

Vancouver's *newest* Chinese diaspora: settlers or “immigrant prisoners”?

Sin Yih Teo

Published online: 8 June 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

Abstract This study seeks to reground concepts of “diaspora” and “transnationalism” in the realities of everyday life through examining the lived experiences of immigrants. Based on in-depth household interviews and focus groups, it examines the newest Chinese diaspora in Vancouver—skilled immigrants from the People’s Republic of China. It explores the challenges that they face in an unfamiliar city, including employment and language barriers as well as domestic anxieties surrounding childcare, education and marital difficulties. The strategies that they adopt to counter these problems are at times transnational—in the form of astronaut families or transnational childcare—but almost always familial. Ultimately, the settlement challenges that they face, coupled with the available transnational possibilities, raise the question of whether they are settlers or “immigrant prisoners”, temporarily serving their time in Vancouver before a further relocation.

Keywords Diaspora · People’s Republic of China · Skilled immigrants · Transnationalism · Vancouver

In Vancouver’s Chinatown, S.U.C.C.E.S.S., one of the largest immigration and social service agencies in

British Columbia, regularly holds a welcome reception for new immigrants at its headquarters. At one such session in 2002, 60 new immigrants originating from 17 cities in the People’s Republic of China (PRC)¹ were present, many with their families. When asked for their most pressing need, the answer was unanimous: to find a professional job. Just as this scene is reminiscent of the struggles that countless immigrants preceding them have historically faced, it also represents the latest major wave of immigration to Canada, which in turn is rooted in the landmark change in Canadian immigration policy in 1967 when the main immigrant selection criterion changed from immigrants’ country of origin to their potential human capital under the “point” system (Green and Green 1996). Until then, immigrants from Europe and the United States, with the United Kingdom as a leading national source, had dominated immigration to Canada; just a generation ago, in 1966, between 80 and 90% of new arrivals originated in these two source regions (Ley 1999). The new legislation dramatically transformed the composition of immigrant origins, with a significant shift to Asia, the source of less than 10% of new arrivals in 1966, and of nearly 65% by 1996 (ibid).

The changing face of immigration has been particularly evident in Vancouver, an aspiring world city in the Pacific Rim that has consistently been

S. Y. Teo (✉)
Department of Geography, University of British
Columbia, 1984 West Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada
V6T 1Z2
e-mail: syteo1@gmail.com

¹ Thereafter, all references to “PRC” or “China” exclude the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong.

ranked among the most liveable locations in the world. As one of the top three destinations for immigrants to Canada, other than Toronto and Montreal, Vancouver has become a living “laboratory” for studying the geographies of immigration. The prominence of Asia as a source area for recent immigrants in Vancouver is clearly demonstrated in Table 1.

In this “borderland” city, David Ley (1995) has written of the engagement between the first diaspora—stemming from the largely pre-1967 movement of British colonial power overseas—and the second diaspora of wealthy overseas Chinese from Hong Kong and Taiwan who mainly arrived in the 1980s and 1990s. The infusion of Chinese capital into the city, the ensuing transformation of its downtown core as well as the cultural politics surrounding “monster houses” and the “missing sequoias” have been well documented (Ley 1995, 1998; Mitchell, 1993, 1995, 1997a; Olds 1998). By contrast, there is a lack of academic attention on the latest wave of immigration from the PRC, which has been the top source country of immigrants to Canada since 1998, replacing Hong Kong’s former leading position. At the national level, the growth of PRC immigrants has been particularly rapid, rising from 13,309 in 1995—the year when full immigration processing began in China—to 40,365 in 2001, marking a more than three-fold increase in 6 years (CIC 2004). Similarly, in Vancouver, PRC immigrants have ranked first

since 1998 (CIC 1999, 2002). Immigration from China is thus an important but under-researched trend.

In the present paper, I examine this most recent wave of immigration from the PRC to Vancouver since 1995. Conceptually, my objective is to reground academic discussions of diaspora and transnationalism in the realities of everyday life through exploring the lived experiences of immigrants—private accounts which are hidden from the public view provided by census statistics and immigration data. I draw on focus groups and in-depth household interviews with PRC skilled immigrants residing in Vancouver, British Columbia. Of central concern are their current circumstances, as well as the kind of attitudes, and strategies, that they are adopting at present, and in the future. Specifically, are there signs of transnationalism? Furthermore, will these immigrants settle in Canada—or relocate elsewhere?

