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Transiting (in) Shanghai: High-skilled professionals from Spain to China

ABSTRACT

The last decade of transformations in global economy have made international migration between China and Spain increasingly popular. The ongoing developmental pathways of the two countries – with China becoming more economically prosperous and Spain struggling to deal with financial crisis – have led to more skilled workers moving from Spain to China in search of better life opportunities. This article aims to capture new mobility flows from Spain to China that involve two groups of Spanish high-skilled professionals: Chinese migrants' descendants socialized in Spain and Spanish adults born to non-Chinese Spanish families. Drawing on semi-structured interviews the article makes a comparison between these two groups in terms of the aims of migration and the working experience in Shanghai. The main reasons for moving to China, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, were to develop professional careers and to gain qualified experience that might prove advantageous for their future life. For them, China is a transitional space in their professional mobility. Therefore, in our study the presence of migrants' descendants in their parents' home country cannot be described by the notions of 'return migration', 'ethnic return' and 'second-generation return'.

KEYWORDS

mobilities
migration
laboral trajectories
ethnicity
transnational socialization
transient migration

1. INTRODUCTION: NEW TRENDS IN MOBILITY FROM SPAIN TO CHINA

> I don't know if it is because I was brought up in this family setting that I am more willing to move, or because nowadays society has changed, and people are more willing to move. Because I see a lot of people like me and they don't have to be Chinese, really.
>
> (Male of Chinese descent in Spain)

Central Shanghai is an international *ethnoscape* (Appadurai 1990) made up of highly skilled expatriates, foreign students and international migrants looking for job opportunities, and domestic migrants and Shanghai locals who live and work abroad and return to their city from time to time. Although this ethnoscape is rather common to Chinese megacities, Shanghai is generally regarded as the most 'westernized' metropolis in China. The city's westernized features are often interpreted in the context of the historical presence of a foreign population, which has truly shaped the life of its urban architecture and aesthetic. For our informants, Shanghai's position as China's 'westernized city' *par excellence* emphasizes the historical relationship between the Chinese development of modernity and the influx of foreign practices, commodities and ideas (Ong and Nonini 1996; Yeh 1997).

Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted in Shanghai from December 2016 to May 2017, this article explores the experiences of high-skilled professionals who have moved to the city from Spain. During the last decade, migration flows between China and Spain have changed and are becoming increasingly fluid and multidirectional due to ongoing transformations in the global economy, which have particularly been triggered by the global financial crisis in 2007, which led to major recessions in the Spanish economy. With China still remaining prosperous in economic development and Spain struggling through the economic crisis, more people are eager to move from Spain to China in search of better life opportunities. The presence of Spanish people in China is not new, but it is notable that over the last decade the migration flows from Spain to China have increased.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were twelve Spanish companies registered in Shanghai.[1] But such business connections were largely lost until Spain established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1973. During the 1970s, the Spanish presence in China involved mainly diplomats and professionals working as journalists. Besides, we could find few students learning Chinese language, literature and culture, as well as traditional medicine.[2] During the 1980s, the situation began to change due to the Chinese government's opening-up reforms that sought to promote foreign direct investment. The transport service company ALSA, which started operating in China in 1984, is a well-known example of Spanish companies in Asia. Many of these foreign companies opened offices in China and employed western expatriate workers, including technicians, managers, and executives, to work in the branch offices in China.

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s triggered further liberation of the world economy. It brought more western professionals to work in China. The internationalization and relocation of Spanish companies in China occurred relatively late compared with their western counterparts. However, the number of Spanish expatriates professionals continued to grow, especially in the more developed area of China (Soler 2003; Fanjul 2013). A total of 50 per cent of the current Spanish companies in China were set up between

1. For a detailed historical account of Spanish presence in China and Shanghai see Ortells-Nicolau (2018).
2. For a summary of the presence of Spanish in China since the 1980s see Sáiz López (2017).

1985 and 2007. Since 2000, there has been an increase in both the number of employees and the staff turnover rate in Spanish companies. Currently there are around 200 Spanish companies in China, which are mainly oriented to transport, marketing and to provide business and legal services (ICEX 2016).

