Chapter 13
A Biographical Study of Chinese Immigrants in Belgium: Strategies for Localisation

Li-Chuan LIU HUANG

13.1   Introduction

The contemporary history of Chinese international migration can be traced back to the Sino-British Opium War (1840–1842), with China, as loser of the war, forced to export contract workers to support growing domestic economic development requested by Western colonial powers (Pieke 1998). Before the end of the Second World War, the Chinese population in Western Europe was not significant and included marine workers recruited from coastal provinces, street peddlers from rural Qingtian (in Zhejiang Province, China), and students. As the Second World War caused a serious shortage of manual labour, there were some 140,000 to 200,000 Chinese labourers recruited by the French government during wartime and around 3,000 of them stayed on through the renewal of their contract (Live 1998). Compared with other Western European countries, the Chinese population in Belgium turned out to be a negligible minority that was diversified in origin, mother tongue, social class, and political orientation.

An early student who settled in Brussels before the Second World War recalled that the main components of the Chinese population in Belgium comprised escapers from France, the Cantonese ship jumpers, Qingtian street vendors, and students[1]. After the Chinese civil war (1946–1949), the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China and the defeated Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-Shek was reinstated in Taiwan. Before China's claim to release control of emigration in 1975, only Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong moved to Belgium for reasons of study, employment, or family reunions[2].

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[1] Records of personal interviews with Mr. Huang in fieldwork conducted from 1996 to 1998.

[2] However, some cases show that the mainlanders from Taiwan took advantage of acquired Belgian citizenship to help their families in China emigrate. Without a foreign connection, it was impossible for Chinese citizens to go abroad before 1975.

Liu Huang (✉)
Department of Labour Relations, National Chung Cheng University, Minhsiung, Chiayi, Taiwan
e-mail: liuhuang7@yahoo.com, liuhuang7@gmail.com

After 1975, immigration to Belgium gradually increased, resulting in an estimated population of 20,000 to 30,000 residents characterised by a growing variety of sub-ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asian countries, Indo-Chinese as refugees in the late 1970s, and Chinese Mainlanders from the Northern regions. The Chinese differed in origin, educational background, mother tongue, and political ideology, although they tended to work in particular business sectors (i.e. catering, the wholesale and retail trade, construction, and personal services in most European countries; garment and leather workshops, particularly in France, Italy, and Spain) (Li 2003). However, what makes individuals and families leave their home and relocate to another country to find opportunity or settlement is a more vexing question.

In this paper, the various compositions of Chinese immigrants are described in order to address the historical and geographical complexities conditional to the development of biographical trajectories. Chinese immigrants are often perceived as a general and unified ethnic group, but the biographical narratives recounted below will show that ethnicity is more about a process of meaning-making over the course of a lifetime and less about collective origin.

13.2   Methodology

13.2.1   *Rationale*

The rationale behind the adoption of the biographical approach is twofold. Firstly, the literature of biographical study offers convincing arguments in tackling the constant dichotomy of culture/structure and agency/action (Archer 1995, 2003; Brettell 2002; Breckner 2002; Chamberlayne et al. 1999; Fischer-Rosenthal 2000). This approach acknowledges the agent's reflexive and internal deliberations (in Archer's terms) as an interactive response within the social context constituted by cultural and structural properties. Secondly, the biographical approach enables social researchers to explore the complexity and dynamics of lived experience which the target group (e.g. the immigrants) encountered in their new context (Breckner 2002a, b). A good example can be found in the Social Strategies in Risk Societies (SOSTRIS) Project, a European Union–funded project aiming to explore the meaning of social exclusion in seven developed European societies through the investigation of six socially vulnerable groups (Chamberlayne et al. 1999). An important aspect of this project is its explicit interest in placing emphasis on personal experience as the basis for the development of social policy. Advocates of this approach argue that sound and effective social policy necessitates knowledge of the lifeworld of the target group through exploration of the subjective configuration of their biographical experiences. What must be taken into account, however, is not

only the aggregated or typical findings from each life story but also the peculiarities of each individual life.

13.2.2   *Biographical-Narrative Interpretive Method*

The biographical approach adopted by the SOSTRIS Project found its methodological origins in the German narrativists (i.e. Schutz, Rieman, Rosenthal, and Fisher-Rosenthal) and was then formulated as the Biographical-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) by Tom Wengraf, who later became a member of the SOSTRIS research team (Chamberlayne et al. 1997; Wengraf 2001). For the interview approach the BNIM researchers used 'a set of non-interfering techniques' (Thompson 2000) or 'lightly structured depth interviews', as described by Wengraf (2001, p. 111, cited in Firkin 2004), in the belief that a free and open narrative account without being interrupted by the interviewer 'comes closest to the experience itself' (Thompson 2000). Accordingly, each interview started with a completely unstructured style accompanied by prior communication and an explanation of the research interest. When the interviewee offered his or her concluding remarks, the first stage of the interview was complete. Following the framed themes or stories in the first stage, more detailed and relevant questions were raised and more narratives were developed. Independent of the previous two stages the interviewer would raise questions on underdeveloped themes and receive feedback from the interviewee.