Positioning the *newest* Chinese diaspora

Since the 1990s, there has been a celebration of the “diasporic” in contemporary cultural debates as a space of liberation from the dominant hegemonies of nation and race (Mitchell 1997b). Previously, diaspora referred to the specific situation of a people living outside of their traditional homeland. In much of cultural theory today, however, the term signifies a

Table 1 Immigration to Vancouver from top ten source countries

| COUNTRY | 1998 | | | 1999 | | | 2000 | | | 2001 | | |
|------------------------|--------|-------|------|--------|-------|------|--------|-------|------|--------|-------|------|
| | # | % | Rank | # | % | Rank | # | % | Rank | # | % | Rank |
| PRC | 5,537 | 17.33 | 1 | 8,077 | 24.95 | 1 | 9,483 | 28.48 | 1 | 9,518 | 27.86 | 1 |
| India | 3,245 | 10.15 | 3 | 3,438 | 10.62 | 3 | 3,826 | 11.49 | 2 | 3,914 | 11.46 | 2 |
| Philippines | 2,439 | 7.63 | 5 | 2,579 | 7.97 | 4 | 2,619 | 7.87 | 3 | 3,125 | 9.15 | 3 |
| Republic of Korea | 1,733 | 5.42 | 7 | 2,001 | 6.18 | 5 | 1,994 | 5.99 | 5 | 2,656 | 7.77 | 4 |
| Taiwan | 4,679 | 14.64 | 2 | 3,508 | 10.83 | 2 | 2,174 | 6.53 | 4 | 1,861 | 5.45 | 5 |
| Iran | 1,751 | 5.48 | 6 | 1,440 | 4.45 | 6 | 1,221 | 3.67 | 6 | 1,227 | 3.59 | 6 |
| United Kingdom | 682 | 2.13 | 8 | 693 | 2.14 | 9 | 632 | 1.90 | 9 | 764 | 2.24 | 7 |
| United States | 646 | 2.02 | 9 | 745 | 2.30 | 8 | 724 | 2.17 | 8 | 679 | 1.99 | 8 |
| Pakistan | 377 | 1.18 | 12 | 555 | 1.71 | 10 | 630 | 1.89 | 10 | 642 | 1.88 | 9 |
| Hong Kong | 2,933 | 9.18 | 4 | 1,303 | 4.02 | 7 | 933 | 2.80 | 7 | 623 | 1.82 | 10 |
| Total for top ten only | 24,219 | 75.79 | | 24,339 | 75.17 | | 24,236 | 72.79 | | 25,009 | 73.21 | |
| Total | 31,956 | 100 | | 32,378 | 100 | | 33,292 | 100 | | 34,165 | 100 | |

Source: CIC, 2001, 2002

more general sense of displacement, as well as a challenge to the limits of existing boundaries (ibid).² One reason for the academic interest could be that scholars are attempting to make sense of their own cosmopolitanism (see Robbins 1992).³ In such writings, the issue of *identity* has been a recurring theme, at times accompanied by a sense of “in-betweenness”. While appreciative of their theoretical merit, I am concerned that the common use of these terms in their abstract sense runs the risk of eliding the actual pains of border crossing and resettlement that may be faced by migrants. Therefore, I subscribe to Katharyn Mitchell’s (1997b: 109) call for “grounded empirical work”, wherein theory is carefully situated in empirical research.

In arguing for a grounded approach, I am also highlighting the significance of concrete *local* differences in diasporic experiences. This is particularly salient in the study of Chinese immigrants where a kind of self-orientation has at times occurred in academic and political constructions of *the* Chinese diaspora (Dirlik 1996). Rather than adhering to the perspective of a singular Chinese diaspora, I agree with Wang’s (1999: 17) position that there are instead “many different Chinese diasporas”, a reality which is all too evident in Vancouver—already home to Chinese from the diverse regions of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, each with their own traditions and cultural practices—yet one that is obfuscated by the homogeneous “Chinese” category in the Canadian Census. Reflecting on the state of scholarship on Chinese subjects, Aihwa Ong (1999: 111) wrote:

An essentializing notion of Chineseness continues to dog the scholarship because the Chinese past, nation, singular history, or some “cultural core” is taken to be the main and unchanging determinant of Chinese identity. Sometimes we forget that we are talking about one-quarter of the world’s population.

² See, for example, Paul Gilroy’s book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

³ Note bell hooks’ observation that international or postcolonial issues are frequently more comfortably dealt with by US academics than those differences of race and class that are closer to home (hooks 1989, 1990).

Likewise, in Vancouver—a city of 2 million—where the Chinese population totaled 342,665 in 2001 (Statistics Canada 2001), finer distinctions are merited. In this paper, I focus on the *newest* Chinese diaspora, which largely arose when Canada started full immigration processing in China in 1995. My emphasis on it being the newest takes into consideration the potential for ever newer Chinese diasporas to emerge, just as the current stream presents a different wave from the Hong Kong and Taiwanese diasporas of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Historically, migration from China to Vancouver dates back to the Fraser River Gold Rush in 1858 (Ng 1999). However, I argue that the present flow of skilled immigrants forms a separate diaspora as a consequence of the institutional framework through which they entered Canada.

Under the “point” system, skilled immigrants are selected based on factors such as “education, work experience, knowledge of English or French and other abilities that will help them to establish themselves successfully as permanent residents in Canada” (CIC website 2006). An underlying assumption for these criteria is that the skills embodied in the immigrants would be transferable to a Canadian context. Here, it is useful to consider the experiences of an earlier diaspora. During the 1980s and 1990s in Vancouver, the popular representation of successful, well-educated immigrant entrepreneurs from Hong Kong was shared by the media, public opinion, government and academics, and resonated with the West Coast representation and *self*-representation of the Chinese immigrants as *homo economicus* (Ley 2003). However, it turned out to be a myth: a successful entrepreneur in Asia is not necessarily an entrepreneur at all in Canada (Ley 1999, 2003). Will the myth of the *homo economicus* apply to the PRC skilled immigrants, as it did for the Hong Kong business immigrants? In other words, is a skilled worker in China also one in Canada?

