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Making a living in an affluent world: the Chinese immigrants in Europe

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The history of Chinese migration into Europe is a rather short one compared to the migration of Chinese men and women into South-East Asia, which dates back hundreds of years. It is generally accepted that it was not until the start of the twentieth century that Chinese sojourners became a more or less visible group in Western European countries such as Britain, France, Italy and the Netherlands.¹ In this article, I will discuss the main 'waves of migration' from China into Western and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century. Particularly, emphasis will be given to the area Chinese immigrants originated from, the relative size of the Chinese population in Europe, the geographical distribution and the occupations of Chinese migrants in different parts of Europe.

A brief historical review: Chinese migration before the Second World War

The Chinese immigrants that arrived in Europe before the Second World War can roughly be divided in four categories. Firstly, there were the Chinese labourers who were recruited during the First World War for the purpose of military-industrial production or logistical support, but did not return home after the war. Secondly, there were the sailors who 'jumped ship' to start a life in Europe. Street peddlers, who were mainly from the Wenzhou and Qingtian districts of the southeastern province of Zhejiang, made up a third category. The fourth comprised of students that settled in Europe after studying there. According to statistics provided by the Overseas Chinese Committee of the Republic of China, the total amount of Chinese immigrants in Europe had accumulated to about 40.000 by 1935 (cf. Table 1).

In the following years, many of the Chinese in Europe returned home when it became more and more apparent that Europe was moving

¹ Even though, from a historical perspective, the Chinese have settled in parts of the Soviet Union before the settlement on the European mainland, within this context I shall not discuss the recent Chinese migration into Russian Siberia.

towards a full-scale war. The Chinese that chose to stay in Europe found themselves in an extremely difficult situation during the War years. When peace was restored in both Europe and China, some of the survivors of the war decided to return home. Back in their hometowns, though, many found it hard to re-integrate. Although some of them wanted to migrate back to Europe, few succeeded. The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 stopped most of the outward migration. This helps to account for the fact that there were just over ten thousand Chinese residing in Europe in 1955 and that these were barely visible in Europe's societies (cf. Table 1).

Three waves of migration towards Western Europe after the Second World War

Western Europe was found to heal quickly from the wounds of war and entered into a new stage of economic development with the creation of the Common Market, shortly after the end of the Second World War. This was also the time in which the social welfare system was created, which benefited the Chinese immigrants greatly. In the past forty years, there have been three great surges in the tides of migration from China into Western Europe.

A first wave of migration began in the early 1960's. These migrants came mainly from the rural areas located in the New Territories of Hong Kong, where, during that period, vegetable cultivation and industrial parks were quickly replacing the traditional rice economy. Many native peasants in the then British Crown Colony were forced to look for alternative means of income, which caused a higher level of migration. A study by Ng Kwee Choo shows that between 1955 and 1960, on average, 450 people from the New Territories migrated to Britain annually.² In the early 1960's however, that number was up to over one thousand individuals per annum. The numbers of dependents to follow were even bigger. As a result, there were already 45,000 Chinese living in Britain in 1965, more than fifteen times the total number of Chinese in Britain in 1955 (cf. Table 1). Most of these Chinese immigrants made a living for themselves in the catering industry. However, the continuous arrival of more immigrants soon formed a problem. When the English market for Chinese restaurants was satisfied,

² Ng Kwee Choo, *The Chinese in London* (London: Oxford University Press 1968) 37.

more and more Chinese decided to try their luck elsewhere and moved into neighbouring countries, like the Netherlands and Belgium, and later on also into Germany and France.

A second wave came to Europe in the late 1970's. Ethnic Chinese from Indochina, some of whom had lived there for many generations, fled from persecution and ruthless political conflict. This group met with extreme difficulties and tragic circumstances. The suffering of the so-called 'boat people' is well known. They were recognized as conventional refugees in France, due to the historical relationship of the country with Indochina, and about 145,000 Indochinese were allowed to settle down in France.³ Most of the other Western European countries also accepted refugees from Indochina. The total number of such refugees in Western Europe is estimated at 200,000 to 250,000. About sixty percent of them were ethnic Chinese. The sudden arrival of a refugee community of 120,000 to 150,000 ethnic Chinese drastically changed the Chinese population structure in Europe.

