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# **Entrepreneurial and Transnational Socialization among Descendants of Chinese Migrants: A Cross-country Study on New Transnational Mobilities Between Europe and China**

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## **Abstract**

The rise of China on the global economic and geopolitical stage has given rise to crucial transformations in transnational mobility and international relationships between Europe and China, which are significant for Chinese migrants' descendants in Europe. Although the transnational relationships with their parents' country of origin during childhood have been documented by numerous researchers, less attention has been paid to the new mobilities undertaken by young adults of Chinese origin. Based on a multi-sited ethnographic study carried out in Spain, France, and China, this chapter analyses the mobility from Europe to China undertaken by migrants' adult descendants for study and work. We argue that their transnational socialization, together with their families' entrepreneurial backgrounds and the rise of the Chinese economy, may lead some descendants to move to their parents' country of origin. Beyond the economic motivations, we also analyse the symbolic meaning of these mobilities to the intergenerational relationships within the family. This new flow of migration to China offers migrants' children a space to rethink their identities in light of their transnational socialization.

**Keywords:** Chinese Migration in Europe, Transnational Mobilities, Intergenerational Transmission, Migrants' Descendants, Entrepreneurship.

## **Introduction**

The rise of China on the global economic and geopolitical stage has brought about crucial transformations in transnational mobility and international relationships between Europe and China. Over the past two decades, the directions of mobility have reversed, and China has become an emerging destination for international migration. Chinese economic growth has attracted an increasing amount of international migration, making China an emerging migrant-receiving country.

This chapter analyses the transformation of transnational labour and economic activities from an intergenerational perspective and explores the underlying logic motivating migrants' descendants' mobility from Europe to China. The chapter draws from empirical research and in-depth interviews conducted within the scope of Chinese migration in France and Spain, which are two of the main destinations of Zhejiangnese migrants in Europe since the 1980s. As we will show throughout this chapter, the daughters and sons of Chinese migrants in these two countries play a significant role not only at local and national levels, but also transnationally, as China and Europe are increasingly linked through the transformation of traditional transnational practices and emerging new mobilities.

We identify two types of motivations to move to China, both linked to intergenerational relationships. First, most of the migrants' descendants who decide to move to China are searching for better opportunities to develop their professional career. Whereas some of them are willing to develop their own career beyond the family businesses, others prefer to continue their parents' transnational business and innovate within it. In both cases, the migration to China involves capitalising on their transnational socialization. Moreover, beyond economic opportunities and pragmatic reasons, a second dimension of their transnational mobility decision-making is more symbolic, subjective, and emotional, and is related to identity building and transnational belonging. These young French and Spanish of Chinese origin are striving for better intergenerational understanding within their families, regarding both their family memories of migratory paths and their social-historical backgrounds in Chinese society. Hence, this mobility to China also offers them a space for re-building their identity.

In the first part of the chapter, we offer an overview of the contemporary background of Chinese people in Spain and France. We also review the current state of research on transnationalism and the theoretical approaches to the new mobilities of migrants' descendants to their parents' country of origin. This discussion leads to a reflection on China's recent role as a migrant-receiving country.

Secondly, we describe the methodology and explain the theoretical framework based on the concept of "transmission" (Bertaux and Delcroix 2009; de Gourcy 2005; Fresnoza-Flot 2018; Santelli 2009) to analyse the transnational trajectories between Europe and China of Chinese migrants' descendants.

In the third part, the empirical findings are presented and discussed. First, we examine the role of the family business in the migrants' descendants' socialization, and the impact of these businesses on their own migration as adults. Secondly, we analyse the professional itineraries of migrants' descendants in China, within the family business and beyond. After that, we examine the symbolic and emotional aspect of this mobility to China. Finally, conclusions and suggestions for future research on this topic are discussed.

### **Current Research on Transnational Mobilities from an Intergenerational Perspective**

#### *An Overview of Chinese Migration to and in Europe: Continuities and Changes*

Since the 1980s, France and Spain have been involved in transnational links with China fostered by Chinese migrants from southeastern Zhejiang province (Beltran 2003; Ma Mung 2000). Since then, the importance of Chinese migrants and their descendants both in the local and transnational sphere have increased.

Beyond minor regional differences, chain migration, family reunion, and the development of different types of family business are defining features of Chinese migration, both in Spain and in France. Often mobilising a social network of extended kinship and compatriots, Zhejiang migrants begin by working within a co-ethnic environment—a business owned by a member of their community—until they are able to initiate their own family business. The traditional ethnic niches, or the main economic sectors where Chinese migrants have developed family businesses, were related to catering, clothing, and garment stores (Beltrán 2000; Beltrán and Sáiz 2009; Z. Li 2021; Ma Mung 1994).

In the last decade, the composition of Chinese populations (migrants from the PRC and their descendants) in Spain and France have become increasingly diverse, reflecting the changes in mobility patterns which have brought about the growing presence of students and highly skilled professionals (Liu and Wang 2020; Wang 2021). After graduating, some enter the local job market, while others choose to start their own companies.

Shaped by their high education level and mastery of various skills, they are able to innovate business models linking Chinese commercial resources and a large public of customers sometimes going beyond the Chinese community (Wang 2020). For example, such young entrepreneurs who are skilled Chinese migrants have opened new Chinese restaurants offering a wide range of culinary flavours from all over China. Others started

companies specializing in food delivery. In 2017, a group of young skilled migrants in Paris established the app platform “Alorsfaim” (now renamed “Waysia”) which directly promoted physical restaurants of all sizes to Chinese and overseas Chinese through digital marketing. It touches the entire supply chain: food suppliers, restaurant launches, and delivery of final products (Wang and Chen 2021).