Today, the international labour market in Shanghai, in which our Spanish informants work, is made up of international companies from a wide range of corporate sectors that operate in the city and its surroundings. Half of the Spanish companies in China are located in what may be called greater Shanghai, which includes cities located in the neighbouring provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. An example of one such place is the Kunshan industrial estate in Jiangsu Province, where many branches of Spanish companies are located. This area of greater Shanghai is one of the most prosperous and dynamic areas of China, where many European and Spanish professionals have been drawn to work. Over the last ten years, the migration flows between China and Spain have become more heterogeneous, complex and multidirectional. We note that since 2010 there has been a growing diversity of Spanish high-skilled professionals working in China. More specifically, the Spanish people in China include not only western expatriates sent by their 'parent companies' in Spain but also workers in various sectors who differ in working status, age and ethnic backgrounds.

This article aims to capture these patterns of new mobility from Spain to China. We focus on contemporary mobility flows from Spain to China that involve two groups of Spanish workers who have different backgrounds in terms of ethnicity and socialization: (1) Chinese descendants born and/or socialized in Spain and (2) Spanish adults born to non-Chinese Spanish families in Spain.[3]

Most of the individuals born to Chinese families in Spain are descendants of migrants from the south-east rural Zhejiang province, mainly from the area around Qingtian and Wenzhou. Since the 1980s, new migration flows from these Zhejiang areas to Southern Europe have re-shaped the Chinese communities in Spain. It was mainly a chain migration based on small family business models, namely restaurants and bars, garment shops, bazaars and import-export businesses (Beltrán Antolín 1998, 2003; Beltrán Antolín and Sáiz López 2013). Against this setting, Chinese migrants' descendants have been socialized in a family entrepreneurial background that influenced their transnational labour trajectories. In the last few years, scholarly work has explored the emerging role of migrants' descendants in the transnational space between China and the different European countries in which Chinese families from the Zhejiang province have settled since the 1980s (Wang 2019; Masdeu Torruella 2014).

The main reasons that the Spanish gave for moving to China, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, were to develop their professional careers and to gain qualified experience that might prove advantageous for their future professional life in China, Spain or other countries.[4] We should note that according to the respondents, Shanghai was mostly regarded as a temporary home, a place in which they only intended to stay for a few years. In her recent ethnography on young expatriates in Shanghai, Sander (2016) talks about how Shanghai offers foreigners a 'transient emplacement' in everyday lives, even though foreigners and members of the heterogeneous transnational capitalist class in Shanghai are craving for the so-called 'new Shanghainese' identity in the context of a global city (Farrer 2010).

The present research is based on a comparison between the two groups in terms of the aims of migration and the working experience in Shanghai. In this

3. Amelia Sáiz López conducted fieldwork interviews with Spanish people of non-Chinese descent from November 2016 to February 2017 and Irene Masdeu Torruella interviewed migrants of Chinese descent from April to May 2017.

4. In this article, when we use the adjective 'Spanish' we are referring to those people who are raised in Spain irrespective of their family background and ethnic features. When we need to stress differences between the two groups we will specify the ethnic descent of the informants.

article we explore factors such as ethnic appearance and previous exposures to the Chinese culture and society, and language skills that may influence the career paths and personal life in China of the two social groups. In so doing, the article shows that what motivates the Spanish to move to China and what they experience as 'culture shock' are not significantly different between those of Chinese descent and those who are not. By analysing Chinese descent and those of non-Chinese descent as social actors of the same migration flow, this article also challenges the traditional view of the flow of migrants' descendants towards their parents' country as 'ethnic homecomings' (Stefansson 2004) or 'second-generation return' (King and Christou 2008, 2009). We argue that such concepts fail to understand Chinese descent as having identities rooted in the place where they were socialized. The study aims to emphasize the often-overlooked sense of belonging that Chinese descents have for the places where they grow up, which has been analysed by Masdeu Torruella (2014).