The third migratory wave started in the 1980's and is an ongoing process up until today. Unlike the first two groups, that consisted mainly of Chinese from outside China proper, the Chinese entering Europe on this last 'wave' usually originated from mainland China. According to my own studies, more than 300,000 Chinese immigrants have settled in Europe in this period. About two thirds of these immigrants came from the well-known *qiaoxiang* areas,⁴ such as the Wenzhou and Qingtian districts in Zhejiang province. Chart 1 clearly shows the high numbers of migrants from the *qiaoxiang* of Wencheng – a county under the jurisdiction of the Wenzhou municipality – in the 1980's. Both legal and illegal migration occurred in this period. Legal migration includes family reunion, migration on basis of a visa, work permit or short-term work contract, migration with the goal of studying or entering a highly specialized work field (a good example here would be the qualified chefs that left China to work in the Chinese catering businesses and so on). Illegal migration includes remaining in Europe after the expiration of a visa or the smuggling of people into

³ Live Yu-Sion, 'France', in: Lynn Pan ed., *The encyclopedia of the Chinese overseas* (Hong Kong: Joint publishing co. ltd., 1998) 312.

⁴ *Qiaoxiang*, a popularly used Chinese word, is used to describe villages and towns that have a high emigration rate or a 'migration culture'. This means that many of the locals share the aspiration to migrate abroad, and regard emigration as a common goal or destiny.

Europe. It is worth noting that thousands of illegal Chinese immigrants have acquired a legal status since the 1980's, when legalization movements were launched successively in France (1981, 1992 and 1997)⁵, Italy (1982, 1986, 1990, 1995 and 2002), Spain (1986, 1991 and 2000) and Portugal (1992 and 1996).

Migration into Eastern Europe

The history of migration of Chinese into Eastern Europe follows a different pattern. The Chinese communities that exist in Eastern Europe today are mainly composed of immigrants from mainland China who arrived in Europe in the late 1980's.

During the 1960's and 1970's, serious conflict existed between China and the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Foreign relations were already tense, and the opposite stances the countries took in socialist ideologies tended to heighten that tension. The few Chinese migrants that lived in Eastern Europe since before the Second World War experienced fierce social pressure and there were few new arrivals.⁶ The 1980's, however, form the starting point for a sudden and unexpected wave of migration towards Eastern Europe. The 'pioneer-migrants' in this particular case were a group of so-called *Daoye*, trans-national salesmen. Initially, this group benefited greatly from the official no-visa requirement between China and Hungary (1988-1991) and the eased requirements for the granting of tour-visa at the border with the Soviet Union. Chinese youths brought in huge bags full of cloths or light industrial products, to sell in Eurasia along the route to Moscow while travelling with the Trans-Siberia Express. They would then often bring back Soviet products to sell to China.

It was tough making a living out of peddling goods travelling back and forth through Siberia, and some of these *Daoye* decided to settle in Moscow or Budapest when they could not sell their stock quickly enough. Thus a new community of migrants emerged and rapidly expanded. When I interviewed some of those immigrants in Budapest, several of them told me how high profits proved to be in the late 1980's: on average, they could

⁵ There was also a case-to-case legalization in France in 2002.

⁶ In the 1950's and 1960's only a few dozen Chinese migrated to Eastern Europe. When migration did occur, it was often due to intermarriages between Chinese women and Eastern European men.

make a two hundred percent profit selling Chinese goods on the Hungarian market. Even profits of one thousand percent on certain best-selling items were not uncommon. Some of those early pioneer-migrants entered the realm of the 'nouveaux riches' virtually overnight. The high profits that could be made turned out to be a strong pull-factor and many Chinese migrants were to follow the example of the *Daoye*.

Then the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union came and shocked the world. These events proved to be a turning point. Eastern Europe entered a completely new political phase in the year 1989. The whole of the Eastern bloc was in turmoil. While the international community was busy formulating a new policy in relation to the new regimes in Eastern Europe, hundreds of thousands of Chinese immigrants washed over Eastern Europe. In addition to Russia and Hungary, these Chinese chose to settle in Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, ex-Yugoslavia and so on, making their living as street peddlers, investors, restaurateurs and a wide range of other occupations. It seemed as if, all of a sudden, there were no Eastern European states *without* Chinese immigrants.