Indeed, in the digital age, the traditional model of international trade has been profoundly modified. Cross-border e-commerce has been embraced by Chinese consumers, epitomized by a new mode of purchase, called in Chinese *daigou* 代购, characterized by the intermediary role played by Chinese overseas sales agents who facilitate sales between foreign manufacturers/traders and Chinese consumers. A range of skilled migrants—predominantly women who arrived in France and Spain after the 2000s—work as *daigou* (Wang 2017). A similar phenomenon is observed in other European countries (Sandal 2023).

However, a particularly significant transformation has been the growing role of migrants’ children, in both the local and the transnational space. These descendants of migrants, who have been raised, educated and socialized in Europe, are reaching adulthood and developing their own professional careers. This generational turn is profoundly contributing to changing identities, representations, and economic activities of ethnic Chinese in Europe.

For the descendants of Chinese migrants who were born and raised in Europe, certain economic niches or enclaves are still important for their professional careers. On the one hand, due to the new mobilities from China to Europe, migrants’ descendants have found new economic and professional opportunities in the real estate sector (Gaspar and de Haro 2020) or in the tourism sector (working as tour guides, clerks, and shop assistants for luxury shops). In both cases, their socialization as Spanish or French in the schools, and their Chinese informal education at home, mark important assets in their entry into the local Spanish or French economy. On the other hand, there are also migrants’ descendants that decide to continue their family businesses (restaurants, import-export) but who modernize them and incorporate changes in the structure, design, and taste in order to break with the traditional images of overseas Chinese (see the analysis below). Our informants have also explained that when trying to find jobs outside the traditional Chinese economic niche, multi-national or European company managers and directors still see them above all as Chinese and they are often hired for their added value as translators and cultural mediators.

Due to this emphasis on the Chineseness of migrants' descendants by European managers, they could be subjected to discrimination at the workplace (Wang et al. 2023).

Finally, in the past few years, transnational practices and the directions of mobility between Europe and China have changed as a result of global structural shifts and, in particular, the rapid growth and globalization of the Chinese economy (Benton and Gomez 2014; Masdeu Torruella 2020; Wang 2019). In this context, migrants' descendants have also chosen to move and develop professional careers in China.

Our research is informed by recent criticisms of the term "second-generation migrants" to refer to the children born to migrant families in the country of destination, arguing that this term is an oxymoron since such children are usually not, in fact, migrants (King and Christou 2008, 2; Rumbaut 2004, 1165). Indeed, not all the children born to Chinese families identify themselves in this way, and we argue that using the concept "second-generation migrants" fails to understand Europeans of Chinese descent as having identities rooted in the place where they were born and/or socialized. We believe that nomenclature is not innocent, and academics also have a responsibility to break with taken for granted realities. Hence, in this chapter we use other expressions such as "migrants' descendants," "children of migrants," or "European of Chinese origin," which we believe carry less problematic connotations.

### **Transnational Practices and Mobilities of Migrants' Descendants**

The concept of transnationalism in migration studies was introduced by Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994, 1995). They defined transnationalism as the process, practices, and networks through which *transmigrants* forge and develop social relationships that link the respective societies of origin and destination. The concept was rapidly disseminated and became the prevalent approach within migration studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It opened up the way to understand the lives of migrants beyond the static and dualistic perspective that used to define the research on migration (Levitt 2001; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Since then, researchers have deepened the study of transnationalism by investigating a wide diversity of relationships, connections, and back and forth movements that migrants develop between the receiving and sending countries for different reasons such as economic, educational, religious, or for kinship and care. They have also

problematized the concept of home and identity as realities linked until then to a unique territory (Ehrkamp 2005; Leung 2007; Levitt 2004).

The transnationalism approach acknowledges that migration not only impacts the lives of those who migrate but also of the family members who stay behind. As Levitt (2001) pointed out more than twenty years ago, physical or geographical movement is not a prerequisite for engaging in transnational practices. In the context of Chinese migration, Chu (2010) stated that one can be transnational and mobile without actually moving and leaving one's country. In other words, the flow and movement can be of people but also information, capital, and symbols, and this is what forms the transnational space encompassing the circularity between the localities of origin and destination (Faist 2008).

The question whether and how transnationalism would extend beyond the first generation of migrants and what the relationship between sending and receiving countries will be in the future has been gaining importance since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Scholars have increasingly referred to the changing characteristics of transnationalism over time and generations (Gowricharn 2009; Lee 2011; Levitt 2009; Somerville 2008). Lee (2011) considers that the above-mentioned difference between transnational migration or mobility of people, and transnational social practices that don't necessarily require physical displacement is especially important when focusing on migrants' descendants, as their socialization might involve a variety of transnational practices that not always encompass physical mobility across borders.

We identify two main areas of inquiry on the transnationalism of the children of migrants. First, we find works focusing on the transnational practices and activities that involve the transnational socialization without the need to physically move across borders (Louie 2006; Marsden 2014; Nyíri 2014). This body of research focuses on analysing those transnational practices aimed at acquiring the social and symbolic capital related to the parent's country of origin from the local setting of the host country. For instance, for Chinese migrants' descendants in Europe, studying Chinese language and culture on the weekends in the cities where they live, is a relevant practice of their transnational socialization that doesn't involve displacement across borders (Masdeu Torruella 2014, 2020; Nyíri 2014; Wang 2021).

