

EEGA in Dialogue: Interview with Ben Chiahung Lu

by Lena Dallywater

Dieser Beitrag ist hervorgegangen aus der Kooperation zwischen dem Leibniz-WissenschaftsCampus „Eastern Europe – Global Area“ (EEGA) und dem eJournal Connections. Die folgenden Interviews und Artikel geben Einblicke in die Forschungen am EEGA-WissenschaftsCampus, die den Entwicklungen im östlichen Europa in ihren globalen Bezügen gewidmet sind.

This item has emerged from the cooperation between Leibniz ScienceCampus „Eastern Europe – Global Area“ (EEGA) and the eJournal Connections. The following interviews and articles offer insights of the research projects at EEGA ScienceCampus, which are devoted to the developments in Eastern Europe in their global dimensions.

Interview with Ben Chiahung Lu

Benny Chiahung Lu received the Ph.D. in Sociology from Goldsmiths College, University of London. From Taiwan, Benny's main research interest concerns the intersection between class and gender. Particularly interested in how the marginal is able (or unable) to respond to neoliberal logic and making values (material and symbolic) of their own, Benny's doctoral research, supervised by Professor Bev Skeggs, for example, investigated living experiences of Money Boys (male-to-male sex workers) in Shanghai, China. From 2015 to June 2017, Lu was a postdoctoral fellow in the Gender Studies Programme of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). In August 2017, Lu joined the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in September 2017 for a project of young working-class culture and digital media in China. Ben is also now a book review editor in 2017 for a new feminist journal „Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics.“

What research have you done during your stay at Leibniz ScienceCampus EEGA?

I focused on Chinese immigration in the GDR area. By engaging with

recent debates on Chinese diaspora and authenticity of Chinese-ness such as „Sinophone“ theory¹ and interviews I conduct during my 2.5-week stay at EEGA in August 2017, I worked on a new theoretical angle to survey new Chinese migration in East Germany. My research highlights the importance of challenging the Chinese diaspora discourse to better capture the dynamic, complicated and contradictory experiences of „Chinese migrants“ in East Germany. During my 2.5 weeks in Leipzig, I interviewed or contacted migration organizations, entrepreneurs, artists, musicians and business people. I also approached a local government unit that works with Chinese businesses to expand my research data.

Can you shortly introduce yourself?

I have been a postdoctoral fellow at The University of Hong Kong (HKU) since September 2017. At HKU I take part in a research project conducted by young working-class students and their media space in China. Chaired by Professor Pun Ngai, this project surveys how vocational schools in mainland China „train“ young people to become future migrant workers in China. In fact, these new workers will become the biggest working class group to serve Chinese and global market. Questions are thus proposed: What do young people today think of their future work lives? How do state and schools utilize workers and students to produce profits? Finally, how do young workers create their own media to help them through their uncertain and precarious labour future?

Before joining this project, I was a postdoctoral fellow at The Chinese University of Hong Kong's Gender Studies program, where I researched entrepreneurship by new migrants in Taiwan. The project investigated how migrant women, particularly those from late-socialist Vietnam and China, began their careers in Taiwan, and how they balanced their new identity as an entrepreneur with being a mother, wife, and daughter. As a sociologist, I am interested in looking into issues

¹See Shih, Shu-mei, The Concept of the Sinophone, in: PMLA 126 (2011) 3, pp-709-718.

of class, gender, and migration which can be re-examined through a new approach - when these social forces are reformulated under globalization but also challenged by the marginal.

Your research stay was about framing Chinese migration in Germany. What did you want to find out?

How do Chinese migrants negotiate their Chinese identity in post-socialist Germany? For me, this is a rarely discussed issue in scholarly writings. Is „diaspora“ as a strong mainstream discourse of Chinese migration and Chinese identity, which is also practiced by Chinese immigrants to formulate identity? Why, though with significant Chinese migrants, Germany is the country without a „Chinatown“ - a landmark of any Chinese diaspora communities around the world in any Germany city? Does this respond to the characteristics of Chinese immigration in Germany? Between the global competition between Germany and China today, how do Chinese migrants practice their national identity?

Your worked with qualitative interviews. Can you present us some of your interview partners and what do you mean by „dis-identification“ of Chinese-ness?

For example, when I contacted a businessman, Mr. Wong in Berlin who moved to Berlin in the early 1990s who told me that he does not care if his children consider themselves as Chinese or not. And indeed, Wong told me his children are more clinging to claim they are Germans instead of Chinese. As a student who grew up in Beijing and witnessed the June 4th turmoil in 1989, Wong decided to start a new life in Berlin, and he eventually became a successful entrepreneur. Though Wong went back to Beijing for some years around 2008, the unhappy new business experiences in China pushed him moving back to Berlin. (He implied the non-transparent business culture in Beijing). Wong then considers himself is not a „real Chinese“ anymore - if being a Chinese means to become a calculative and aggressive money-driven entrepreneur. Wong's statement showed me that his „dis-identification“ of Chinese-ness is a reaction of his disappointment

of corruption and aggressiveness of Chinese market.

Another person I interviewed is Mr. Ren. Quite different from Mr. Wong, Ren, a musician as well as a restaurant owner who moved to Leipzig in the early 1990s to study music, he was vividly expressing his strong Chinese identity. When I met him in his China-chic restaurant, he has just finished a performance with local artists. Trained as a traditional Chinese musician and active in the local music community, Mr. Ren is proud of his cultural backgrounds. Ren cannot hide his pride to tell me that he felt quite determined and competitive when he was on the same stage with other Western musicians - he to me he felt he must be the most impressive one so the audience can realize the sublime of Chinese music.