This immigration wave did not last very long. The economic situation in the Eastern European countries proved unstable and offered limited opportunities. Unemployment soon became a serious social problem, for immigrants and natives alike. In 1992, a stricter immigration policy in Hungary made it much harder for new immigrants to make a living. Some ended up heavily indebted and, disillusioned, they finally left. It is said that the 'Danube was filled with the tears of Chinese immigrants'. By the end of the 1990's, there were about ten thousand Chinese remaining in Hungary, about one third of the number living there at the start of the decade.

Size of migration

It is difficult to determine how many Chinese live in Europe today. According to the data provided by the Council of Europe, the number of *PRC Nationals* legally residing in Europe in the year 2000 was estimated at 200,000. However, as I have argued above, there are also a great number of Hong-Kong Chinese and migrants from Indochina (and some from other areas) living in Europe, on top of the PRC nationals. I believe, based on some of my own research, that there are over one million Chinese migrants and their offspring living in the whole of Europe. Table 1 provides an

indication of the changes in the size of the Chinese population in the main European states.

A number of conclusions can be drawn on basis of the above. Firstly, there has been a considerable increase of Chinese migrants in Europe over the last decades of the twentieth century. According to an official announcement of the Chinese government, there are about thirty million Chinese migrants and their offspring living all over the world. If the total number of Chinese in Europe is compared to that of the rest of the world, it is clear that, in absolute percentages, the Chinese in Europe are just a fraction of the world wide migrant community. However, when one looks at the relative rates of increase in migrant populations, the one in Europe is the highest. To be more precise: during the half century after the Second World War, the number of Chinese immigrants in Europe has increased from just over ten thousand in the mid 1950's, to more than one million by the end of the twentieth century. That would mean there has been an almost hundred-fold increase in the Chinese population in Europe since the 1950's.

Secondly, if the number of thirty million Chinese immigrants worldwide is accepted, this would mean that the Chinese in Europe constitute six percent of that total. That is much less than the percentage of Chinese migrants living in Asian States other than China (seventy-seven percent) or the percentage living in the United States (fifteen percent). Then again, this is much higher than the percentage of Chinese migrants living in Oceania (1.6 percent) or Africa (0.4 percent).⁷

Finally, when compared to other immigrant groups in Europe, the size of Chinese migration is not very significant. According to statistics provided by the Council of Europe, the total number of 'foreign nationals' - people originally from another country - living in Europe today, is estimated at twenty-one million. That would mean that the 200.000 PRC immigrants only make up less than one percent of that total. In other words: although Chinese immigrants attract more attention than ever before, it cannot be said that these immigrants from the world's most populous nation, 1.3 billion people, have a lot of impact on the social structure of the 'receiving' nations.

⁷ The relevant figures are quoted from OCEYB (Overseas Chinese Economy Year Book editorial Committee), *Huaqiao jingji nianjian* (Overseas Chinese Economic Yearbook; Taipei: OCAC (the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission) 1968-1998).

Geographical distribution and economic activities

Within the geographical distribution of the Chinese in Europe, two coexisting trends can be distinguished. On the one hand, there are flourishing ethnic Chinese urban concentrations. On the other hand, there are small groups of Chinese scattered all over Europe. These two trends are heavily influenced by the economic activity in which the immigrants are engaged. The urban centres, such as the new and old Chinatowns in metropolises like Paris and London, have become a collective symbol for the Chinese communities in their new home countries. In Chinatowns you can find everything that meets your 'oriental needs': Chinese clothes, food, books or everyday commodities. At the same time, all across Europe it is possible to find a Chinese restaurant even in remote villages, or coming across a Chinese trader selling Chinese goods at a local market. For many Chinese, the catering business is still the main economic activity, and to ensure a larger clientele they have set up their restaurants all over Europe. In Western Europe it is not uncommon to find more than one Chinatown in one country, or even to find a couple of Chinatowns within one city. In the Netherlands for example, there are two Chinatowns located in



Chinese New Year festival in The Hague. Source: www.chineesnieuwjaarsfestival.nl. With thanks to 'Yat Hong-vereniging' and the 'Algemene Chinese Wu Shu Dragon & Lion Dance Federatie Nederland'.