Secondly, researchers have also analysed transnational practices that involve physical mobility, especially by examining migrants' descendants regular or occasional visits

to their parents' hometown and country of origin in different geographical contexts such as India (Gowricharn 2009; Somerville 2008), Greece and Cyprus (King, Christou, and Teerling 2009), Pakistan (Bivand 2011), and China (Louie 2004, 2006; Masdeu Torruella 2020). Some young migrants' descendants visit their grandparents and relatives regularly during summer holidays and, sometimes the parents take the opportunity to send their children to study the language of their family (Masdeu Torruella 2020). We can find also visits to the parents' country of origin that go beyond the family circle and involve institutional programs addressed to "discovering roots" (Beck 2016; Louie 2004) and occasional visits to attend funerals, weddings, or other family ceremonies (Masdeu Torruella 2014). All these practices are important to reinforce their family links, and their symbolic and cultural capital.

Beyond family related visits during childhood and teenage years, scholars have also focused on the different types of transnational practices and involvement maintained by adult descendants with their parents' hometowns. Reflecting on migration flows of Greek-Americans and Greek-Germans to their ancestral home in Greece and Cyprus, King and Christou have underlined what they call the "migration turnaround" in those countries that have experienced a rapid economic development in few decades, and have gone from having mass emigration to having mass immigration (2008). In a similar way, the new global position of China has changed and prompted new transnational links and mobilities of adult Chinese migrants' descendants in the US (Wang 2016, 2019) and in Europe (Masdeu Torruella 2020; Masdeu Torruella and Sáiz López 2019). In the case of Chinese international migration, within four decades the migration flows have changed due to the new socioeconomic background, and some of the children born to Chinese families who migrated to Europe at the end of the twentieth century to search for a better life overseas have already turn their sights to their parents' country of origin to ensure an upward social mobility and develop their careers.

### **China as a New Destination for Transnational Migration**

In recent decades, China's economic growth and its new position on the global stage have brought about changes in the country's relationship with international mobility that have been central to the country's socio-economic development since the 1980s.

International migration to China has been increasing both in numbers and in the diversity of people involved (Camenisch and Suter 2019; Farrer 2019; Pieke et al. 2019).



There is a growing presence of expatriates and highly skilled professionals working for multinational companies in the country's large cities, as well as small traders and unskilled workers from other Asian countries, Africa, and Latin America. Moreover, China "attracts more students than ever from all over the world" (Pieke et al. 2019).

The National Bureau of Statistics (*guojiatongjiju* 国家统计局) of China confirmed that for the first time, the sixth national population census of the People's Republic of China included foreign nationals who had been in the country for over three months. On that basis, by 2010 a total of 593,800 foreigners resided in mainland China. The census indicated that around half of international migrants in China were so-called expatriates, officially registered as "employees," and "entrepreneurs" who had started their own businesses. Moreover, of the foreigners holding a long-term residence permit, 200,000 had come to China for higher education, and 100,000 foreigners were of Chinese origin and/or had a Chinese spouse and had moved to China to be with their family, without necessarily intending to migrate long-term. Ten years later, the seventh national population census of the PRC indicated that in 2020, 845,697 foreigners resided in mainland China (National Bureau of Statistics 2021).

Although there have been major transformations in international migratory flows between China and the rest of the world, the presence of foreigners in China has so far received more attention among the Chinese authorities and Chinese researchers than within academic circles in the countries of emigration (Fang and Liang 2010; Huang, Gao, and Zhu 2013). The research carried out by Chinese sociologists and demographers has three main characteristics: first, it mostly draws on quantitative methodologies; second, it tends to approach transnational immigration phenomena through a descriptive urban geography prism; and finally, studies on foreigners in China are driven by the common goal of finding a solution to manage and integrate foreigners as part of the construction of China's harmonious society (*hexieshehui* 和谐社会) (Li Qing 2013: 146).

It is precisely within this new context and China's changing relationship to international migration that we must situate the country's emergence as a destination for international mobility among young descendants of Chinese migrants in Europe and the United States (Wang 2016).

## **International Entrepreneurship and Migrant Entrepreneurs' Mobilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The current international political, economic, and social context is continuously changing as a result of COVID-19. The pandemic had heavy impacts on economies and businesses—including international entrepreneurship—as it disrupted and reshaped the global supply chain (Zahra 2021). For transnational migrant entrepreneurs, mobilizing transnational social capital from their multiple embeddedness was one way to exploit emerging opportunities during the pandemic (Harima 2022). From the case of immigrant entrepreneurs in Portugal, Szczygiel, Nunes, and Ramos (2020) point to social support as a means of relevant business-related resources for immigrants in major crisis situations such as the COVID-19 outbreak. In this global context, the entrepreneurs working in China as well as the Chinese entrepreneurs based in Western countries all faced countless challenges and developed various strategies to cope with this unprecedented situation. Kefala and Lan (2022) examine two groups of young Western entrepreneurs' experiences of leaving China during the COVID-19 pandemic, either due to business failure or due to being stuck abroad when China closed its border to international travellers. Based on an empirical study carried out among Chinese entrepreneurs (first-generation migrants or their descendants) working in five different industrial sectors (import and export, retail, catering, hotel, and tobacco) of the French economy, Wang and Chen (2021) highlight three entrepreneurial transitions ("integrating online and offline businesses," "hiring beyond Chinese ethnic networks," and "paying attention to the local country's policy directions") previously made or partially made before the pandemic by some Chinese entrepreneurs helped them greatly reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic and enabled them to shift business patterns and commercial practices from offline operations to digital businesses. During the pandemic, two unprecedented business opportunities opened up in France: "fostering local production" and "seeking low-risk sectors" such as tobacco. These may be the new trends for Chinese entrepreneurs in France in the future.