At the same time, emigration from China globally has reached its highest levels since the start of the reforms in 1978, and the liberalization of migration with the emigration law of 1985 (Pieke 1998). Accompanying this trend has been a distinct transformation in the PRC state’s attitude towards emigrants. As Pal Nyíri (2001: 637) observed, “in just over two decades, the nature of emigration has turned from treacherous, to tolerated but ideologically

suspect, to patriotic.’’ This change can be understood in terms of the state’s strategic recognition of new migrants as a highly useful resource for economic construction in China, the attraction of foreign investors and business partners, as well as the leadership of overseas Chinese communities. From this perspective, it appears that PRC migrants are enjoying a new state-sanctioned flexibility. Aihwa Ong (1999) has eloquently captured the way Hong Kong migrants respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions through transnational movements. To what extent are PRC migrants acting in a similar way? Furthermore, how does transnationalism affect their lives in reality?

Methodology and profile

Focus groups and in-depth household interviews were conducted—usually in Mandarin—with 78 PRC skilled immigrants in Vancouver from 2001 to 2002. A pilot study was first held with a focus group of five participants who were recruited from an online mailing list. Snowball sampling using a range of entry points provided 18 households. Another 18 households as well as two focus groups (eight participants each) were recruited with the assistance of the immigration service agency S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Participants were immigrants of PRC origin who entered Canada through the skilled immigration program, and landed in or between 1996 and 2001. Wherever possible, I tried to have a broad spectrum across gender, year of landing,⁴ number of household members, province of origin, and occupation in China. To ensure that the research environment was convenient and comfortable for participants, interviews were conducted mainly in their homes. The pilot group was held at UBC and the other two focus groups at the headquarters of S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Elsewhere, I have discussed related methodological issues, including the dynamics of household interviews when both spouses are present as well as my situatedness as a researcher (Teo 2003a).

In terms of profile, there were 41 females and 37 males. The age distribution clustered between 30 and 39 (Table 2), and included mostly married immi-

grants. There were a total of 57 households, of which 41 had one child,⁵ six had two children and 10 had none. Approximately two-thirds of the sample landed in 2000 and 2001. Reflecting their status as skilled immigrants, most respondents were highly educated, with 56 holding a Bachelor’s degree, 17 with Masters and one Ph.D. Candidate. Of the remaining four, three were polytechnic graduates and one a high school graduate. Likewise, a high proportion was in professional occupations in China.

Lofty ambitions, thwarted dreams

Through the words they chose, my respondents painted a poignant picture of their worlds after migration. Almost all of them faced a drop in living standards. One respondent, Evelyn, 35, told me that when she was among friends from the PRC, they would say that their time in Vancouver was like “*shangshanxiang*”, which referred to a movement during the Cultural Revolution whereby educated urban youth would be sent to “labour and reform” in the countryside. Jingwen, 36, added:

We joke that skilled immigrants are like those Sichuanese seasonal migrant workers coming to Guangdong to do very laborious work. They have poor meals and live in very bad conditions... very, very bad ones. We compare ourselves—skilled immigrants who have *come to Canada*—to agricultural workers who *come to Guangdong* to do those kinds of work. (My emphasis)

A common element in their descriptions is the usage of past, and contemporary, events in China to contextualize their experiences in Canada. Immigration, by definition, connotes arrival at a different place. However, this does not mean a tabula rasa, a past way of thinking, and living, erased from their minds. Instead, their frames of reference fluctuate between the familiar world of China, and the new world of Canada, and not infrequently, arise from both simultaneously. Thus for Jingwen, who had migrated from Guangdong, those workers were “coming”—not “going”—to Guangdong, just as

⁴ It was particularly difficult to recruit earlier immigrants who arrived in 1996 or 1997.

⁵ Note China’s One-Child policy since 1978.

Table 2 Age grouping of participants

| Age | 25–29 | 30–34 | 35–39 | 40–44 | 45–49 | 50–54 |
|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| No. | 2 | 33 | 30 | 9 | 1 | 3 |

she herself had “come to” Canada. From listening to my respondents, it seems to me that what renders their experiences in Canada all the more painful, is their instinctive comparison of present circumstances with past achievements and status that may mean little in a different society. A key reason for the migrants’ decision to migrate was their quest for personal, especially career, development (Teo 2003a). Once here, however, some felt that their former confidence was eroded. Shulin, 34, observed:

I think when those who had lofty ambitions and grand dreams in the past go abroad and stay for a few years, they will think that they just want an ordinary life. They may have thought of achieving a great career in North America before they went abroad; but after staying here for a few years, they don’t think this way anymore. They feel that it is not bad to have a stable job, to lead their lives peacefully.

Next, I examine the grounds for these sentiments.