My research started with field observations and participation in line with ethnomethodological enquiry (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). I noted that it took time to gain the interviewees' trust. Thus, my prior fieldwork was extremely helpful in the process of investigation and the subsequent inductive analysis. Without having invested time to establish a trusting relationship with the interviewees and capture the contextual details of their lives, it is difficult to imagine acquiring 'good' biographies as the interviewer usually must first wade through issues of inner suffering experienced during the migratory process and of family shame.

13.2.3   *The Analysis Phase*

The BNIM analysis welcomes a panel-based discussion when a case has been separately analysed by a two-track lived history and told story in order to widen the scope of hypotheses for the sake of the multiple panel input (Wengraf 2001, 2006). As the analysis is assumed to be reconstructive, the hypotheses are generated from the interview transcripts without pre-set theoretical input. It is self-evident that the researcher will be equipped with certain theoretical knowledge before entering the

field and with subjectively lived experiences as a field participant. However, working mainly with the generated themes through the restructured data helps to explore plausible hypotheses with an understanding of the narrator's reflexive disposition. Analytic induction may help the researcher to avoid theoretical judgment and explore the peculiarities of each individual case (Breckner 2000).

Each interview undergoing BNIM analysis is separated into 'lived history' and 'story told'. A lived history means the basic biographical information is reorganised by the researcher with respect to the chronological order of the narrator's life events. Then the whole text is studied in sequences and tagged with attributions of description, argumentation, narration, or evaluation, which is abbreviated as the DARNE typology (Wengraf 2001).

The hypotheses were developed with an 'always looking for alternative' strategy. That is, to examine the framed hypotheses, some fragments were analysed in great detail and the hypotheses and counterhypotheses were reviewed again (Wengraf 2001, 2006). After testing the hypotheses, the narrator's life story was reconstructed in respect to his or her subjective order and interpretation. Data gleaned from the biographical analysis demonstrates how the interviewee structures his or her life in a certain way or activates the process of meaning making through free narration.

The importance and interest of a panel discussion in enriching hypothesis development is acknowledged. However, due to lack of time and limited personal facilities I was not able to organise a team to conduct a segment analysis without knowing an interviewee's entire life story, as recommended by BNIM. Nevertheless, it was found that previous field observations and participation were helpful in collecting supplementary data from the interviewee's family members or close friends, and the use of constant cross-category comparison enabled me to enlarge the span of hypothesis building.

13.2.4   Comparison and Typology

Having analysed individual life stories as described above, some typical actions or common case features can be outlined and conceptualised as a type or pattern and the discussion of typology can be furthered. However, as previously noted, the Chinese immigrants had varying degrees of social embeddedness in the host society and developed different lived experiences, so I found that it was equally important to report the particularities of a singular case and its analysis as well as cross-case comparisons and thematic analyses. I will present an exemplary case in the following section and then propose a thematic discussion. The strategic patterns as responses to the migratory process are discussed following a thematic presentation. My major concern in presenting individual cases is to enable the reader to become familiar with an ethnic group culturally unknown to the host society. It is my hope that presenting these biographies will raise the reader's awareness of Chinese immigrants' lived experience.

13.3   Case Presentation

13.3.1   Hua's Lived Life

Hua was born in a Mainlander family (the Chinese mainlanders are people who migrated to Taiwan after the Chinese civil war) in 1947 in Taipei. As her father hailed from Qingtian, Zehjiang, she spoke the Qingtian language as her mother tongue and practised Mandarin in school.

Hua's aunt preceded her in coming to Belgium in 1969 and later owned a restaurant. Hua finished her high school education but failed to enter university. She married a Hong Kong–born countryman who was a university graduate and wanted to go abroad to earn his PhD degree. The original plan of studying abroad was to obtain a doctorate and to earn more money. She remembered that there were only 200 US$ in their pocket when they arrived in Zaventem. Like many Taiwanese students of the 1970s, they had to earn their livelihood and pay study fees with their own funds. Therefore, Hua's husband took a waiter's job in a Cantonese restaurant and she worked in her aunt's restaurant as a kitchen helper.

Hua's husband gave up his studies for financial reasons when Hua gave birth to their first son in 1975. Given the fact that they had to find another reason to stay in Belgium, the couple chose to get started in the Chinese catering sector, as many students did during that time.

When Chinese emigration was declared open from the late 1970s, Hua, as a restaurant owner of Qingtian origin, could not resist the requests from relatives in Qingtian who wanted to go abroad and needed her assistance in visa processing. Her husband's family in Fujian made similar requests as well. When the immigration policy of Belgium became stricter, Hua and her husband chose Austria as the next destination for business for the benefit of more relatives.