For the descendants of Chinese entrepreneurs studied in this chapter, their mobility to China was interrupted due to China's border closure. Whatever their status (student, trainee, employee, entrepreneur), the project of mobility to China for a better professional career was suspended. For those already settled in China, given the difficulty of pursuing business in China, many have returned to Europe. On a symbolic and emotional level,

mobility to China was also revised, suspended, or prevented, given the closure of the country, the “zero-COVID” policies, and the increasingly complex geopolitical stakes.

### **Transmission: An Intergenerational Approach to Chinese Transnational Mobilities**

Although migrants and their descendants are sometimes pitched as opposites, they are in fact closely linked in the analysis of mobilities over time (Benton and Gomez 2014; Breier 2019; Somerville 2008). In this chapter, we adopt an intergenerational perspective to examine the continuities and changes between migrants and their descendants regarding their relationship with China, their professional trajectories, and the experience of migration.

The family serves as the primary socializing agent for individuals, and parent-child relationships are strongly marked by the intergenerational transmission of languages, attitudes, and behaviours. The same goes for migrant families, where the process of transmission is more complex, due to their diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

In the family, the child learns from his or her parents and assimilates, by mimicry, ways of being, relational practices, and know-how. The intergenerational transmission, whether voluntary or involuntary, which takes place in the daily experience of the relationship between child and parents, forms the basis of the child’s existence and socialization. In this chapter, to understand the transnational trajectories of the descendants of Chinese migrants, we articulate the concept of “transmission,” a valuable tool for analysing intergenerational relationships within migrant families (Bertaux and Delcroix 2009; de Gourcy 2005; Fresnoza-Flot 2018; Santelli 2009). The theoretical concept of “transmission” serves to analyse new mobilities and entrepreneurship trajectories among descendants of Chinese migrants in France and Spain on two levels.

First, we consider the transmission of entrepreneurship and its renewal—in other words, how family businesses have been transmitted across generations, and how Chinese descendants are changing the image of Chinese business in Europe as well as in China (Merchionne and Liu 2016). This approach involves examining not only “self-employed culture” within Chinese families from an intergenerational perspective, but also the historical shift in Chinese transnational family business in terms of image and the organization of work. We also consider how the children may view their parents’ migration as a model for how physical mobility can ensure upward social mobility.

Second, we examine the transmission of transnational mobility and experience. To this end, we explore how the new mobilities of descendants of Chinese migrants towards China afford a unique opportunity for sharing migratory experiences over generations within a family. The transmission of life stories, memories of migration, affections, and emotions related to transnational mobility effectively reduces the emotional distance between generations, repairs intergenerational misunderstandings and contributes to identity building (Mariani 2012; Wang 2021). In the following sections, we see how the decision to migrate to China among young Europeans of Chinese origin emerges at the crossroads between these two types of transmission (professional opportunities and mobility experiences).

### **Methodology and Data**

This paper is based on qualitative data from empirical research carried out with Chinese migrants' descendants moving to China from France and Spain. We carried out multi-sited fieldwork and conducted interviews in China (Shanghai, Beijing, and Qingtian), and in Europe (Paris and Barcelona).

We conducted interviews with 62 people of Chinese origin: 32 French and 30 Spanish. Interviewees were all born to families who migrated from Zhejiang or Fujian to Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, and their parents run small to medium size businesses (catering or import-export) in the European countries.

At the time the informants we interviewed moved to China, they all had at least bachelor's degrees and most had master's degrees. Most of the interviewees were born in France or Spain, and seven were born in China and migrated to Europe during their childhood. Most of our interviewees from Spain were taking their first steps in a professional career in China. By contrast, most of the French descendants of Chinese migrants whom we interviewed were older and the professional positions they occupied in China were not their first jobs after graduating.

The fieldwork with Spanish of Chinese origin grew out of an ethnographic study undertaken in Qingtian County (Zhejiang province) from 2011 to 2014, where we interviewed returnees as well as Chinese migrants and their children who were visiting their own or their parents' hometowns. The second stage of the research took place between 2016 and 2017 and involved fieldwork in Barcelona, Qingtian, and Shanghai to interview

migrants' descendants moving to their parents' country of origin for their careers. In Shanghai, we interviewed 20 Chinese descendants (eleven women and nine men) aged between 22 and 35 years old and ten more living in other smaller cities. They all were born to parents who had migrated from Qingtian County to Spain during the 1980s and 1990s.

The fieldwork with French of Chinese origin was also carried out in two stages. Starting in 2010, we met and interviewed 32 young adults in the Paris region (between 18 and 35 years old, two thirds of them were men and one third women) who had migrated from France to China. Building on the first survey, between 2011 and 2016 we again met with nine of the 32 interviewees during their stay in five Chinese cities (Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, and Beijing). In this second round, we conducted a total of fifteen interviews with them to better understand their international mobility and how they integrated a global approach in their social trajectories. In some cases, we also met and interviewed their family members living in China.