The employment conundrum

Peirong, 36: There is a saying, “Whether Canada is heaven or hell, the crux is if you have a good job.” If you have a very good job, it is heaven. If you have no job, then it is hell. It is not better than going back to China.

Yihui, 34: What disappoints me after coming here is that about 80% of those I know are not in their original occupations.

To paint a bold brushstroke, the single most critical issue facing recent PRC skilled immigrants is that of employment, specifically employment commensurate with their educational qualifications and work experience. According to Ms Lilian To, the agency’s former Executive Director, many of the PRC skilled immigrants are professionals with degrees in engineering or information technology, and approxi-

mately one in four has a background in finance or business, yet about 40% of them fail to find work related to their training (Matas 2002). Instead, it has become commonplace to hear of former engineers, teachers and doctors working as dishwashers, factory workers and janitors, earning the minimum wage of \$8/h.

Indeed, there was a striking change in my respondents’ occupations after immigration (Table 3). Professional occupations in all fields showed a significant drop. For example, the number in professional occupations in natural and applied sciences, which include engineering and computer science, decreased from 29 to three and those in business and finance dropped from 11 to two. As for the six participants who found jobs in professional occupations in social science, education, government and religion, three of them had switched to their new jobs only in Canada,⁶ indicating that most of those originally in the sector (mainly teachers) were no longer so. In addition, none of those working at the senior management occupation were holding similar positions after immigration. On the other hand, the service sector had a sharp increase in the number of employees. Overall, there appeared to be a substantial amount of underemployment—e.g., former engineers working as machine operators and laborers—as well as unemployment. More females also became housewives and a sizeable number were students.

Respondents identified three main obstacles hindering their employment: the licensing requirements set by professional associations, the demand for local work experience and language difficulties. The experiences of a married couple, Elaine and Philip, illustrate the employment difficulties. Elaine, 36, used to be a human resource manager at a hotel while Philip, 38, who had an engineering background, was the assistant general manager of a shipping company. Both held Masters degrees from respected universities in China. Upon arrival in 2000, Philip sent out resumes—“maybe up to a hundred”—to companies,

⁶ Two as translators/interpreters and one as a social worker.

Table 3 Occupations of respondents before immigration in China and after immigration in Canada

| Occupations | In China | In Canada |
|---|----------|-----------|
| Senior management occupations | 7 | |
| Professional occupations in business and finance | 11 | 2 |
| Skilled administrative and business occupations | 6 | 6 |
| Professional occupations in natural & applied sciences | 29 | 3 |
| Administrator | 1 | |
| Technician | | 3 |
| Professional occupations in health | 6 | 2 |
| Technical and skilled occupations in health | | 1 |
| Prof occup in soc sci, education, gov services, and relig | 14 | 6 |
| Professional occupations in art and culture | 1 | |
| Technical and skilled occup in art, culture, rec & sport | 1 | |
| Skilled sales and service occupations | 1 | 4 |
| Intermediate sales and service occupations | | 2 |
| Elemental sales and service occupations | | 3 |
| Trades | | 1 |
| Process, manufact, & utilities supervis & skilled operator | | 3 |
| Labourers in processing, manufacturing, and utilities | | 4 |
| Housewife | 1 | 9 |
| Unemployed | | 9 |
| Students at university or other higher education | | 5 |
| Preparing to attend graduate school | | 2 |
| Studying ESL | | 3 |
| Studying for certificates in trades | | 3 |
| N.A. (either residing in China or no intention to look for job yet) | | 7 |

but only three or four replied, with rejections. Elaine too met similar rebuffs. Four months later, Philip found a job at a Chinese supermarket and worked there for half a year before taking up a communications course at a local college while working part-time at a factory. He was later retrenched from the factory, and was on unemployment benefits at the time of interview. Meanwhile, Elaine had changed several jobs: working in a food court for 3 weeks, and then as an assistant to a realtor for a few months. Finally, she found employment as a sales coordinator with a telephone card company. Both expressed their disappointment at not being able to find jobs commensurate with their education and experience.

Philip pointed out that when he was applying for immigration, the Canadian immigration authorities had requested for, and approved, his Chinese educational qualifications. Yet, when he used those very certificates to apply for jobs, the Canadian companies demanded “local degrees”, in addition to “local

experience”. The non-recognition of foreign credentials and work experience are not entirely unique to PRC skilled immigrants; rather, they are problems encountered by many newly-arrived skilled immigrants to Canada more generally (Bauder 2002; Geddie 2002; Zong 2003). However, compared to immigrants from countries where English is used more widely, the language barrier further complicates the employment difficulties faced by PRC immigrants.

Language barriers: “circling outside their circle”

The acquiring of English language skills was a priority for many respondents. Within a household, there was often one spouse who was stronger in English and the other might attend English as Second Language classes. Minglu, 35, contemplated upon the difficulty of his situation:

I can only say this: language (learning) is not about 1 or 2 days. Without 3 or 5 years, it is impossible to improve a lot. I am already trying my best but it may not be possible because of the environment. If you can't find a job that allows you to interact with the locals, then it is hard to improve your English. At the same time, if you can't improve your English, you can't find such jobs. It is a vicious cycle.