The first part of the article will describe the socio-demographic profile of the subjects interviewed, focusing on their motivation of moving to China. In the second part, respondents' working situation at the time of interviews will be described and analysed. Finally, we will ask about the role of ethnicity and mobility that shape the transitional lives of these Spanish workers in Shanghai.

2. SPANISH IN SHANGHAI: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND WORK PROFILE

The fieldwork was carried out in Shanghai and consisted of interviews with 42 people. Respondents were aged between 20 and 48 years and were interviewed in semi-public settings such as cafeterias and restaurants. As shown in the table, the age range of our respondents was mostly 20–39 years, with just six informants being older than 40 years of age at the time of the interview.

People of Chinese descent usually moved to Shanghai from Spain at a younger age because China has a particularly important role in their transnational socialization (Nyíri 2014; Masdeu 2014). As can be seen in the table, of the nineteen people interviewed who were younger than 30, fourteen are of Chinese descent.

	Age			**Family situation**			**Working situation**			
	20-29	30-39	+ 39	Single	Couple	With children	Entrepreneur	Expat	Employee	Student
Male	3	6	4	6	6	2	3	2	6	1
Female	2	5	1	3	2	2	0	3	3	1
Subtotal	5	11	5	9	8	4	3	5	9	2
Male descendants	5	5	0	7	2	1	3	1	5	1
Female descendants	9	1	1	6	4	0	1	0	10	0
Subtotal	14	6	1	13	6	1	4	1	15	1
Total	19	17	6	22	14	5	7	6	24	3

Table 1: Socio-demographic and work profile.

In terms of martial status, most of them were single (in total, thirteen men and nine women) while fourteen were married without children (eight men and six women), who arrived in Shanghai with their partners or visited their partners following their move to the city. Of the families with children, we found four cases of family migration from Spain to China, and one case of a family formed in Shanghai by a Spanish of Chinese descent. Families with children had moved to Shanghai because the men had been relocated by their Spanish companies; these men had held middle management posts to supervise the work of their companies' branches in China for several years (the usual length of contract was three years).

Many of the people who moved to Shanghai had worked in Spain or other European cities before. At the time of our fieldwork, the majority of our respondents were employed (24 people) by companies in Shanghai. We interviewed four men and one woman who moved to Shanghai from Spain on international assignments for their multinational companies, and two women who moved to Shanghai from other Asian countries in a similar way. They may be considered expatriates who were transferred to Shanghai from Spain or other countries by their parent companies. There was only one Spanish expatriate of Chinese descent, who had worked in Spain for a year before he came to Shanghai. In terms of the working conditions, expatriates were the most privileged among the Spanish skilled workers in Shanghai.

Western expatriates, as the articles of Camenisch and Suter show in this special issue, usually earn high salaries and enjoy very good welfares in the local and international labour market, which includes housing allowance, education subsidies for their children in international schools, holiday travels for home visiting, insurance package of international health care and a chauffeur-driven car. But in the last few years, it has become far less common for Spanish skilled workers to enjoy such privileges in China. This is especially the case after the economic crises that began in 2007. As we have described in the introduction, the crisis led to the emergence of more Spanish companies in China; while this means that more Spanish professionals have become available to be employed in Shanghai, we should note that these companies actually tend to offer fewer privileges to the employees. As one of our respondents stated:

> Well, 10 to 15 years ago the expats that came here, they came with a very specific job, highly professional, with a very good salary, able to bring their families over and live as expats. Now we are all immigrants, we all work to pay our rents, on an ordinary salary, working for a company that might fire you just like that, and when it does, forget about marriage and kids, because in Shanghai on ten thousand Yuan you can't do that.
>
> (Female of Chinese descent, five years in Shanghai, employee)

Indeed, the conditions and benefits for Spanish employees, including salaries and in some cases financial assistance for housing and travel, can vary widely. Gaining any of these benefits depends on, among other things, the employee's ability to negotiate with the company, which is governed by the respondents' age, gender and working experience. This is especially the case in terms of salary negotiations:

> I know that as a young Spanish woman it's not the same as if I was a man the same age, if it's a man, he has a higher salary, and even a man my age, same qualifications, same skills, and all that, but I come from

> Spain not Germany, so they won't offer me the same because they know that the base line in my job is 1,500, 2,000, 3,000 euros, around that, and in Germany it's more.
>
> (Female, three years in Shanghai, employee)

There were also respondents who were self-employed and business owners, one woman and six men. The first group included self-employed individuals who offer their services directly to the clients in fields such as consultation, language classes and interior decoration. The second group included Spaniards who ran business consultancy for international clients in the fields of design and architecture. We also interviewed people without a formal work status in Shanghai, such as students or family members accompanying professional employees and those who worked informally as private teachers and event organizers.

It should also be noted that the international labour market in Shanghai is male-dominated. Even if Spanish women, irrespective of their ethnicity, felt respected and valued as professionals and bosses in their work team, they also found it intrinsically difficult to do what men could do and achieve in the Chinese context. One female respondent shared her experience:

> I don't do the same as my male colleagues, I go to dinners with politicians, with other companies and stuff… but I'm always the first one to leave, because I know that they'll go on to other places… or whatever, and I don't want to face those situations, or reach the point of saying: 'As I am equal to you, I have to go to all the places you go'.
>
> (Female, two years in Shanghai, professional expatriate)

3. WORKING IN SHANGHAI: MOBILE PROFESSIONAL CAREER PATHS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

People of different ages tend to be offered different types of work contracts, given that their skills and aptitudes are seen as different in the Chinese labour market. The youngest group of respondents in our study usually had master's degrees from universities in European Union countries. They began their careers in Europe before moving to China. Those who had obtained Spanish master's degrees had done so in English and so they were fluent in the *lingua franca* of global commerce and international relations. They stated that the job market in Shanghai is better than that in Europe, especially Spain. One of them said:

> Salaries and benefits, for qualified foreigners […] have always been very good, in comparison with […]. Evidently, when compared with the conditions of the locals, and with their countries of origin, with Europe. That is, the same person, with the same knowledge and experience, in Europe would earn less.
>
> (Male, seven years in Shanghai, employee)

Thus, for the majority of Spanish workers in Shanghai, the main reason for migrating to China was to find a job that would allow them to earn a high salary that they would not earn in Spain; they were also eager to learn from the experience in China to build up an international professional profile, which would be useful for their future career.

It is important to point out that irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, Spanish people who had moved to China over the past five years had carried

out job searches on an international scale, with China being only one of the many choices among other potential destinations. In fact, other European countries or large cities in South America are the first target destination for the young professionals who have left Spain since 2008 (González-Ferrer 2013). Still, those Spanish of Chinese descent seem to be relatively more actively in search of opportunities in China. They are conscious of China's potential as a destination and how their transnational socialization could have been an important factor that brought them to China.

Transnational mobility of Chinese migrants' descendants

The previous professional experience in Spain gained by the Spanish with Chinese descent whom we interviewed in Shanghai is very diverse. The jobs held by those of Chinese descent before moving to Shanghai ranged from tourist guides to shop assistants in luxury shops on major tourist shopping routes, posts in Spain-based companies with markets and clients in China, and in Chinese companies with strong roots in Spain, such as the mobile phone company Huawei. However, the Spanish of Chinese descent also share some common understandings of the Chinese job market with the other Spanish in China.

While they were looking for a job in China from Spain, many of them consulted friends and acquaintances who had gone through a similar process and were already working in China. In this way, new transnational networks of contacts and information were being used to obtain information about the characteristics and conditions of the labour market in China.[5] It can be said that a new transnational niche in the ethnic labour market has been created by these people with a dual Chinese-Spanish socialization.

One of the 'best' job options for those of Chinese descent is to apply to work in Spanish companies that are strongly connected to both Chinese and international markets. Such companies usually see these young people as highly valuable professionals, who have the ability to 'be Chinese or Spanish' when required by the business needs of a particular context. This supposed versatility gives our respondents added value in the global labour market.