The interviews were conducted in French and Spanish, with uses of certain relevant words and terms in Chinese following the preference of interviewees. In response to the transformation and discontinuities in transnational mobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the two authors continued their fieldwork in both Spain and France. They engaged with migrants and their descendants to understand the changes in transnational connections and the emergence of new mobility patterns during the pandemic era.

Our approach differs from existing research carried out in China for at least two major reasons. First, we adopted a qualitative research methodology, carrying out multi-sited fieldwork in our respondents' native language—French or Spanish. Second, we analyse the transnational mobilities of Chinese migrants' descendants from the perspective of the intergenerational relationships within these families that settled in Europe. This original approach—top-down, based on individuals' biographical and social trajectories—allows us to shed light on new relationships between China and Europe that are usually analysed from a macro-sociological perspective.

### **Family Businesses as Spaces of Socialization**

Although the population of Chinese migrants' descendants in both France and Spain is widely diverse as regards gender, age, and ways of socializing within the transnational space, one of the most significant features that these individuals share is the family

business's central role in their socialization and in the configuration of their social identity. For young people born into Chinese families in Spain and France, the family business is a central space besides school for their socialization, especially during their childhood and adolescence.

As a young woman born to two Chinese parents in 1991 and raised in a small town in the south of Spain explained, the restaurant was a key space in her life:

From the age of six, I spent long hours in the restaurant. I spent my days in the warehouse, between the bottles of coke, the soy sauce, the vinegar, the rice... that was my home! And when I grew up a bit I already started helping out. I remember they put me on a box of coke bottles and I started helping to dry glasses, and then with other things... I virtually grew up in the restaurant! (interview with Tingting, Shanghai, April 2017).

For Zhejiangnese migrants' children who grew up in Spain, the store, the bazaar, the bar or the restaurant were central spaces of socialization during their childhood and adolescence. Many of them explained how they helped their parents in the afternoon after school and on weekends, and this responsibility created differences between them and their classmates born and raised in local Spanish families.

Yes, it was like this... Always thinking: "See, my friends aren't working, why should I stay here and work?" When we grew up, we realized that our people had to work very hard and that the family business was our life (interview with Eric, Shanghai, April 2017).

In France, similar processes were observed. Children of Chinese migrants who own shops or other small scale businesses spend a lot of time helping their parents after school. As these children acquire various linguistic, cultural, and social resources growing up in France, "inverted parenting" is frequent (Wang 2014). The children feel "required" to make themselves available to their parents to provide three types of inverted parenting: socio-cultural and linguistic help, administrative help, and economic help by supporting and working for the family business.

This was the case of Alex. Born in Wenzhou in 1987, he arrived in Paris in 1994. His mother had left for France in 1989 when Alex was 18 months old, and his father joined her two years later. As undocumented migrants, they both started working illegally in the garment industry until they were granted a residence permit in 1997, when they opened their first family business, a restaurant. Alex recounted:

Along with my studies, it was important to have the time and energy to take care of my parents' business. It was always like that: when I was in high school and my parents were working in the restaurant, back then already they would ask me to go to the restaurant every day after school because they didn't want to employ another waiter, and my presence ensured the customer relationship, because I could talk to French-speaking customers if need be (interview with Alex, Paris, March 2013).

Tingting, Eric, and Alex were all raised in a transnational context that included local Spanish or French culture at school and their Chinese cultural background at home. They were socialized in a family business environment and within dynamics of international mobility over generations as their parents often undertook trips back and forth to China. Being heirs to the spirit of entrepreneurship and the mobile experience of their parents, they made the decision, at different stages of their lives, to move to China.

### **The Professional Trajectories of Migrants' Descendants in the Global Age: Renewing Business Models and Social Representations**

Young people born in this context of family entrepreneurship experience different relationships with the family business throughout their adult life. Our research shows that in recent years, some French and Spanish of Chinese origin, particularly those with university degrees, have sought to build a career outside of the family business. Others have decided to take over the family business and transform it through innovation.

Against the backdrop of growing precariousness in Europe and the rise of the Chinese economy, however, young Europeans of Chinese descent see China as a new centre of a global economy, to which they can extend their professional and entrepreneurial activities.

We found that two paths are followed to move to China. The first is to work as an employee, which is considered the first step in a transnational professional career; the second is to continue the family business and renew it in the new transnational context.

#### *First Steps in China: a Career Beyond the Family Business*

Our informants referred to China as a “land of opportunity” and as a place to develop their career beyond the family business.

In Spain... either you continue with the family business, which, well, I believe for my generation, if you have a degree then it's impossible to go back. Unless you're doing it just to make money or that kind of thing. But if you have a university degree, going back is complicated. Going back to running the business I mean. That's why we've come to Shanghai (interview with Kelly, Shanghai, April 2017).

Some of the migrants' descendants we interviewed who are in their early and mid-twenties see a professional life outside the economic niche of Chinese migrants as a way to achieve upward social mobility. Kelly, like other descendants of Chinese migrants in Europe who moved to China between 2008 and 2016, saw China as a country with opportunities to develop her professional career as an employee for international companies or to start up new types of entrepreneurial activities beyond those businesses that have typically been associated with Chinese migrants in Europe (shops, restaurants, and bars).

Some of our informants moved to China with job contracts signed with international Spanish or French companies that were already conducting business in China. Others decided first to move to China to study Chinese for a year or so and from there to start seeking job opportunities, focusing either on Spanish or French companies based in China, or on Chinese international companies with a market or infrastructure in Europe. Even among our informants who attended Chinese language schools as children, some did not feel confident that their Chinese language skills were adequate to immediately enter a Chinese language workplace.