Expressing their sentiments in layered nuances, my respondents noted that culture is imbued in language, and that, even if they were able to cross one barrier by mastering English, it would still be difficult for them to cross the cultural barrier, and communicate—in the true sense of the word. Respondents often lamented how their attempts to integrate into Canadian society were being hindered by the lack of social bridges, resulting in their friendship circles being still largely Chinese. Philip conveyed his frustration:

Actually, how much we earn is not the main thing. We feel that we have been here for such a long time but we have not entered the society. Even though we are in Canada, we are circling outside their circle. We have not entered it at all. This is in fact... how should I say it... we feel... this is the greatest failure, the greatest failure. (My emphasis)

Domestic anxieties: childcare, education, and marital difficulties

Immigrants also encountered issues that developed from within the household. One important concern was that of childcare. Previously in China, the child would either be looked after by the grandparents or be placed in childcare centres while both parents were at work. Here in Canada, the absence of the extended family and affordable childcare meant that one parent had to take care of the child at home and thus not work. Several parents also highlighted another concern: the children's education. Although many respondents had voiced that one of their migration motivations was for the children's education, some now harboured doubts. Binya, 35, divulged:

The education we imagined before migration is quite different from the reality. At that time, we thought the education must be very good. After

we came here, I feel that the education is not anything great. Sometimes, I'm even worried whether we might have ruined the child.

While for these respondents, the comparatively "laidback" style of education in Canada was a cause for worry, especially in terms of their children's performance in Mathematics and Science, other PRC migrants sang praises of the more flexible and creative education they perceived in Canada. On the whole, many parents felt that their children—released from the stress they faced at school in China—were enjoying their time in Canada. Turning to the adults themselves, Haojie told me:

You could say that every new immigrant family is under stress. If you ask 10 people who migrated from China, I believe there are none who are not stressed... unless both spouses are very lucky and found a job immediately. There are such people but I believe there are few of them.

Haojie, 34, was alluding to the marital problems that were faced by some PRC immigrants. Although Haojie considered himself to be among the fortunate "20–30%" of PRC skilled immigrants to be able to work as a technician, he admitted: "Even though I have found such a good job, immigration still has impacts on our family." Referring to his wife who was away in China, he revealed:

She did work in Canada [as a waitress] but she couldn't stand the rotten work. After that, it was not good for her mentally. She developed depression. She couldn't adapt. [...] Hence my wife has gone to and fro twice this year. [...] From the looks of it now, it seems that she is thinking of staying in China. It is a challenge to me. I like this place very much, the job and other aspects. [...] Presently, I don't want to go back.

From Haojie's account, it is apparent that migration can affect the family in rather powerful ways.

Coping strategies: transnational possibilities, familial goals

If words do indeed shape worlds, then the words that my respondents used to describe their situations could

perhaps offer a glimpse into their inner worlds. The saying *jilaizhi zeanzhi*, translated as “since here, might as well be contented, and make the best of it” that I have heard repeatedly from them, convey to me a sense of quiet courage amidst despair. In highlighting the challenges faced by immigrants, my intention is not to cast them in the role of passive victims. Rather, I am emphasizing their *responses* to prevailing circumstances, and paving the ground for appreciating the *agency* that they demonstrated in planning strategies to cope with those challenges. More often than not, I was struck by their stoic acceptance—not of defeat—but of their present experiences as challenges to be overcome. The first step was ineluctably that of a mental adjustment to reality. Iris, 32, advised:

If they can accept reality, then they will like Canada. If they feel that their prospects are not in Canada or they are always thinking about how superior they were in the past, then they may be more pessimistic or consider Vancouver as an “immigration prison”, and plan to go back after they have completed it. For us, although our conditions were superior, the past is already in the past. You are standing on a new starting line. You should have a new kind of thinking to face the new problem.

The second step was usually to adopt a household strategy that optimized the family’s resources and opportunities. For instance, one spouse might work while the other studied English. Furthermore, transnational family arrangements based on continuing movements, and linkages, between China and Canada were also part of the repertoire of strategies that were available to some immigrants. At the point of interview, seven of the 36 households in my research were astronaut families, with the wives in all except one case staying in Vancouver while the husband worked in China and shuttled to Vancouver every 4 months on average. Unlike Hong Kong and Taiwanese astronaut families who decided on the transnational arrangement prior to migration (Waters 2003), for PRC immigrants, this decision was usually made in Canada *after* migration when they had a clearer picture of Canada’s employment condition.⁷

⁷ This suggests that the PRC immigrants had less precise expectations (Teo 2003b).

Invariably, the arrangement stemmed from the family’s realization that the husband would be unable to have a job or business in Canada that was comparable to what he had in China.⁸ All however stressed to me that this was only a *temporary* arrangement, and one that ultimately needed to be resolved. Huiling, 38, an astronaut wife, revealed:

It is difficult for him being alone over there [in China]. He complains that he’s not like someone who has a family; his life is not regular, with no one to take care of him, it is very lonely. [...] And me, I have to take care of two children and go to work. It’s hard on us both but it can’t be helped. Often, he says it’s the cost of our immigration. One thing that we both agree on is that this is temporary. We must think of a plan after we obtain citizenship. Whether it’s him coming or me going back, it’s important that we make a decision.

