates. Seemingly universal/neutral concepts such as 'friendship' are in fact shaped by specific cultural discourses which operate tacitly to orientate bodies to behave in particular ways (Bissell, 2010). As such, Cassie tends to dedicate more time towards those who also places equal emphasis on the allegedly 'Chinese' values of collectivism and empathy. Crucially, such views underscore how the same signifiers can be refashioned by huaren transmigrants in ways ('comaraderie') that are different from how non-Asian/Chinese might mobilise them ('antisocial') to explain behaviour.

6.4 'Cosmopolitan' Flexibilities

The third tactic, which adheres most closely with idealised notions of cosmopolitanism, involves the flexible negotiation of social situations. Here, inclusivity becomes an indication of a tolerance of all peoples as not similar to self, but 'rather as having a recognisable, expected, and *accepted* difference' (Yeoh, 2017:1). Apart from the most cited example of 'code-switching' between languages to facilitate communications i.e. Cantonese practitioners speaking Mandarin when conversing with those from Taiwan and China, Zac's (M, Taiwanese) response below captures precisely the types of

'cosmopolitan repertoire' (Butcher, 2009) articulated by several interlocutors:

> "Yeah, unless I am very close with him/her. Otherwise, politics is not a topic that would appear in our casual conversations. Even if we do talk about politics, I would observe if s/he is open-minded enough to discuss them."

In displaying mindfulness towards the kinds of topics that should be threaded carefully with PRC nationals, Zac's prudence demonstrates an awareness that the meaning(s) of 'Chinese'/'Chineseness' varies across contexts. What distinguishes his (among others) strategy from the preceding relational enactments and strategic essentialisms lies in how Zac's was enacted with the intent to create common familiarity amongst groups of people while the latter two largely involves altering individual mobility rhythms to minimise personal discomfort and encountering unknown others. Yet this does not mean that contentious topics are shied away from for the process of (re)creating comfort does sometimes requires mature confrontations. Gwendolyn's (F, Macanese) vignette typifies such an instance:

> "For instance for the Tiananmen Square incident basically 90% of the Chinese don't know what is it because the Chinese government tried to hide this event from the public. But when I am here, I'm quite open to talk about it because I don't want them to be lied about it. I want them to know the truth."

Despite inciting bursts of anger and humiliation among her PRC peers, Gwendolyn opined that such open dialogues have actually brought them closer. In fact, they openly welcomed Gwendolyn's efforts to initiate discussions on sensitive geopolitical issues, partly because opportunities to do so are rare back home. This resonates with Mahler's (1999) observation that transnational migration provides a 'liminal' space for (re)configuring

identities in profound ways. Imperatively, mastery of the cultural 'know-hows' (Beaverstock, 2002) does not always equate to a more 'diverse' composition of friends. Even though Ben (M, American-HongKonger) and John (M, Danish-British-HongKonger) both described their closest social circles as comprising mainly other Caucasians and Asians living in London respectively, they also qualify that this is simply because they feel the most at ease among such company. Pivotally, acquiring intercultural sensibilities is not instantaneous but requires active efforts and time.

6.5 Nonchalance

The final tactic is to be nonchalant about the various, sometimes competing, discourses ascribed upon them. This does not mean that my interviewees are unaffected. Rather, they view feelings of estrangement, frustration and novelty as inevitable to the migratory experience (Collins 2010). After being subjected to years of racial second-guessings in the UK, Irene's (F, Malaysian) account illustrates how she has become increasingly desensitised to such encounters:

> "I do to some extent pay attention to how I am perceived but only because I think it is quite amusing. People often try to guess where I am from and get it wrong so its interesting to see what they think my heritage is. As quite a dark Chinese person, I have gotten Thai, Filipina and even Indian."

Yet Irene's seeming aloofness could also be read as a 'minor' protest to quote Katz (1996), that is the challenging and reworking of master categories from the inside via subtle but no less effective ways. The significance of time (and age/maturity) in tempering one's capacity to shrug off 'prescribed otherness' (Chow, 1991) is no better exemplified by the

1.5/second generation interviewees. All of them recounted at least one incident in their growing years whereby they were treated differently simply because of how they look e.g. corrected for 'improper' English accents, name calling. While experiences of these sorts did cause them much grievances (especially as adolescents and teens), many also talked about how they have gotten over such agnosticisms as they matured. Looking back, some like Autumn (F, Canadian-PRC) even attributed the self-confidence – including being at ease with or even proud of their 'Chinese' identity – that they possess today precisely to these obstacles that they have surmounted. Indeed, it is only through coming to terms with the irreducibility of cultures can 'Chinese'/'Chineseness' become an open-ended signifier where the inability or unwillingness to speak Chinese dialects/languages fluently (Ben, M, American-HongKonger) among other non-normative traits not be seen as a sign of lost authenticity (Ang, 2001) or a problem at worst.