Tingting exemplifies the first case of migrants' descendants who found work at a European company in China. She studied architecture in Valencia and did an internship at a well-known firm in Barcelona. When she completed her internship in Spain, she tried to



build her career as an architect, but given the precarious labour market and the difficulties in finding a well-paid job in Barcelona, she had to return to the village where she grew up in the south of Spain. Her dilemma was a common one for Spanish youth regardless of their migrant trajectories due to the severe financial crises in Spain.

After spending a few months working in her parents' restaurant and contemplating the possibility of taking over the family business, she eventually decided to move to Shanghai. As she explained during our interview, she wanted to try one more time to establish a career as an architect before deciding to take over the family business and run the restaurant that her parents opened shortly before she was born. China seemed to be the place to make this last attempt. When we met Tingting in April 2017, she had just found a job at a German company's branch in China as an architect and interior designer after spending a few months studying Chinese.

While Tingting found a job at a European company, other young Spaniards of Chinese origin ended up working for Chinese companies focused on European markets—a clear reflection of the markets emerging as a result of global economic developments. Pablo started working for a Chinese real estate company with luxurious offices in a fancy building overlooking the Bund. At the young age of 26, he was already a regional director, and his duties were to find new clients and investment opportunities in Europe. Since starting to work for this company, he has been travelling back and forth between China and Europe.

These descendants of migrants in their mid-twenties believe that starting their career as an employee for an international company in China is a strategic move to gain experience within the global market, where China plays an increasingly large role. However, some plan to eventually start their own businesses involving transnational entrepreneurship between Europe and China. They refer to themselves as a bridge between the two cultures and countries, drawing on their socio-cultural capital acquired through their dual socialization growing up in Europe as the children of Chinese migrants.

Interviewees born in France, even those who were not born into entrepreneurial families, also considered their move to China as a rewarding experience, both professionally and culturally. Irrespective of their occupation and professional field, all respondents pointed to the surge in general interest in China at their workplace. Mastery of Standard Chinese, general knowledge about Chinese society and social norms, and more specifically experience cooperating with Chinese partners, were seen as professional assets. The

prospect of leveraging these valuable resources for their career led these young French people of Chinese descent to decide to move to China.

After gaining work experience as employees in Europe and China, many migrants' descendants began to think about becoming entrepreneurs, either by starting their own business or taking over the family business. Those who considered taking over their family business also planned on ways to modernize it and better tailor it to their professional training.

Their reasons for deciding to return to the family business varied, depending on their age and context. The instability of the labour market in Europe in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis may have influenced this decision, as it became increasingly difficult to find well-paid jobs with good working conditions in Europe (Masdeu Torruella and Sáiz López 2019). However, beyond this structural variable, the entrepreneurial culture in which our respondents had been socialized played a very important role in this decision to “go back to the family business.”

#### *Moving to China and Continuing a Transnational Family Business*

Respondents from merchant families were sensitive to the emergence of China in the global markets, and they often moved to China to extend the commercial networks of their family businesses. Let us consider Victor's case.

Victor is the eldest son of a hat wholesaler based in Aubervilliers, who took over the family business after obtaining a master's degree in international trade. He spoke to us about his life experiences in Shanghai for two years, before taking over the family business.

Our family businesses are split between Paris, Shanghai, and Angola. In Shanghai, my uncle and aunt take care of it. Before I left for China, I knew them mostly by phone and by email. And in Shanghai, during my last year of study, I spent a lot of time with them because I had so much to learn from them, especially about how the market works in China and building networks (*guanxi* 关系) in China. Then I decided to do a one-year internship at the Shanghai branch, at their home. I became very familiar with the Chinese commercial environment. For example, you know better than I do, in China, the best time to talk about business and to sign contracts is at the table when drinking and eating (interview with Victor, Paris, July 2016).

Until now, Victor's family business produced hats in China with raw materials sourced in Africa and then sold them on the European market. However, Victor explained that, in recent years, due to rising production costs in China and the growing number of competitive wholesalers, the profit margin has dropped. To overcome these challenges, like many other entrepreneurs of his generation, he has sought to innovate around the import-export model. His aim is to develop a new market in China, with "high-end" products manufactured in France.

By switching the place of manufacture and that of the retail market, Victor aims to develop a new luxury brand. In addition to his professional business skills—valuable in both France and in Africa—his language skills and his knowledge of the Chinese market are crucial for building commercial partnerships in China. This motivated Victor to go to China.

We also found other practices to renew economic activity, specifically surrounding online sales within Chinese merchant families (usually from Zhejiang province). This particularly involves inter-professional relations between these families and other types of commercial intermediaries between European producers and Chinese consumers, known as *daigou* (see above).

Whereas Victor's case reveals a transformation and renewal of the family business involving transnational practices, trading, and international commerce, other participants drew on their unique experiences to adapt a family business at a single location, such as a restaurant. In these cases, Europeans of Chinese descent endeavour to capitalize on their dual socialization and specific advanced training.