Speaking to Michael, 39, who came to Vancouver to visit his wife, I was further reminded of the importance of the family. Michael, an MBA graduate from a renowned Chinese university, and the vice president of a major company in China, appeared to be the very embodiment of Aihwa Ong’s (1999) flexible economic subject. In his words:

You can say that the globe is our home. In the past, our consideration may be, for example, that our home is in Nanjing, and our job is in Beijing. Is there much difference between working in Beijing and working in Vancouver? Not really, because to go from Beijing to Nanjing, the most convenient way is to take a train at 10 pm, which will reach Beijing at 7 am. Now from Shanghai to Vancouver, it is 10 h. I think the feeling is about the same. The distance is already not a problem, including communication through telephone and e-mail. It is very convenient. Thus I feel it is about the same everywhere.

When immigrating, he had thought of Vancouver as “a chess-piece in a game of chess”. For him, the strategic move would be to remain in China since “the whole world is thinking well of China’s

⁸ Two of the husbands were businessmen who could better afford this arrangement.

market.’’ Probing deeper, however, Michael admitted:

It’s not good for the family in the long run. Separation is definitely not good. So we will consider being together. [...] It is still the family that is important. (My emphasis)

These dilemmas were mirrored to an extent in the transnational childcare arrangements of some PRC immigrant families. At the time of interview, 11 out of the 29 households with children had sent their children back to China to be looked after by the grandparents or babysitters. Usually, the child was very young. In most cases, when the child reached the school-going age of six or seven, he or she would return to Vancouver. As such, the parents emphasized that this was a temporary arrangement. After all, such a transnational arrangement was usually fraught with heartaches; their pain in separation often compounded by the lack of understanding from other people who were not in their shoes. Shuping, 31, who intended to send her daughter, aged 4, back to China for a short period, said animatedly:

There is no choice. Those Westerners cannot understand. I went to quite a few places and told them my thinking. They said, ‘‘A lot of you PRC immigrants are like that. If it were me, I wouldn’t send my child back.’’ In my heart, I was thinking, ‘‘Of course. You have a job and an income here. How can we compare to you?’’

Settlers or ‘‘immigrant prisoners’’?

The account thus far has focused on the challenges encountered by PRC immigrants, and their coping strategies. It is worth noting that these were very recent immigrants, for whom the disparity between their initial expectations and reality might be the starkest (Teo 2003b). Over time, there appeared to be a general trend among my respondents for their circumstances to improve. Kaiyang, and Biying, both 44, arrived in 1996, and bought a townhouse in 2001 for about CAD 300,000 with a mortgage from the bank. Between the two of them, they earned CAD30–50,000 a year. Their lives were very hectic. Kaiyang was an insurance salesperson and a part-time tour

guide during the summer, and Biying, a beautician. Both also worked in direct sales. Kaiyang was upbeat about the prospects of PRC skilled immigrants:

I definitely believe that those who come out from Mainland China are very eager [to adjust]. There are few who aren’t enthusiastic i.e., everyone will grumble that it is tough, and be disappointed, but after 2 or 3 years, they will not think about it. If after 2 or 3 years, they still have this feeling, then they really have not adapted, and may go back. But there are few people like that. There aren’t people like that among those I know up to now. There is thus an adaptation period. It is natural for those kinds of feelings during the process of adaptation.

Kaiyang’s description follows the notion of a U (or V) shaped curve that typifies immigrant adaptation. Cheryl’s landlord introduced her to the head of a *tongxianghui* (association of fellow townfolk) in Vancouver when she first arrived. Cheryl, 30, recounted what he told her:

A regular pattern is that you may be in a high position in China i.e., a high point on a V. When you first come out, it may be very fresh, and you feel that the air is good, the environment and facilities superior, everything is good. It is like a honeymoon—very sweet. At that point, your spirits rise slightly upwards. When you have settled, and are really adapting to life here, you will discover that everything is strange, even the roads are unfamiliar. Everything is unfamiliar, and everything is different from China. The greatest challenge is employment; it is very difficult to get a job. As a new immigrant, everywhere they want you to have [local] experience etc; all your past glories are useless. At this point, it is a drop, an immediate drop from a high point. Slowly, with adaptation, you can return back to that point. This is a regular pattern of immigration.