Hua's husband left for Austria and started up a restaurant. Hua's three younger brothers also migrated to Austria with the couple's help. The long separation harmed the conjugal relationship and the couple ended up divorcing due to the husband's love affair with a Mainlander nurse. Hua continued managing the restaurant in Belgium and took care of their four sons while her husband settled permanently in Austria. Her long narration showed me how proud she was of her four sons with their high education and upward mobility.

Hua's previous restaurant was located in a Dutch-speaking tourist city and the business was successful. Then she opened a fish shop that caused her to incur a significant financial loss because of a lack of professional know-how and trust from local clients. She made note of the obstacles faced by Chinese immigrants, who were stigmatised as restaurant people only.

At the time of the interview, Hua had sold her former restaurant and moved to a satellite city around Oostende where she served not only Chinese food but also cuisine that catered to the locals' taste. She managed the restaurant together with her partner, a native Belgian named Eric.

Hua described how she coped with the cultural differences of living with a Belgian partner. A mixed conjugal relationship forced them to seek common ground.

Hua was born in Taiwan but also considers herself a second-generation Chinese Mainlander. She was annoyed by the then-politicised debate on who was a 'real' Taiwanese provoked by Taiwanese politicians who supported a pro-Taiwan rather than a pro-China ideology[3]. The ideological battle split her Taiwanese ingroup and forced her to withdraw from Taiwanese organisations:

> I consider myself Taiwanese as well as Qingtianian. But the Taiwanese will say that I am not Taiwanese because my parents came from Qingtian. As a descendant of Chinese Mainlanders, I was sometimes confused and did not know where I belonged.

13.3.2   Analysis of Hua's Life Story—A Life of Trilogy

Hua came to Belgium with her husband in the early 1970s, a decade when many Taiwanese students were eager to study abroad and earn foreign currency[4]. The couple's dream was simple: to earn a PhD degree and go back to Taiwan for a better career. It is clear that the original plan for the couple was career-oriented and Hua played a traditional supportive role for her husband's career advancement. Nevertheless, her husband's career path had to be curtailed because of increasing family demands.

The birth of a newborn forced the couple to alter course from an individual, career-oriented lifestyle to family survival and long-term settlement in Europe. In addition, the couple felt pressured by interpersonal competition to create wealth for their families. Thus, the couple opened a restaurant and invested all of their efforts into the betterment of their four children's education in the hope that they would eventually realise their parents' unfinished dream—to have a better career. Hua expressed great devotion to parenting and satisfaction with her sons' educational achievements, as they are all university graduates: the elder a practising physician, the second working towards a PhD, the third a financial analyst, and the fourth an economist.

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[3] As the pro-independent Democratic People's Party (DPP) won the presidential election in 2000, it was in a position to enable the re-orientation of overseas Chinese policies. Many pro-nationalist overseas Chinese organizations were not satisfied with the DPP's political stand while the long exiled pro-independence overseas Taiwanese groups started to give support to the Overseas Compatriot Affairs Committee (OCAC). The relations between OCAC and overseas Chinese and Taiwanese residents were thus challenged by the controversy surrounding Taiwanese identity, low trust, and the restructuring of power among overseas Chinese and Taiwanese organizations.

[4] There is an expression, 'Come, Come, Come and Come to Tai Da (National Taiwan University), Go, Go, Go and Go to America', directed towards capable university students, in particular students from top Taiwanese universities. Western Europe certainly was another choice, but less interesting to Taiwanese students because of language proficiency.

For Hua, the effort to develop a business was not only to benefit her core family but also her siblings in Taiwan and more distant relatives in Mainland China. Following a co-ethnic occupational path, Hua quickly assimilated into the ingroup's biographical trajectory and became successful in its niche economy. However, the family was torn apart by her husband's love affair in Austria. It seems that the resultant divorce was the turning point in Hua's life that forced her to acknowledge that her individuality and independent status differed from her past self-perception as a subordinate, traditional wife. Reflecting on her divorce with a positive attitude, Hua attributed her failed marriage to geographical and temporal factors. She assumed full responsibility for childrearing and kept the restaurant business in good shape, playing the double role of breadwinner and caring mother. Her maternal identity appeared to strengthen after the divorce.

Although Hua was considered a successful restaurateur by her peers and had been elected president of the Chinese Restaurateurs Association, she would rather identify herself as 'a capable wife and a good mother' with a connotation of a stereotypical maternal identity in a patriarchical society. Hua may be characterized as demonstrating a strategy of ingroup assimilation that enabled her to benefit from cultural connections and to successfully localise the second generation's mobility. The driving force behind her entrepreneurship was family ideology and maternal love in particular, instead of a sense of feminist independence.