This is the case of Joan, who was born in a mid-sized town in Catalonia in 1982, a couple of years after his parents opened their first restaurant in the town. Joan developed an interest in the catering and restaurant business from a young age. He completed a degree in tourism and later obtained a university diploma in what he called "his true vocation," professional cooking. The family business obviously influenced his decision, but in 2010, after working at the family restaurant for two years, he decided to move to Shanghai. After studying Chinese in university for a year, he decided to stay in the city, where he worked at several foreign restaurants with a view to learning about the restaurant business in China. He worked at a Spanish restaurant run by one of his uncles, who had opened it after spending a couple of years in Barcelona. After four years of working as an employee,

he took over the restaurant. He wanted to transform it by introducing “authentic” Spanish food and not generic “Western food” adapted to Chinese tastes. Similar processes are evident in the introduction of Chinese food in Europe. Just as Joan’s parents had used their cultural capital and ethnic identity in their restaurant in Spain, so too was he using his Spanish identity in his business in Shanghai.

These two study cases reveal different patterns of transmission and transformation of family business in the transnational space, with the one involved more in international trade and the other in food services. In both cases, we find this idea of transmission of the family business with a view to innovating. For both Victor and Joan, the family business has provided a space in which to develop their professional career in line with their studies, and to introduce changes to these businesses. They also expressed the need, in so doing, to “change representations of Chinese people’s businesses” within the context of migration.

### **The Transmission of Migratory Experience and its Symbolic, Subjective, and Personal Uses**

We have seen how professional trajectories motivated our interviewees to move to China. Beyond this instrumental dimension of new mobilities to China, we also found a symbolic, subjective, and emotional dimension of these mobilities. By moving to China to develop their professional and entrepreneurial careers, migrants’ descendants connected with their parents’ experiences of migration. Migrant descendants’ mobilities to China thus open a space for intergenerational understanding between these individuals and their parents.

The descendants of Chinese migrants recounted how they connected with their parents’ life experience when they undertook their own journey of migration to China. As the interview below shows, migrants’ descendants can experience a new perspective, curiosity, and empathy towards their parents when they themselves migrate to China. Sally, who grew up in Spain and then moved to Shanghai as an adult, described how moving to China helped her connect with her mother:

Since I’ve been here in China, my mother and I talk far more than before. It’s like you’re born and don’t ask yourself a lot of questions. Sometimes I even felt ashamed of my mother... sometimes, you know. I just thought we were totally different. But then when I arrived here I realized that I knew very little about her. People asked me about my family and I realized that I didn’t know a lot about how they left, how they

arrived, how they felt—we never talk that much in my family. But now it's different, since I came to Shanghai we talk and share far more. Maybe I rediscovered my mother, maybe (interview with Sally, Shanghai, April 2017).

Sally's experience of silence about migration is not unique; in Chinese migrant families, migratory journeys and social memories are rarely passed down from parents to children. Misunderstandings between generations can lead to silence, reproach, and rifts between generations (Muel-Dreyfus 1993; Sayad 1979). Living in China can also be part of descendants' search for their family's history. Thus, some respondents also considered their mobility to China as an opportunity to repair intergenerational relationships, to seek a sociological understanding of their parents' histories and backgrounds.

Like Sally, Frédéric—a trainee auditor in Beijing—confirmed that his mobility in China had allowed him to better understand his parents' migratory trajectories and the context of their emigration. In Tangshan, he met former workers of a factory under audit due to pollution caused by manufacturing activities. Talking to these workers, Frédéric understood—and this surprised him—that they would have preferred that the factory continued to operate so that they could feed their families, even if it was bad for their health. He explained:

At that moment, I thought of my parents, who bore the responsibility of feeding the whole family, even though they were undocumented when they arrived in Paris, and they lived in an undignified way. For a long time, I was ashamed of my parents, of the lack of dignity in their lives (interview with Frédéric, Beijing, November 2016).

By discovering that the migration experiences and biographical stories of Chinese internal migrants were in some way “comparable” to those of his own parents, Frédéric was able to gradually situate his parents' migration project and social trajectory in a particular socio-historical context, to “sociologize” his own familiar history, and, finally, to reconcile with his social origin.

This symbolic and figurative journey towards recent Chinese history and family origins can also involve a physical journey in which the children of migrants discover and rediscover their parents' home villages in Zhejiang province—places with a strong migration

*habitus* and a long emigration history (M. Li 2013). During their childhood, most of the migrants' descendants we interviewed went on occasional trips to Qingtian or the villages in Wenzhou from which their parents came. These trips were significant experiences in their socialization and transnational training (Beck 2016; Masdeu Torruella 2014, 2020; Nyiri 2014). After moving to China as adults, they can reconnect with their parents' hometowns more easily, making weekend and holiday trips out of the large Chinese cities where they work to stay with their grandparents or other relatives in these small cities and villages.

In addition to repairing intergenerational relationships within Chinese migrant families, migration to China serves another symbolic, subjective, and personal function, as these migratory experiences provide an opportunity for identity building. Consider the case of Meilian, who works in communications for an international company in Nanjing. Her family migrated to France via Hong Kong in the 1980s. After five years working as employees in the restaurant industry, Meilian's parents became the owners of a restaurant in the French provinces. Meilian, a brilliant student who graduated from a business school in Paris, explains about her identity-building process through her experience of moving to China:

Thirty years ago, I left China with my parents to settle down in France. I was barely ten years old. My origin, my "Chinese" side, is something that has always intrigued me, but that pains me too [...]. Two years ago, in my company, I had the opportunity to be transferred to Nanjing. I decided to go there. Before this trip, I was always seen by others but also by myself as the "Chinese one" in my group. From the time I arrived in Paris, in a Western environment, I was considered so because of my "Asian" appearance. I myself was influenced in that way. Yet by going to and living in China, I immediately realized that my "Chinese" side was empty, even imaginary, because I was far away from the real Chinese in China. And my "French" side, I feel it more frequently compared to when I'm in France, especially by socialising with foreigners of other origins also living in Nanjing. Now, regarding my origins, I reason less in a dichotomous way ("French" or "Chinese"), because one can be "French" and "Chinese," and also "something else." (interview with Meilian, Paris, October 2012).