To be versatile in this way, fluency in Chinese is indispensable. However, such fluency is much less common among those of Chinese descent than is usually assumed. Those who gain the best posts in Spanish companies orientated to the Chinese market are those who master a good level of spoken and written Chinese, in addition to being Spanish speakers – that is, those socialized in Spain and with international master's degrees in specialist fields (economics, ADE, etc.) and excellent proficiency in English. In other words, the better their Chinese, the more they are valued and the better the work opportunities available to them in the national and international market in Shanghai.

In this respect, it is important to take into account that the majority of Chinese descendants in Spain spoke the regional dialect of the place of origin of their parents.[6] During their childhood and adolescence many of them learnt the rudiments of Mandarin in after-school and weekend classes or during their summer trips to China (Masdeu Torruella 2014). However, the low level of the weekend language classes in Spain, together with the general reluctance to learn the language of their parents' country of origin, meant many Spanish of Chinese descent did not pick up the Chinese language.

Conscious of the need to perfect their Chinese to be more competitive in the global labour market, some of them decided to travel to China and dedicated time to study Mandarin on completing their undergraduate or

5. This mechanism and process find a parallel in the transnational information networks that their parents' generation established to emigrate from China to Spain during the 1980s–90s and the 2000s (Masdeu Torruella 2014).

6. Most of the interviewers were descendants from migrants coming from the rural area of Qingtian in south Zhejiang province.

master's degrees. This decision was often taken following the advice of their Chinese parents. This had a significant influence on our respondents when they considered setting up new business and professional projects.

> Um… what happened was… well I was looking for a job in Spain and… I went to Madrid for an interview, yes and… I almost got it. I almost got the job in Madrid. But they needed someone with good Chinese because they wanted to send me to Shanghai. I was honest and I said 'look… my Chinese isn't good enough for architecture'. I think I was too honest… then I said, what should I do? Go to China? Study Chinese? I want to give it a try and find a job there […].
>
> (Female, one year in Shanghai, employee)

The experience of this respondent is illustrative of the journey of those of Chinese descent in two ways. First, it reveals that they start to consider China as a migrant destination after having seen their initial expectations of getting work in Spain busted. Second, it reveals the pressure and anxiety experienced by these young people in the labour market as they are stereotypically expected to be fluent in Chinese. In sum, Shanghai's labour market generally assumes that those of Chinese descent are able to manage themselves in both Spanish and Chinese sociocultural settings.

Spanish as western high-skilled professionals in Shanghai

Many Spanish of non-Chinese descent attended Mandarin courses when they first arrived in Shanghai. But they usually dropped out from these courses after some time. While Spanish workers of Chinese descent were generally expected to be fluent in Chinese, Spanish of non-Chinese descent came to realize that knowledge in Chinese language was not essential in developing their professional activity and their social life in Shanghai.

We found that it was mainly because the Spanish of non-Chinese descent were asked to conduct their professional duties in China through the mediation of the so-called 'westernized Chinese', who are Chinese that have received education in English-speaking countries in the West. In Shanghai's international labour market, most of these Spanish of non-Chinese descent are highly qualified foreign professionals trained in Anglo-Saxon countries. They are required to conduct their professional work in English only, with assistance provided from the westernized Chinese in the companies.

Westernized Chinese have first-hand knowledge of western business environments, which helps them obtain jobs in international companies where they earn a higher salary than in Chinese companies – although not as high as the salaries earned by qualified western professionals. However, this salary difference does not entirely exclude them from the 'expatriated community' in Shanghai, which is considered 'an hybrid or mixed community of foreigners and Chinese' (Farrer 2019: 14). In contrast to Chinese who have not received a western education, westernized Chinese are more valued in this kind of international companies.