The failed experience investing in a fish shop exemplifies how Hua's occupational orientation was influenced by the self-learned experience of a stereotypical image. She attributed her failure to a lack of occupational know-how and rejection by local clients because of her ethnicity. Thus, it is important to note that Chinese immigrants' vocations are not only a matter of business know-how, but also a reluctant acceptance spurred by a stereotyped occupational image.

Hua's first biographical phase was that of a supportive housewife. Her subsequent engagement in the restaurant business and in the role of an independent single parent enabled her to overcome the structural constraints of economic integration. However, Hua's journey would not be complete if she had not been introduced to her current partner Eric, a native Dutch-speaking Belgian. She admitted that cohabitation was a process of mutual adjustment; it took some time for her to accept Eric's belief in a work/life balance, which was contrary to the career-oriented lifestyle that most Chinese restaurateurs led. Hua's integrative attitude towards her host culture was exemplified not only in the acceptance of a Belgian partner but also in her multicultural style of restaurant management. To satisfy local tastes more effectively, she not only served Chinese food but also Belgian cuisine specifically for banquets and weddings. All of her efforts demonstrated sensitivity towards local values. Hua's life could be viewed as a trilogy—coming to Europe as a traditional wife, building a career as a successful entrepreneur, blending her life into a multicultural environment—in an extensive process of localisation.

Notably, Hua's inclusive attitude did not carry over to her son's dating partner and mixed marriage. How should we interpret her double standard of accepting a foreign partner but rejecting her son's native girlfriend? Hua's attitude towards the

host culture may be assumed to be inclusive or selective depending on whether the continuity of the Chinese identity would or would not be in danger. Her insistence in using Mandarin as the primary language with her siblings' offspring seemed to express a shared worry for the loss of cultural identity among the younger generation[5]. Speaking Chinese was a way to enable the offspring residing in foreign countries to communicate easily and to share a common family culture. Finding a spouse with a similar ethnic and cultural origin would be considered a way of assuring the cultural continuity of a transnational family group like Hua's.

Hua's story is not only inspiring because of her trilogy of personas but also in light of her interpretation of transitional ethnic identity. As a second-generation Qingtian immigrant from Taiwan, Hua identified herself as a Taiwan-born Chinese but felt marginalised when Taiwan's political party claimed to be pro-independence and caused intragroup splits. In this case, her identity construction was limited to a position of independence (pro-Taiwan) or reunification (pro-China). However, the ongoing debate of Taiwan's national identity has been politicised and stigmatised as a battle of Taiwanese versus non-Taiwanese (i.e. the pro-reunification party is simplified as Chinese or non-Taiwanese). Feeling hurt by this political labelling, Hua retreated from Taiwanese organisations and took part in a Mainlander-based Chinese women's organisation and a Qingtianian organisation but remained wary of getting involved in sensitive political activities.

It is interesting to see how political orientation can be manipulated to impact the development of a national identity. Hua had a multicultural identity—she was not only a Taiwan-born Taiwanese but also a Chinese Mainlander because of her mother tongue—so she anticipated changes brought on by Taiwan's next presidential election would allow her Chinese identity to be recognised. In other words, the sense of belonging is a matter of ongoing construction. Hua intended to make sense of her identity not only because of her collective origin but also in light of events that unfolded over time. Her self-defined identity appears to have been alternately ordered by the perception of meaningful events in her life.

Hua's alternate ethnic identity suggests that identity construction is a learned experience from a biographical trajectory that can be destroyed and reformed depending on the subjective evaluation of contextual limits and cultural constraints. The politicised discourse that split the overseas Taiwanese caused harm to the interpersonal relationship between the informant and her identified group. It is clear to see how the development of a political discourse in the informant's home country impacted the Taiwanese perception of ethnic identity in the country of reception. Ideological conflict between the Taiwanese and Chinese overseas is nothing new. However, the exclusive Taiwanese identity as a threat to the Taiwanese circle is

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[5] Hua's family may be characterised as a transnational network: her parents and elder sister live in Taiwan, one brother lives in Vienna, and another brother and sister settled in the United States. To facilitate communication among intra-and intergenerational family members, Mandarin is accepted by the parents as the primary domestic language by the parents.

crucial as it forces the uprooted party to look for a sense of belonging from Taiwan's counterpart at the cost of the ingroup's disintegration.

13.4   Thematic Analysis—Chinese Restaurateurs and Their Lifeworld

This section discusses the findings and themes that emerged from the interviewees' life stories during the analysis. As my research interest centres on the topics of occupation, family relationships, and social identity, the salient points extracted from the data under the above-mentioned framework may be summarised as follows.

13.4.1   Occupational World

Family Status Revised and Occupational Orientation

For many of the informants, the continuity and future development of family was their fundamental life goal and immigration was considered a practical strategy to improve the lives of successive generations. In addition, several informants who as students did not expect to stay permanently in the country of residence decided to change their plans after they experienced events such as marriage and childbirth. In other words, a significant change in family status seems to have provided motivation to assimilate in order to assure their family's future development.