6.6 Conclusion

Building on the understanding that encounters have resonances beyond their immediacies, this chapter has previewed the variegated ways huaren transmigrants attempt to negotiate more desirable forms of identifications for themselves. This means that subjectification is never unidirectional i.e. externally instigated. Be it through practices that help them fit in or at other times to differentiate themselves, huaren transmigrants are social actors who intentionally embody and perform the identities that they aspire or wish to preserve as well (Butler, 1988). It is important to iterate that the spatial strategies outlined above are not exclusive to any subgroup of ethnic Chinese but neither are they privy to every huaren migrants for all transnational lives are unevenly

positioned (Collins, 2009). The choice and success of tactic depends very much on accessibility and the difference encountered. After all, boundary-making is a dynamic process that shifts in response to the social occasion that arises (Cranston, 2016).

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

It seems fitting to conclude by returning to my provocative claim on 'unbounding' Chineseness which is two-fold. The first, which adheres the closest to Reid's (2009) original meaning, concerns propagating the *multiplicitous* nature of 'Chinese'/'Chineseness'. Be it the motivations/logics ordering mobilities, politics of difference encountered or strategies adopted to negotiate membership terms, it is clear that the trajectories of huaren transmigrants can only be weaved together in dissonant ways. While their "bodies might be conceived as similar from the 'outside', … processes of embodiment are thoroughly individual" (Collins, 2010:60) and shaped by the dynamics of two or more overlapping 'regimes of power and knowledge' (Yeoh & Yap, 2009:568). Viewed this way, we must refrain from conceiving contemporary huaren transmigrations as one unitary community (Crang *et al.*, 2003). Besides lending a polymorphous voice, unbounding also involves troubling the ontological status of 'Chinese'/'Chineseness' from what it is to *how* it has been constructed and deployed in place i.e. sinicisation processes. Crucially, recognising the essentialism of classification systems (Kobayashi, 2017) does not make them any less abstract or unreal for they continue to perpetuate the 'inequalities and experiences of marginality which construct the lived realities of racialised individuals' (Clayton, 2009:215). Instead I am urging for 'Chinese'/'Chineseness' to be treated as a geographically contingent scheme of meanings tied to specific power dynamics. This point about the recursive relationship between space and sociality (Harvey, 2000) explains why I have chosen to interrogate the everyday realities of my student-respondents within and beyond universities. In so doing, dialectics of self/other, Chinese/Not-Chinese are

revealed to be intersected by other contextually dependent identifiers of difference as well. Proposing huaren as a semantical and conceptual corrective therefore does not mean replacing one dominant, broad-sweeping lexicon with another but utilised to encourage a more complex view of subject-*making*. To assume a less anticipatory stance when thinking about Chinese mobilities and transnationalisms, we need to thoroughly interrogate the possibilities and costs associated with simultaneity (Yeoh, 2005) – both as transnationals and co-living with others – because huaren migrants are more often than not only partially enfolded into the spaces that they inhabit.

Although I have framed my research questions and empirical directions towards the nexus between Chinese Mobilities and Transnationalisms, International Student Mobilities and Everyday Encounters, future research need to consider other aspects that are beyond the ambit of this paper owing to word constraints. One is the role infrastructures play in the production of migrant mobilities, including both human and nonhuman actants that help facilitate movements (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Indeed, some of my respondents revealed that they had sought the help of intermediaries to augment their applications, from drafting personal statements to visa advice. Another direction pertains to how emotions could have been conferred greater attention in the analyses. If externally imposed social difference constructs the boundaries between 'us' and 'them', it is the intersubjectivity of emotions that operationalises/naturalises such divisions (Conradson & McKay, 2007). Finally on a general note, the need for a more lively introspection of the interplay between geography, difference and simultaneity made in this dissertation probably extends to migration studies on the whole. Moreover as 'Chinese' mobilities become more heterogeneous, my portrayal of these 'alternative'

narratives 'may be nothing more than 'fleeting expressions of a [single] habitus' (Lin, 2012:145) at particular points in time.

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