Amsterdam and Rotterdam respectively. In Britain, it is the Chinatown of London that is the biggest and best known, but a number of smaller Chinatowns have emerged in Manchester and Liverpool as well.

In Paris, three Chinatowns, each with their own characteristics, are becoming important ethnic quarters of the metropolis. Recent research by a French scholar shows that more than half of the Chinese immigrants in France have settled in the Greater Paris area. Two third of them live in one of three districts in the city of Paris: the 3rd arrondissement (which is also known as *Wenzhou jie*, Wenzhou street) is the first. As the name explains, the first group of Chinese to settle here was from the Wenzhou district and through chain-migration this arrondissement has largely maintained its specific regional character. The second Chinatown is located in the 13th arrondissement. It is the biggest in Europe and consists mainly of former Chinese refugees from Indochina and their descendents. The third one is a fast-growing Chinese centre located in the 19th arrondissement or Belleville, called *Meili Cheng* (Beautiful City) by Paris' Chinese. Most of its residents are newcomers from mainland China.

In Italy, most Chinese immigrants work in the garment and leather industry, wholesale, international trade or Chinese catering. Statistics show that in the early 1990's, the majority of Chinese immigrants in Italy lived in the regional capitals of Lombardy (Milan, 26%), Lazio (Rome, 25%) and Tuscany (Florence, 15%). Only about five percent of the Chinese immigrants live in the remote towns or on the islands.⁸

Before the 1980's, small Chinese communities existed in Spain, concentrated in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. However, because of extensive regularization measures towards illegal migrants in 1986 and 1991, there was a sudden rise in the number of PRC Chinese immigrants coming to Spain. New Chinese immigrants quickly spread all over the country. Although the number of Chinese in Madrid grew more than thirty fold between 1961 and 1999, the proportion of Chinese living in Madrid actually decreased. In 1961 about fifty-one percent of the Chinese in Spain lived in this city, but by 1981 the percentage had dropped to thirty-seven and to thirty percent in 1993.⁹

⁸ Francesco Carchedi and Marica Ferri, 'The Chinese presence in Italy: dimensions and structural characteristics', in: Gregor Benton and Frank Pieke eds., *The Chinese in Europe* (Houndmills: MacMillan Press 1998) 267.

⁹ Joaquin Beltran Antolin, 'The Chinese in Spain', in: Gregor Benton and Frank Pieke eds., *The Chinese in Europe*, 224.

Conclusion

We live in an age of migration and the constant flow of information, capital and goods will continue to stimulate the movement of peoples and populations.¹⁰ When we take this worldwide trend into account, it can be expected that new Chinese immigrants will also continue to arrive in Europe in the foreseeable future. Their numbers may not grow as quickly as they did in the last twenty-five years but an affluent Europe remains an attractive destination.

A few things should be taken into account. Obviously, the geographical distribution of the Chinese in Europe will keep changing. In addition to the migrants from the traditional *qiaoxiang* areas of Wenzhou and Qingtian in southern China, new migrants from Northern China are expected to arrive as well.¹¹ The Chinese immigration has resulted in a series of social consequences where the two worlds of Europe and China met. On the one hand, it has brought the Europeans and the Chinese closer to each other. To the natives of the *qiaoxiang* areas of China, widely disposed though they are, Europe is not a strange world any more. Meanwhile, more Europeans have become familiar with the Chinese people and their culture in their midst. Learning to get along with people of different cultures is important for keeping the peace of the world. However, it is worth noting that the continuous inflow of Chinese illegals in Europe has also become a focus of attention in the diplomatic relationship between China and Europe. High-ranking officials are known to travel between Europe and China to deal with this problem. It is clear that the Chinese migration to Europe has become, although not always recognized, an important and dynamic factor in the relationship between China and Europe, with both positive and negative consequences.¹²

¹⁰ Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (Houndmills: MacMillan Press 1993).