Although family values were persistent among Chinese interviewees, the structural effects of individualisation in the host society emerged in several cases. The literature asserts that the effects mentioned above would be more significant in the second generation born in the host country, as these children would likely be more acculturated (Massey 2005; Wong 1992). The Belgium-born subjects were not the focus of this research, but their experience would be an important topic for further research.

Whether or not the informants chose a lifelong or temporary occupation in the restaurant business, most demonstrated a clear desire to provide higher career-building mobility for their children. Although a few of the informants suffered from the precarious nature of the business, most endorsed the positive effects of continued family development and entrepreneurship in the process of localisation. Thus, the restaurant sector has been serving as an incubator for the continuity and development of Chinese families. Consequently, Chinese restaurateurs have used their accumulated resources to enable successive generations to have more diversified career options and upward social mobility.

Transcendent Thinking on 'Downward' Occupation

Some Chinese higher education graduates who invested in the restaurant sector were driven by family responsibility and some tended to transcend an occupational orientation to a level of collective interest. This was particularly true for Chinese intellectuals who failed to return to China for political reasons and thus transformed patriotic love into an effort to promote Chinese culture in their host country.

Assimilation of Biographical Trajectory

Family members and the extended-family network are still the main support for informants in the process of economic integration. For the early settlers from Hong Kong and later Qingtians, known as 'Qiaohsiang (homeland for Chinese overseas)', an established social network minimised the risk of emigration and facilitated economic integration by providing an immediate income and support system in the form of the catering business. The restaurants in Belgium act as incubators that enable families to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, and capital for their businesses to survive. As intergenerational business experience is circulated, creating wealth through the catering business has become a primary commitment in post-migration life. Thus, it is an effective conduit for localisation among co-ethnics that generates benefits from within.

Reciprocity in Family Project and Immigration

The literature asserts that immigration often entails family decision-making instead of individual action. My findings support the argument that immigrants usually engage in reciprocal communication with their homeland and country of residence. Immigration not only changes the prospective immigrant's biographical trajectory, but also that of his or her family. For example, starting a successful business may transform a housewife into an entrepreneur and force her grandparents to assume care for their grandchild, which allows for the subsequent migration of the immigrant's siblings or other relatives. The engrained reciprocity in the migratory process explains the failure of one-direction immigration policies and also the need to develop multilateral cooperation between governments and citizens.

   In addition, the life and work of a married couple may appear to be closely intertwined and hard to separate. As new opportunities and constraints emerge in post-migration life, women tend to play a substantial part in economic integration. Entrepreneurship opportunities for women appear to be legitimated in a society where the family system is more or less based on equality between men and women. However, the economic emancipation of women does not relieve them from family

burdens, and in reality they must play multiple roles in both family care and business development. However, some women interviewees welcomed this challenge given such a dual role would be impossible in their homeland.

13.4.2   Family World

The Father-Son/Daughter Dyadic Family System in Transition

The traditional father-son dyadic relationship and family organisation is challenged in a society where equality of individuality and gender is valued and is based on a husband-wife dyadic system. It is not unusual for father-daughter conflicts to occur when both parties are struggling with a status change in the host society. In an extreme case, a daughter attempted suicide in response to her father's forceful marriage proposition, revealing the naiveté of the young female immigrant and the lack of a supportive environment. Thus, humane and empathetic intervention by professional resources was found to be helpful for the daughter in this interviewee's case. In this case, the informants relied on an informal family network, so their response to a family crisis was personal and individualised. There should be room for public institutions to create an environment that enables immigrant families to strengthen a supportive and multicultural neighbourhood via ingroup members or ethnic organisations.

Paradox in Immigration and Mobility of Second Generations

Education and knowledge are highly valued by Chinese parents regardless of their territorial identity and former educational background (Qingtian, Cantonese, Taiwanese, etc.). The assimilated values of higher education ostensibly would produce more career options and opportunities for the second generation. However, the multiple burdens faced by female migrants and familial struggles to overcome a stressful downgrading of business are lasting challenges for Chinese restaurateurs. Some couples questioned their emigration decision because of struggles with balancing childcare and business operations. Thus, transnational familial support emerged as an effective solution, with cross-generational childrearing becoming a typical arrangement for struggling young parents of Qingtian origin.

Restricted access to the mainstream labour market and oversaturation of a niche sector causes stress for many Chinese families. Although remigration and alternative employment are a part of the solution, providing adequate vocational advice and developing individualised guidance programmes for Chinese restaurateurs who intend to switch occupations appears to be urgent work.