As such, the Spanish professional expatriates were required to supervise Chinese workers who neither spoke English nor had been socialized in a western company setting. To perform this role, the Spanish workers need an intermediary to translate for them both linguistically and culturally. In reality, communication was not easy or smooth, and resentment and

frustration were common in this working environment. As described by a Spanish expatriate worker:

> I'm operations manager, so I have a staff of 60, all Chinese. And it's hard, because its… you can't trust some people, you know. You realise that it turns out that maybe someone you trusted, and well… they stabbed you in the back. You know? They sold you out or…
>
> (Male, four years in Shanghai, professional expatriate)

The burden of working in an unfamiliar context with the need to establish trust with an intermediary, we believe could be a significant reason why Spanish of non-Chinese descent did not renew their contract and ended up spending less time in China. Interestingly, the Spanish of Chinese descent did not have the help of any Chinese intermediaries, which seemingly led to more effective communications and perhaps higher productivity in the workplace.

Shanghai as a transitional space

For the majority of the subjects of this research their stay in China was temporary. For them the chance to be part of a global metropolis where 'something is always happening' – implying that there are lots of opportunities in the working domain and personal life experience – was the main motivation behind making the most of their time in Shanghai.

Qualified Spanish professionals, irrespective of their ethnicity, planned to leave Shanghai for other work destinations that would be advantageous for their future careers. They also hoped that they did not need to return to Spain immediately after Shanghai. Thus, their stay in China formed part of an ongoing employment strategy in the global labour market in which they hoped to benefit from their time in the international labour market in Shanghai. For instance, for those of Chinese descent, the experience in China was oriented to take advantage of the potential development of businesses and commercial activities in which they could act as a 'bridge between China and Spain'. Looking for work or developing a business related to China was one way of profiting from what marked them out as different both in China and in Spain. Indeed, the metaphor of a bridge, a reference to the added value of their dual identity as Chinese Spanish, appears as a leitmotif in the narratives of many of those of Chinese descent.

4. CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY AND MOBILITY AMONG HIGH-SKILLED SPANISH PROFESSIONALS IN SHANGHAI

Spanish who moved to Shanghai to work in international companies found themselves in a context of growing transience in the global economy. The specific context and the circumstances of China as a country with increasing internationalization of the labour market are key to understanding what has motivated the Spaniards, both with or without Chinese ancestry, to move to Shanghai.

As we have explored, Spanish of Chinese descent have been socialized in a transnational space with a different degree of contact with China and Chinese culture during their childhood (Louie 2006; Levitt 2009; Nyíri 2014; Somerville 2008; Masdeu Torruella 2014). We have also seen that Spanish of non-Chinese descent in Shanghai were not required to speak Chinese or become familiar with China's business cultures. The international Chinese market seems to stereotypically value them as European professionals who

have specialized skills that no Chinese could offer. The same assessment was not applied to Spanish workers of Chinese descent. Additional knowledge is required of them in the occupational environment. On most occasions, they were requested to 'be Chinese or Spanish' as they were assumed to be equally fluent in Chinese, Spanish and above all, English. For this reason, those Spanish of Chinese descent who grew up in Spain and who are not fluent in Chinese tended to work hard to learn the Chinese language when they began their professional careers in Shanghai. Those who have been schooled in China and Spain, and who are fluent in both languages, have a greater possibility of being successful in their professional projects.

Therefore, we conclude that the different outcomes between the two groups that we studied can be largely attributed to the essentialist ideas about 'Chinese' and 'western', which are not necessarily related to our respondents' experiences, skills, knowledge and sense of belongings. Hence, our article seeks to problematize the meritocratic measurements that have been used to assess the professional skills of foreigners in the Shanghai labour market, which has been highlighted in the recent literature (e.g. Le Bail and Théry 2017). As our empirical work shows, hierarchies that have been defined by ethnic and national origins are still important when we attempt to understand the full complexity of foreigners' working experience in Shanghai.

For Spanish of Chinese descent, their stay in Shanghai was considered to be a period of transition, gaining experience in the field of Chinese business as they sought to start their own business in the future. While working in Shanghai, they seemed to adopt a cultural strategy of what Spivak (1985) calls 'strategic essentialism'. That is, they revalorized their Chinese identity and socialization as they became aware that it could be advantageous for their professional and entrepreneurial future.

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