¹¹ Cf. Marc Paul, 'The Dongbei: the new chi immigration in Paris', in: Pal Nyiri & Igor Saveliev eds., *Globalizing Chinese Migration: trends in Europe and Asia*, 120-125.

¹² For more details please consult with the following books: [in English] Li Minghuan, *We Need Two Worlds: Chinese Immigrant Associations in a Western Society* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 1999); [in Chinese] Li Minghuan, *Onzhou Huaqiao shi* (A history of Chinese immigrants in Europe; Beijing: Zhongguo Huaqiao chubanshe 2002).

Table 1: Statistics of Chinese immigrants in Europe (1935-1997)

NATION	1935	1955	1965	1975	1985	1995	1997
Britain	8000	3000	45000	120000	230000	250000	250000
France	17000	2000	6000	90000	210000	200000	300000
Netherlands	8000	2000	2353	30000	60000	120000	100000
Germany	1800	500	1200	8000	30000	100000	110000
Belgium	500	99	565	2000	11400	20000	30000
Italy	274	330	700	1000	5000	60000	100000
Spain	273	132	336	2000	5000	21000	30000
Austria		30		1000	6000	12000	20000
Portugal	1200	120	176	300	6800	4700	5000
Demark	900	900		1000	3753	6500	6000
Luxemburg		1	10	20	200	100	
Switzerland	148	30	120	1500	6000	7500	
Greece		2	16	10	130	300	
Ireland						10000	
Sweden		2347 in total		1000	9000	12000	
Norway				500	1000	2000	
Finland						1000	
Poland	139					1500	
Czechoslova kia	250					10000	
Hungary						20000	15000
Total	38484	1149 1	56476	258330	584283	858600	966000

Sources:

- 1935: Report by The Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee, Republic of China. The statistics for Spain was originally marked ‘Spain and other countries’.
- 1955: ZGQZXH (Overseas Chinese Society), *Jinri qiaoping* (Overseas Chinese Affairs Today; Taipei: Zhongguo Qiaozheng Xuehui 1956).
- 1965-1995: OCEYB, *Huaqiao jingji nianjian*.
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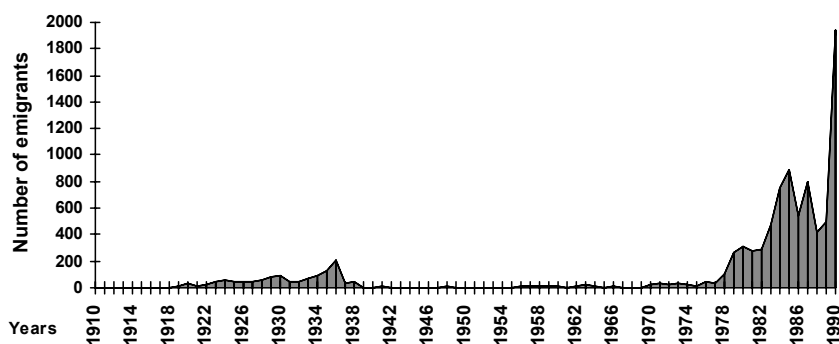
1997: The relevant figures were collected by a nation-to-nation investigation in 1997, when I was the principal investigator of the project The Chinese Community in Europe, sponsored by the Dutch Ministry of Public Health Wellbeing and Sports (VWS) and authorized by the European Federation of Chinese Organizations (EFCO).¹³

Table 2: PRC nationals regularized and its proportion among total numbers regularized

Nation	1990	1991	1996	1997	1998	2000
France				7600		
Chinese: Total				9.8%		
Italy	8300		8900		n.a.	
Chinese: Total	3.8%		6.0%			
Spain		4200	1400			n.a
Chinese: Total		3.8%	6.6%			
<i>TOTAL</i>	30400					

Source: OECD, *Annual Report 2001* (Paris: OECD 2001) 82.

Chart 1: Emigration waves rising in Wencheng county (1910-1990)



Source: sorted out from the relevant statistics provided in: Li Zhu ed., *Wencheng xian zhi* (Wencheng county chronicles; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1996).

13 Considering most Chinese in former Soviet Union lived in its far east, a geographic Asian district, the figures concerning the Chinese in former Soviet Union are not included.