Institutional Discrimination and Its Effects

Accused of membership in the Chinese mafia and embroiled in legal proceedings since 1995, Zan experienced suffering akin to that of chronic illness (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Strauss 1993). As chronic illness places a physical and mental burden on a patient's family, similar symptoms emerged from Zan's biography and his wife felt the related effects. Struck by the unfounded accusation as a family shame, Zan's restaurant business deteriorated and the couple's relationship became precarious after he became addicted to cigarettes and alcohol. Thus it is necessary to provide adequate background about immigrants' culture and empathetic training practices for policemen, social inspectors, and fiscal controllers.

Attitude for 'Foreign' Marriage Mate

Ethnicity and cultural origin are still concerns in mate matching, but an attitude of tolerance is increasingly common in older generations. The process of selective acculturation reveals the persistence of Chinese culture when marriage is an issue. Moreover, the lively transnational networking between Chinese families facilitates the activities of mate matching of the same ethnicity for the sake of new communication technology and transport facility.

13.4.3   Social Relational World

Chinese Community—An Ancient Power Game in Modern Times

Ingroup relationships are complicated and intertwined with emotions characterised by concepts of 'renqing/人情 (favour)', 'mianzi/面子 (face)', and 'guanxi/關係 (personal relations)', which the literature of psychological anthropology and social psychology have explored (Hsu 1985; Hwang 1987; Ho 1976, 2004; Chang 1994). As the rule of reciprocity applies in chain migration and overseas employment, the ingroup relationship between predecessors and newcomers may be interpreted as a patron-recipient relationship under the framework of favour and unfair employment from an outsider's point of view. 'Renqing (favour)' can be artfully applied to the foundation and management of Chinese organisations, and indeed most Chinese organisations still function under the principles of 'renqing', 'mianzi', and 'guanxi'. It is quite rare to find a Chinese organisation where modern management principles have been applied, as evidenced by 'Chinatowns' established by second generation immigrants or professionals in the United States. Thus, it is crucial as well as extremely difficult to recruit young multicultural devotees who can identify immigrants' emerging needs for more effective localisation through modern governance.

Chinese Immigrants—Vitality from Diversity

It is self-evident to recognise the supportive function that Chinese social groups and volunteer organisations offer their members and participants. However, a sense of belonging and spirit of collectivity cannot be devoid of cultural concerns such as kinship, territorial origin, mother tongue, political identity, and so on. Similarly, the structural barriers delimited by the sophisticated federal system of Belgium must also be acknowledged. Cross-organisational activity may be found during traditional festivals such as Chinese New Year or Mid-Autumn, or in political events to some extent mobilised by the Chinese government. Apart from these occasions, however, there is no regular cooperation among Chinese organisations, let alone the constitution of a nationwide federation. Some Chinese leaders expect to see a unified Chinese community in Belgium, but the likelihood is this will never happen. Nevertheless, each Chinese organisation has its cultural affinity and particular interests. Indeed, the Chinese are never unified but clustered in a particular way and for unique reasons. It is crucial to increase mutual understanding among these groups and organisations, but it may be Platonic thinking to view the Chinese population in Belgium as a unified group.

Pragmatic Realism in the Process of Localisation

The inclination towards acculturation is perceived as a contingent and practical strategy in the interest of upward mobility. However, many informants admitted the necessity of integration into the country of reception but felt compelled to convey Chinese culture and customs to younger generations. The Chinese language is not only valued out of concern for cultural continuity but also for its growing importance in a globalised labour market. In other words, embedded Chinese culture and acculturated experiences of the host country are perceived as complementary parts in a pragmatic strategy geared towards better integration.

Multicultural Chinese—from Being to Becoming

Seeing Chinese immigrants as having a multicultural identity from the perspective of an individual's biography suggests giving priority to subjective experiences developed in various cultural localities. As discussed in Hua's case (i.e. of an unwanted break from her self-identified group caused by the hostility between Chinese and Taiwanese groups), the proposed biographical approach would be of help to read 'Chinese' with wide and multiple references and enable a new dialogue between long-hostile parties.

13.5 Strategies for Localisation—Typology

In this section, the localisation strategies among the interviewees are reported. As migrants' life stories are always concerned with actions and reactions to structural constraints and temporal dis/continuity, their strategies are much about how they make sense of their present situation in light of family history and the socio-economic challenges of their host society. Note that the strategies were sorted out and generated at the time of the interviews. Some biographies indicate the transferability or interruption of various types of strategies. Hence there is room for mobility among the strategic orientation assumed by the interactive work of agency and structure (Archer 2003).

13.5.1 Ingroup Assimilation

This type of strategy was common for informants who demonstrated a strong connection to their past life and culture. Several informants took advantage of embedded social networks and expressed devotion to the betterment of their family and future generations. For them, immigration did not necessarily cause a break with the past, nor did it appear to be a turning point in their life. They assimilated into an occupational milieu of senior fellows, seeking an economically independent trajectory that would benefit their core family and successive generations.

