

Transnational Communities

An ESRC Research Programme

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AT THE MARGINS OF THE CHINESE WORLD SYSTEM: THE FUZHOU DIASPORA IN EUROPE

Principal Investigators

Dr Frank Pieke

Institute for Chinese Studies, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 2HG

Dr Pal Nyiri

Institute for Chinese Studies, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 2HG

Dr Mette Thunø

East Asian Institute, University of Copenhagen, DK-2300 Copenhagen S

Dr Antonella Ceccagno

Institute of Chinese Studies, University of Bologna, I- 40100 Bologna, Italy

Aims and objectives

Fujianese are smuggled across the globe by professional human traffickers. Hailing mainly from Fuzhou city and its vicinity, Fujianese arguably are the most disadvantaged, but simultaneously the most mobile overseas transnational group. The project will investigate (1) Fujian sending communities, (2) the migratory process, (3) patterns of settlement, employment, entrepreneurship in selected countries of destination in Europe, and (4) the transnational links that tie Fujianese into a world-wide diasporic community.

Our central concern will be the serious human costs of their activities, which supplies established overseas Chinese communities with an nearly inexhaustible source of cheap, docile and expendable labourers. In addition, we will investigate the implications of Fujian migration on the relations between China, Taiwan and receiving countries.

The project will start with gathering basic information on in selected European countries. Subsequently, field research in the home areas of Fujianese emigrants will be carried out. After fieldwork in Fujian, we shall follow the emigrants through Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and Europe. Back in Europe, systematic interviews with migrants from our Fujian fieldsites and their employers, landlords and “immigration service companies” in Europe’s Chinatowns will be carried out. During the final phase of this study, we will return to Fujian to test initial hypotheses formulated about the Fuzhou diaspora.

Duration of research

January 1999 to December 2001



Methodology/study design

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Academic and Policy implications

The project hopes to contribute to a more balanced assessment of Chinese international migration and the emerging Chinese world system that is as sensitive to their strengths (rapid and flexible deployment of economic and human capital, aggressive entrepreneurship, flexible and extensive transnational business links) as to their weaknesses (ruthless exploitation of labour, predatory criminal gangs, lack of integration of migrants into receiving societies). This should also contribute to more realistic policy making in various areas that tend to be either predicated on either wholly negative (in the case of Chinese immigration in Britain) or wholly positive stereotypes (in the case of the spectacular development of the Chinese economy).

SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- The largest absolute numbers of Fujianese appear to be in the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, France (in the order of 10 thousand each, but in the Netherlands and France this estimate includes a large number of Fujianese from Southeast Asia), Moscow (3-6 thousand), Spain (3-4 thousand), and Hungary (2-4 thousand). The

largest relative number of Fujianese is perhaps in Hungary, where the total Chinese population is around 10 thousand.

- Fujian migration to Europe started as a second choice for those wanting to make money abroad within a short time, but who were unable to get to Japan or the US.
- We also found evidence of small seed communities dating from the 1940s and 1950s of jumped-ship sailors in Europe that were instrumental in initiating Fujianese migration to Europe quite independently from the major flows to the US and Japan.
- As expected, we found that Fujian migrants choose their preferred destination on the likelihood of successfully getting there, expected income, and the presence of relatives/friends.
- Availability of legal residence status (i.e. policies on the receiving end) seems to play a lesser role, although visa requirements, perceived ease of obtaining refugee status, and amnesties for illegal migrants all play an important role in directing Fujianese (and other Chinese) migrants to particular countries at particular times, either directly from China or else from other countries in Europe.
- Professional migration brokers (“snakeheads”), eager expand their market, play an important role in maintaining the flow of migrants by searching for new client populations, destinations and routes.
- Hungary and Italy in the early 1990s were the two countries that were relatively easy to get into: Italy with its regular amnesties and Hungary which exempted Chinese from

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the visa requirement. Much of this migration took place by train via Siberia and Moscow, a route popular with Chinese at the time.