Such a curve would reflect the influence of length of settlement on an immigrant’s adjustment, as assumed in traditional theories of immigration (Gordon 1964; Alba 1997). The PRC immigrants would then be no different from conventional immigrant settlers who face all the concomitant struggles of settlement

during the first few years but adapt to the “receiving” country over time. Yet the prevailing discourse amongst respondents suggests that transnationalism may disrupt this straight-line narrative. Through my respondents, I learnt of a popular term “immigration prison” (*yiminjian*).⁹ The term is highly evocative of immigration as a prison sentence that has to be served before freedom—in the form of a Canadian passport—may be obtained. I was told on several occasions that “many” PRC immigrants have returned to China. In a survey, I found that there was a clear divide between those who had yet to decide whether they would stay in Canada (40) and those who would stay for 20 years and above (24).¹⁰ The common refrain among those who had yet to decide was “taking one step at a time” (*zou-yibukanyibu*) or “wait and see”. An important issue that can influence whether immigrants decide to stay in Canada is their perception of the alternative choice—that of return migration to China. Regardless of how respondents viewed return migration, most of those who were undecided about whether they would stay in Canada nevertheless felt that they would at least stay for 3 years to fulfill the requirement for Canadian citizenship. For a number of respondents, a Canadian passport symbolized a mobility that they did not previously enjoy, and offered additional destination possibilities, whether to the US, or other places. As for plans thereafter, Linda, 33, said:

Whether we go back depends on these 3 years. If I am able to find a relatively stable job that I think is quite good, I may remain. But if there is not much opportunity here, it may be better to return to China.

The immigrants’ experiences during the critical 3 years hence determine to a large extent whether they become settlers or released “immigrant prisoners”.

⁹ According to respondents, the term originated from Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants who arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the aim of securing Canadian citizenship as a way to bypass the Hong Kong handover to China and the geopolitical tensions that exist between China and Taiwan. In an ironic turn of events, immigrants from the PRC have now appropriated the discourse.

¹⁰ For the remaining respondents, 11 intended to stay between 1 and 5 years, and three between 6 and 10 years.

Conclusion

With the arrival of this newest Chinese diaspora, Vancouver has further diversified its social and cultural landscapes. The impacts have only begun to manifest, whether in labour-market effects, in settlement service agencies recruiting Mandarin-speaking staff, or in issues of cultural identity. While the Chinese population in Vancouver used to be closely associated with Cantonese speakers, the recent inflow of Mandarin-speaking PRC immigrants has meant that on the streets of Vancouver, one is now just as likely to hear Mandarin as Cantonese, PRC-Mandarin as Taiwanese-Mandarin. Similarly, restaurants offering cuisine from Beijing, Szechuan, Shanghai and other parts of China have sprouted alongside the more familiar Cantonese restaurants. Through reshaping notions of “Chineseness”, recent PRC immigrants are also reconfiguring the urban social geography of Vancouver.

In this study, I have focused on the lived diasporic experiences of PRC skilled immigrants to understand their personal worlds after migration. Whilst my sample is not statistically representative of PRC skilled immigrants in general, I argue that the findings highlight the most salient issues facing the population and reflect the prevailing angst surrounding their initial settlement. I do, however, acknowledge that there are positive accounts too of immigrants who have made a smooth transition to Canada. Even for respondents who encountered considerable difficulties, there are aspects of the immigrant experience which have been uplifting and encouraging. Nonetheless, it is important to understand some of the challenges they are facing so that policy measures can be taken to assist their settlement.

At the heart of the issue is the employment conundrum. Returning to an earlier question, my research reveals that for a considerable proportion of my respondents, a skilled worker in China is *not* necessarily one in Canada. It mirrors David Ley’s (2003) finding on business immigrants in Canada. As such, it brings into question whether there is perhaps a mismatch between the objectives of the skilled immigration program and its outcome in this case. One caveat is that it could be too early to make an adequate assessment. Further research needs to be conducted to follow-up on the immi-

grants' development in the future. A second caveat is that it may be too narrow to conceive of immigrants only as "skilled workers". After all, even though immigrants may embody the skills that Canada desires, they are at the same time *human*, and possess the agency that enables them to accommodate, innovate, and create, even as they negotiate each challenge, whether in crossing employment and language barriers, resolving issues of childcare and education, or overcoming marital difficulties. Moreover, the strategies they adopt to counter these problems are at times transnational—straddling the distance between China and Canada—but, almost always, familial. Thus arrangements, such as astronaut families and transnational childcare, which appear to be flexible and mobile at first glance turn out to have a more rooted ultimate goal: the family as a unit. This essentially brings to light both the flexibility offered by transnationalism, and its limitations. Eventually, the PRC immigrants' experiences, coupled with their perceptions of alternative destinations, will influence whether they settle in Canada or become "immigrant prisoners", temporarily serving their time in Vancouver before a further relocation.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank David Ley, Diana Lary, Wei Li, Carlos Teixeira and an anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am grateful to the Vancouver Metropolis Centre (RIIM) for funding this research and to S.U.C.E.S.S.—especially its former Executive Director, the late Lilian To—for help in recruiting some of the contacts. My deepest thanks go to my respondents for their trust in me.