Chinese restaurateurs who used ingroup assimilation relied on social bonding with co-ethnics to maintain and develop a network of relationships. They tended to downplay the complexity of Chinese interpersonal relationships and complain about the social relational burden incurred by the Chinese community.

Parental immigrants expressed concern about their children's upward mobility, but they were pragmatic about issues of localisation. Several informants originated from rural areas that did not offer opportunities for higher education, but these interviewees were aware of the limits of cultural capital. Although there are clear benefits to social bonding and cultural continuity, these informants believed that the second generation would deviate from the restaurateur's trajectory in order to honour their parents' wishes. Thus, ingroup assimilation appears to be a detour strategy for Chinese restaurateurs to generate resources for better localisation.

Some interviewees expressed a sense of isolation and worry about the increasing gap between themselves and the second generation. This was particularly true for retirees who lived on their own and lacked social outlets, as there is no Chinese organisation for the elderly other than in downtown Antwerp. A related worry was the possibility of needing care from a local institutional centre once they lost the capability to make a living. How to adapt to local dietary habits and establish personal contacts within an institutional environment appear to be emerging fears for less acculturated immigrants of this type.

13.5.2   Endorsing Individuality

Informants who embraced individuality tended to be selective about establishing links with their past—several interviewees had an unpleasant past, and some sought to break completely with their past life. Cultural continuity and the family's future development were not prior concerns for this group, obviously. Some kept their distance from Chinese social networks due to negative personal experiences and preferred to externalise links with autochthon people. They believed an individual's efforts were central to career building (vs. family or relatives' support). When work or business was identified as a primary concern, no resistance to acculturation was expressed. Accordingly, more efforts were made to assimilate to the host society instead of investing time within an ethnic group.

For this group, self-reliance appeared to be the strategy for localisation. Although several informants were capable restaurant owners, they were reluctant to seek out emotional support from co-ethnics or autochthon friends. As they placed emphasis upon life and economic achievements, there was more concern about structural constraints and the development of occupational alternatives.

13.5.3   Multi-engagement

This type of informant appeared to be capable of connecting cultural and structural resources in service of crossing cultural boundaries. They sought out cultural capital that enabled them to communicate with local people. They expressed an attachment to an inherited past and tended to see restaurant work as a way to glorify family and their ancestors. Regarding issues of social identity, they identified with Chinese ethnicity but demonstrated a sense of membership with the host society as well. This sense of citizenship enabled them to move beyond private concerns and devote themselves to collective Chinese affairs. Some of them did not have higher education but all exhibited good communication and leadership skills. Usually the informants of this type overcame difficulties of economic integration and showed commitment to helping their fellow countrymen in an organised and collective way. Some people in this group viewed the restaurant business as not only a profit-making enterprise, but also as a way to demonstrate Chinese fine arts by means of Chinese cuisine.

Compared with ingroup assimilation informants, multi-engagement informants tended to incorporate their cultural continuity into concerns for local constraints and to safeguard the interest of their fellow Chinese. In contrast with those who endorsed individuality, multi-engagement informants shared a high degree of interest in career development and entrepreneurship but were willing to distribute part of their profits to support Chinese group affairs.

This group was highly involved with Chinese organisations, but were often critical of Chinese self-centredness and their indifference to community affairs.

Some of them complained that the Chinese would spend money and time on gambling but not donate one penny for the common good. Moreover, with their accumulated experiences in restaurant management, they tended to employ various kinds of capital to increase visibility among Chinese co-ethnics or even participation in political affairs in the homeland. A good business profile would enable them to establish connections with local politicians and thus direct more attention to Chinese affairs.

13.5.4   Broken Biography

Some informants were not easily identified with any of the above-mentioned types. At the time of the interview, these informants appeared to be confined by both structural and cultural constraints that prevented certain actions. Some of their biographies may be classified as a sort of ruptured ingroup assimilation, as they demonstrated a strong attachment to cultural continuity and family bonding but felt vulnerable or helpless to develop a concrete plan of action. For example, Zan was a victim of institutional discrimination. He felt his family and life were gravely wounded after a large-scale investigation into whether he was involved with the Chinese mafia. Suffering from an unfounded accusation (and incurring a huge penalty for illegal employment since 1995), Zan's restaurant business went into a downward spiral and he subsequently was excluded from the Chinese community. He was desperate to repair his marriage and questioned his decision to emigrate from China.

Differing from the deviant type of ingroup assimilation described above, Ping's biography appears to be a fractured type of individuality endorsement. She strongly regretted having to quit her beloved profession as a dance teacher in Taiwan and felt overburdened by business start-up activities and the responsibilities of having to care for two children. She felt constrained by restaurant work and also wondered about her decision to leave her home country, as she and her husband failed to provide a better environment for their children and were overwhelmed by the demands of running their business.