By changing her environment and peer groups, Meilian departed from a dichotomous form of identification and built a hybrid identity. Other descendants of migrants refer to their move to China as an “opportunity for self-discovery.”

For these children of migrants, moving to China is not just an economic or career-oriented decision but also carries emotional, familial, and identity-related significance. As we have seen, this mobility involves an emotional journey to the past, towards the migration trajectories of their own families. It also provides them with a new context in which to experiment with their multiple identities—an opportunity that they could not find remaining in the European societies where they grew up.

### **Conclusions and Future Research Directions**

The multi-sited ethnographic research presented here reveals novel changes in transnational mobilities between China and Europe, and the growing role of migrants’ descendants within transnational spaces. We have argued that the entrepreneurial culture of Chinese migrants is an important aspect of intergenerational transmission. However, inheriting a family business is not always the first choice of these migrants’ descendants. Given the various options available for upward social mobility, some take the time to navigate between “self-employed culture” and “working outside the family business.”

Our empirical research has shown that there are two main dimensions to the new mobilities of young French and Spanish people of Chinese origin towards China: pragmatic motivations related to the capacity and possibilities to develop their professional career in China; and the need to understand the migration history and trajectories of their parents.

As we have seen, some of our respondents expressed the need to try to begin their professional career outside of the family business, while others decided to take over the family business and transform it through innovation. In both cases, migrants’ descendants demonstrate a desire to break with the previous imaginaries surrounding Chinese migrants in Europe. They strive to accomplish this either by trying to develop their professional careers or, when they take over the family business, by modernising and internationalising the business, as we have shown with Victor’s case. Thus, changing the representation of Chineseness on the labour market and the style of their business is one of the goals pursued by Chinese migrants’ descendants.

Through their mobilities to China, descendants of migrants connect and reconnect with the migration experience of their parents who were born there. While some of them explore the connections with their family memories after they arrived in China, for others this aspect is an important consideration when deciding whether to move. Hence, this paper shows another type of transmission, one that is more symbolic, emotional, and affective, as mobilities to China open a space for intergenerational understanding in these Chinese migrant families. As we have seen, some informants reconnected with their family history and formed stronger bonds with their own parents after they arrived in China.

Our findings demonstrate that beyond professional and economic motivations, symbolic, subjective, and emotional factors can also motivate descendants of Chinese migrants to move to China. The common denominator between the two generations discussed here is the aspiration for social mobility through geographical mobility, in other words, through migration. However, within a single generation, the direction of migration has reversed. While the parents' generation fulfilled their desire for prestige and upward social mobility in Europe, for the children's generation, China is becoming the destination they aspire to.

This article has shown how the generational shift in Europe—with the retirement of the first migrants who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s and their children reaching adulthood—is bringing about transformations linked to the descendants' identities. These transformations, in turn, are impacting and giving rise to changes in representations of Chineseness, which are closely connected to changes in local and transnational entrepreneurship.

Finally, shifts in the global economic structure—particularly the rise of China as a major economic force—have impacted the personal and individual lives of migrants and their descendants. It has further shown how individuals—here, Chinese migrants' descendants—also have the agency to enact change and how they engage in such change. The economic and family business provides far more than material resources; it is also the space in which to connect and reconnect with family memory, to search for and build one's identity, and to shift the representations of Chineseness. It is shown, for example, through the case of Victor, who renewed his family business by leveraging the cachet of “made in France” to target Chinese middle- and upper-class customers living in China. By doing so, this generation of young Chinese is abandoning the traditional import-export chain that was



established by Chinese businessmen in their parents' time: cheap goods of low quality made in China that are imported and sold in Europe.

In the following years, researchers are invited to pay attention to the labour trajectories of the next generations of Chinese migrants in Europe to examine how different national and transnational economic spaces will be reconfigured under the influence of the entrepreneurship of migrants' descendants. How will Chinese migrants' descendants be able to find their footing in the mainstream European labour market? Will China remain a place to develop their professional projects? What new types of family businesses will arise in the next few years? In consequence, what will be the new spaces of family socialization (related or not to the family business) for the future generations? Will the experience of "in-betweenness" continue to be important to Chinese in Europe?

Regarding the subjective dimension of descendants' transnational connections to China, it would be relevant to follow them in a biographic and intergenerational approach. What will these descendants transmit to their own children in terms of family memories related to migration? Will they remain emotionally linked with China? If so, how will they experience and translate these emotional and symbolic ties through practices, including physical mobilities to China?

Finally, we might further investigate the social mobilities and new aspirations within the Chinese business families among the next generations. The current generation of descendants that are taking over their family businesses is relatively educated compared to their parents. For these descendants' future children, will transnational space still be important for achieving upward mobility? It seems also relevant to discuss the impact of COVID-19 and the post-pandemic situation in China. This includes the extended border controls, China's current economic slowdown, and the reduced number of foreign companies and professionals. These factors could potentially affect the movement of the children of Chinese migrants from Europe to China. All these considerations enable scholars to examine the evolving interactions between social mobility and geographical mobility in an era of complex economic and geopolitical transformations.

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