References

- Alba, R., & Nee, V. (1997). Rethinking assimilation theory for a new era of immigration. *International Migration Review*, 31(4), 826–874.
- Bauder, H. (2002). *Brain abuse or the devaluation of immigrant labour in Canada*. Paper presented at the Canadian Association of Geographers 2002 Annual Meeting, Toronto.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (1999). *Facts and figures 1999: Immigration overview [Electronic Version]*. Ottawa: Strategic Policy, Planning and Research.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2001). *Facts and figures 2001: Immigration overview [Electronic Version]*. Ottawa: Strategic Policy, Planning and Research.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2002). *Facts and figures 2002: Immigration overview [Electronic Version]*. Ottawa: Strategic Policy, Planning and Research.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2004). *Facts and figures 2004: Immigration overview: Permanent and temporary residents [Electronic Version]*. Ottawa: Research and Evaluation Branch.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada website. (2006). Immigrating to Canada as a skilled worker Retrieved September 28, 2006 from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/skilled/index.html>.
- Dirlik, A. (1996). Chinese history and the question of Orientalism. *History and Theory*, 35(4), 96–118.
- Geddie, K. (2002). Licence to labour: Obstacles facing Vancouver's foreign-trained engineers. RIMM Working Paper #02–21. Retrieved from <http://www.riim.metropolis.net>.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Gordon, M. (1964). *Assimilation in American life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Green, A. G., & Green, D. A. (1996). The economic goals of Canada's immigration policy, past and present. RIMM Working Paper #96–04. Retrieved from <http://www.riim.metropolis.net>.
- hooks, b. (1989). Critical interrogation: Talking race, resisting racism. In J. Clifford, & V. Dhareshwar (Eds.), *Traveling theories, traveling theorists, inscriptions*, 5, 159–164.
- hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston: South End Press.
- Ley, D. (1995). Between Europe and Asia: The case of the missing sequoias. *Ecumene*, 2(2), 185–210.
- Ley, D. (1998). The rhetoric of racism and the politics of explanation in the Vancouver housing market. In E. Laquian, A. Laquian, & T. McGee (Eds.), *The silent debate: Asian immigration and racism in Canada* (pp. 331–348). Vancouver: Institute of Asian Research.
- Ley, D. (1999). Myths and meanings of immigration and the Metropolis. *The Canadian Geographer*, 43(1), 2–19.
- Ley, D. (2003). Seeking *Homo Economicus*: The Canadian state and the strange story of the business immigration program. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 93(2), 426–441.
- Matas, R. (2002). Chinese immigrants recasting Vancouver. *Globe and Mail*. 11th December. Retrieved from www.globeandmail.com.
- Mitchell, K. (1993). Multiculturalism, or the united colours of capitalism? *Antipode*, 25(4), 263–294.
- Mitchell, K. (1995). Flexible circulation in the Pacific Rim: Capitalisms in cultural context. *Economic Geography*, 71(4), 364–382.
- Mitchell, K. (1997a). Transnational subjects: Constituting the cultural citizen in the era of Pacific Rim capital. In A. Ong, & D. Nonini (Eds.), *Ungrounded empires: The cultural politics of modern Chinese transnationalism* (pp. 228–256). New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, K. (1997b). Transnational discourse: bringing geography back in. *Antipode*, 29(2), 101–114.
- Ng, W. C. (1999). *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945–80: The pursuit of identity and power*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Nyiri, P. (2001). Expatriating is patriotic? The discourse on "new migrants" in the People's Republic of China. In Roy Stars (Eds.), *Asian nationalism in an age of globalization* (pp. 144–157). Surrey: Japan Library.

- Olds, K. (1998). Globalization and urban change: tales from Vancouver via Hong Kong. *Urban Geography*, 19(4), 360–385.
- Ong, A. (1999). Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality. Duke University Press.
- Pieke, F. (1998). Introduction. In F. Pieke, & G. Benton (Eds.), *The Chinese in Europe* (pp. 1–17). New York: St Martin's Press.
- Robbins, B. (1992). Comparative cosmopolitanisms. *Social Text*, 31/32, 169–186.
- Statistics Canada. (2001). Census 2001 Community profile: Vancouver (CMA). Visible Minority Status. Retrieved January 4th, 2007 from http://www12.statcan.ca/english/profil01/CP01/Details/Page.cfm?Lang = E&Geo1 = CMA&Code1=933__&Geo2=PR&Code2=59&Data=Count&SearchText = Vancouver&SearchType = Begins&SearchPR = 01&B1 = All&GeoLevel = &GeoCode = 933.
- Teo, S.Y. (2003a). Dreaming inside a walled city: Imagination, gender and the roots of immigration. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 12(4), 411–438.
- Teo, S. Y. (2003b). Imagining Canada: The cultural logics of migration amongst PRC immigrants. RIIM Working Paper #03–16. Retrieved from <http://www.riim.metropolis.net>.
- Wang, G. (1999). A single Chinese diaspora? Some historical reflections. In G. Wang, & A. S. Wah (Eds.), *Imagining the Chinese diaspora: Two Australian perspectives* (pp. 1–17). Canberra: Centre for the Study of the Chinese Diaspora, Australian National University.
- Waters, J. (2003). Flexible citizens? Transnationalism and citizenship amongst economic immigrants in Vancouver. *The Canadian Geographer*, 47(3), 219–234.
- Zong, L. (2003). Language, education, and occupational attainment of foreign-trained Chinese and Polish professional immigrants in Toronto, Canada. In M. W. Charney, B. S. A. Yeoh, & C. K. Tong (Eds.), *Chinese migrants abroad: Cultural, educational and social dimensions of the Chinese diaspora* (pp. 163–180). Singapore: Singapore University Press and World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.