In the case of broken biographies, the narrators tended to evade challenges and assumed an apathetic attitude towards the future. Some informants obsessed over past misfortunes and were rendered indifferent to their present situation while others adopted a compromised attitude towards risk and felt unable to fulfil their dreams. In both cases, stress prevented informants from drawing a clear picture of their future, and therefore some external consultation or intervention seemed to be needed.

13.6 Conclusion and Implications

13.6.1 The Sociological Contribution of a Biographical Approach to International Migration

As stated above, the aim of this research project was to investigate how an individual's life story makes sense of the past and relates it to the present time. Each biography reflects not only the structural and cultural constraints the narrators encountered but also the possibilities and opportunities that were demonstrated through their projects and actions. In line with the agency's theory, bridging the micro and macro dichotomy allows us to see how Chinese immigrants respond to structural constraints and transform life projects into practices for localisation. Thus, my findings support structure-oriented theories in the sense that individual actions are the response to and the source of the process of structuration. I argue that migration and settlement form the 'playground' of the ongoing interplay of structure and agency.

However, we cannot identify the effects of structural factors without looking at the micro level. Thus, a biographical analysis approach provides a platform for in-depth understanding of the transactions that occur within the phenomenon of international migration. Alternatively, biography produces a meso-level solution to the patch-like theories that frame international migration. That is, it allows researchers and policymakers to avoid overlooking structural undertakings (the macro level) or individual experiences (the micro level), as remarked by Firkin (2004).

13.6.2 Empirical Contribution

Immigration is not an end, but a waypoint in an individual's life project. Most theories see migration and settlement as dependent variables instead of intervening variables. Policymakers need to be aware of the significance of personal and family stories before considering prescriptions for immigrants, and it is comparably important to evaluate the complexity of immigrants' life projects which shape their concerns about structural and cultural customs.

Bearing this in mind, it must be noted that categorising immigrants in terms of economic or political reasons, or classification strictly by nationality, can lead to misleading data. To some extent, these reductive categorisations may lead to missed opportunities for exploring the sources of enablement and empowerment that are frequently engrained in migrants' individual biographies. A pre-set category may oblige immigrants to bear a given image and the related judgments and expectations that accompany it. For example, seeing immigrants simply in terms of economic

motivation may lead to scapegoating for increased unemployment and unwelcome social burdens. Similarly, categorisation as a political refugee may stoke citizens' view of refugees as a source of public disorder.

Chinese immigrants are assumed to be the least incorporated ethnic group as they appear to have less involvement with local communities.[6] However, in Hua's case I intended to demonstrate her identity transformation over various phases of her life and her efforts to become part of mainstream society. In other words, I note that social integration can be examined not only through an ethnic group's public/collective participation but also by an examination of each individual's identity transformation over different phases of life.[5]

13.6.3   Policy Implications

The patterned behaviour or types of actions for localisation presented earlier in this chapter provide a comprehensive picture of Chinese immigrants in the process of migration and settlement. The identification of strategic actions and in particular broken biographies provide insight into the dynamics that should be evaluated before and during immigration policy discussions. Three strategies were identified. The Chinese subjects who pursued ingroup assimilation were apt to take supportive measures for family development and to foresee the specific needs of aged immigrants within the local social care system. Informants who endorsed individuality were anxious to find work and business opportunities, but they may need more consultation about occupational orientation and guidance regarding alternative careers. Informants who used a multi-engagement strategy may be the most effective bridge-builders for localisation; their devotion to Chinese organisations and related affairs can lead to strengthened organisational management and information exchange. Thus, it is extremely important to create incentives and enable multi-engagement informants to participate more substantially in the process of policy-making and realisation.

Regarding informants who were identified as having broken biographies, the obstacles they are confronted with may require public resources to address their specific needs. A defeated biography, as seen in Zan's case, may serve as a reminder of the lifelong suffering that the misuse of public order can produce. A failed suicide attempt demonstrates the vulnerability that some immigrant families have to endure when coping with societal change. Finally, the fractured biography of an exhausted interviewee who failed to balance career and family commitments indicates that more cross-departmental collaboration efforts are needed between families, labour market representatives, and immigration policymakers.

In light of the findings above, I suggest that policymakers prioritise two areas: (1) the implementation of an environment that is friendly to immigrant families, and

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[6] Interview with Ms. S, head of a government-sponsored institution for multicultural integration in 2005.

(2) enforcement of capacity building on behalf of Chinese organizations. A tangential concern is the problem of aged ethnic Chinese who need institutional care and expressed concern about social isolation. Chinese organizations that target elders' well-being should cooperate with local care centres to identify the needs of elderly people, in particular concerns about dietary habits and religious beliefs.

My preliminary research findings tend to support the need for more biographical research work on international immigration. Such work will benefit not only researchers and historians concerned with what lessons migration experiences may teach, but also public servants and policymakers concerned with the public good.

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