- Somewhat surprisingly and for reasons that we do not yet fully grasp, we found that the UK is the preferred destination of many migrants, although the UK is considered to be a tough country to get into.
- In Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain Fujianese overwhelmingly work in established restaurants owned by Cantonese, Wenzhounese, or Southeast Asian Chinese.
- In Britain, the appearance of Fujianese has permitted a renaissance of restaurants and takeaways that have been struggling with manpower problems. It has also driven wages down in Britain, and now the job market in places like London Chinatown is becoming saturated.
- In Italy, most Fujianese work in leather or garment workshops doing contract sewing for local companies, as do many Fujianese in Spain. In Prato (Italy) 3-4 years ago all Fujianese still worked at Zhejiang-owned workshops, but now Fujianese own over 200 leather and cotton garment workshops, plus 2-3 restaurants, one toy and one spectacles frame workshop.
- In Eastern Europe, import, wholesale, and retail of low-price clothes, shoes, and other Chinese consumer goods at markets and shops is the mainstay of the economy of the Fujianese. There is no particular Fujianese specialization; Fujianese sell garments from Zhejiang just like Zhejiangers sell shoes from Fujian. Connections to manufacturing or export companies in China are obviously key to this business.
- Somewhat unexpectedly, we found that the area around Fuzhou city (Changle county in particular) is not, like in the US, the most important source area of Fujian migration to Europe. Rather, adjacent Fuqing prefecture the relatively more important, together with inland Sanming prefecture. It seems that in the latter case the local government was instrumental in initiating this flow in the hope that it would generate foreign revenue.
- In Sanming and Fuqing, remittances from

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Europe so far go to the family, in part to finance migration by further family members or education, although many migrants have in fact not yet got to the point of being able to remit any money. In cases of return investment, the money is used to buy shop space in Fuzhou or other big cities rather than ventures in the home community itself.

- Contrary to our expectations, we discovered that among the sending areas in Fujian province, Fuqing and Mingxi prefectures were numerically much more important in the emigration to Europe than the area around Fuzhou city.
- In building communities of Fujian migrants, we found that Chinese national and local governments play an important role, particularly in the setting up native place associations that reflect the Chinese administrative models.
- In the case of Sanming prefecture we found that local government has also been instrumental in initiating and facilitating the migratory flow from this area that particularly targets eastern Europe.
- More generally, migration from Fujian and the choice of destination are based on careful calculations of relative risks and income earning potential and is facilitated and perpetuated by professional migration agents who depend on a continuing flow of migrants for their livelihood.

SOME USERS ENGAGED IN THE PROJECT

Numerous lawyers, immigration officials and policemen dealing with Fujian immigration, employment and criminality; the International Organization for

Migration in Budapest, Vienna and Geneva; the British Broadcasting Corporation; Channel Four; major foreign and national newspapers; the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada; the Federation of Chinese Organizations in Europe; European Commission.

PROJECT EVENTS

User workshop in Oxford, March 2000; Workshop on the new Chinese emigration, Budapest, May 2000, co-funded by the ESRC Programme on Transnational Communities and European Science Foundation

SOME CONFERENCE/SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS

Frank N. Pieke, "Aspects of belonging in a global migration configuration". Paper presented at the workshop "The anthropology of separation and belonging in China", Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, 15 – 16 May 1999.

Frank N. Pieke, A Chinese World? Paper prepared for the International Anthropological Conference on 21st Century Human Existence and Issues of Development and the Sixth National Symposium of the Chinese Anthropological Society, Xiamen, Fujian, China, 18 – 23 July 2000.

Pal Nyiri, "From Class Enemies to Patriots: overseas Chinese and emigration policy and discourse in the People's Republic of China." Paper at the workshop on "Perceptions and agency of sending countries towards their citizens and former citizens living abroad," London School of Economics, 10 July 2000.

Pal Nyiri, "Expatriating is Patriotic?" Paper at the conference on "Transnational Communities in the Asia-Pacific Region: Comparative Perspectives", 7-8 August 2000.

Pal Nyiri, "The Snakehead's Concise Guide to Europe", EACS conference, Turin, 30 August - 2 September 2000

SOME PUBLICATIONS TO DATE

Frank N. Pieke and Hein Mallee, eds, *Internal and international migration: Chinese perspectives*. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999

Pal Nyiri, *New Chinese migrants in Europe: the case of the Chinese community in Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999

Pal Nyiri and Edgar van Lokven, "The Chinese and the problem of organized crime". In European Federation of Chinese Organizations/EFCO, *The Chinese Community in Europe*. Amsterdam: EFCO, 1999

Transnational Communities Programme

On the programme's website (<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>) you will find contact details for all the project teams, guidance notes for would-be authors in the book series', information about past and forthcoming events, downloadable working papers, a searchable bibliography of world diasporas and links to related sites. An on-line news digest, TRACES aims to make sense of the human dimensions of globalisation by monitoring news items from around the world and presenting them in summary form. You can register on-line to receive hard copies of newsletters, reminders of website updates and information about related events.

Director: Dr Steven Vertovec, Administrator: Ms Anna Winton

Transnational Communities, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, 51 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 6PE, Tel: +44 1865 274711, Fax: +44 1865 274718, Email: anna.winton@anthro.ox.ac.uk