For me, this can resonate to an owner of a Chinese Tea House, Mr. Kuo and his determination to bring Chinese tea ceremony to Germany. Moved to Leipzig for nearly 20 years, Mr. Kuo's tea house has become a hub for Leipzig's Chinese migrants and westerners who are interested in Chinese tea ceremony. All the furniture from his tea house were even shipped from Mainland China. Mr. Kuo and Chinese culture are undivided.

Can you please resume your results and link it to the theoretical background?

In short, For Ren and Kuo, his Chinese-ness seems an undoubtedly self-evident identity but for Wong, the Chinese-ness has been detached from him. But as Huang's² research of the second generation of Chinese migrants in Berlin, the Chinese identity is an evaluative and negotiable process. I found that Huang vividly captured that for the second-generation Chinese in Germany - they are standing in-between of Chinese and German identities and creating an „evaluative“ subjectivity between these two. Huang's point is important for me because to some extent, this evaluative migrant subject can respond the Taiwanese migrants' identities in East Germany when I witnessed their'

²Kejie, Huang, The Construction of Ethnic Identity of Chinese Descendants in Berlin, conference paper, „The Challenge of the Global Migrant Bodies on the Move and Cultural Differences“, Rome, Italy, 2017, 10-11 January.

practices of Chinese identities are ambiguous or flexible.

For instance, I met Mr. Chen who has been a pastor in GDR belt for more than 20 years. Mr. Chen is tour " de- force in his Christian faith, when I went to their church event, I immediately how he is the key figure of the assembly, everybody listened to him, everybody followed what he said. Even 90 percent of the joiners there are from Mainland China. Mr. Chen told me how he was so glad that God helped him to meet people in his church and many of them were students at Leipzig or Halle and then settled in Leipzig. Chen is undoubtedly pleased that more and more Chinese migrants join his church yet he still complains me about China's strict regulation of the public religion.

Overall, these fieldwork stories I showcase here is to suggest a new Chinese migration is emerging in GDR areas and how different values, ideas and identities of/from Chinese-ness are made. Staying at EEGA and the fieldwork helped me to rethink this issue. I therefore also expand my theoretical frame on Chinese-ness and Chinese diaspora in order to better survey the new type of Chinese migration in GDR.

Can you give us an overview of the history of Chinese migrants in Germany?

The history of Chinese migrants in Germany can be tracked back from the late 19th century when some port workers moved to the port city such as Hamburg. Then In the early 20th century, the more active commercial movements between China and Germany has made, so more and more Chinese migrants flowed to Germany but were cut off during the World War Two. According to statistics, there were little Chinese migrants in Germany until China moved into the Post-socialist period, reopened its door to the global capitalist market in 1978. Indeed, one can see, after 1978, according to the official statistics, Chinese migrants in Germany increased gradually from a few hundred to eighty hundred thousand in 2010, and the number is expected to double next decade, given the more stronger business ties and globalization between Germany and China.

Looking closer on East Germany and especially Leipzig what did

you find out?

Migrants work on the business sector are mainly facilitating the commercial ties between China and Germany, or opening restaurants and so on. In East Germany, such as Berlin area, there are more than 30 classes, 600 Chinese students went to the private Chinese schools. Also, in Leipzig, there was a Chinese church that was developed by a Taiwanese priest who started his sermon in Berlin 1989, right after the unification. He moved to Leipzig in the early 2000s to establish the only Chinese Church in Leipzig so far. Religion organization has slowly mobilized in Berlin and Leipzig. Besides, a recent study has shown, in Germany, the new migrants are tirelessly sending their children to these private schools to learn Chinese culture (calligraphy, Opera or music) and Mandarin where migrants' identity can be strengthened.³

How could one classify theses cultural behavioral patterns?

This resounds the late leading sinologists, Philip A. Kuhn noted work „Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times“⁴ where he iterates that the Western idea of immigration cannot easily capture the meaning of overseas Chinese migration Because, Kuhn argues, Chinese migrants particularly intend to bond their economic, cultural, language and emotional relationship with China - they are only geographically apart from where they are from. But as Huang⁵ also notices, for the new generations of Chinese migrants, their Chinese identity is not in a fixed identification but the second generation of young Chinese migrants in Germany has actually straddled between Chinese and German identities.

Which approach do you recommend to analyze these phenomena?

For me, it is no easy to examine this new migration politics in sole theory. But, given this new and changing patterns of Chinese migration in East Germany, I would propose Sinophone theory for reviewing

³Huang 2017.

⁴Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*, Singapore 2008.

⁵Huang 2017.

its dynamic formulation. As British sociologist Caroline Knowles⁶ claims, the Chinese migration in today's UK should go beyond the „Chinatown“ model which focuses merely on migrants work in the service sectors or making the lived experience in specific urban space such as Chinatown. For Knowles⁷, the new model is based on how Chinese migrants, following the intense global capital flows, has made their life and career outside the Chinatown, engaged with every aspect of society and industries. Responding this new Chinese migration politics, I, however, suggest a step back to reframe the „Chinese“ itself in immigration for a better understanding of the intricacies of Chinese migrants, where values, languages, capitals (symbolic or material) and so on are various and at times contesting. In short, I try to employ Sinophone to argue the necessity to rethink the self-evident of „Chinese“ migrants here and the Chinese „diaspora“ for better capture the new Chinese migration today in Germany.

Can you please give us an introduction in what framing Sinophone theory means?

Studies on Chinese-ness overseas had initiated a lot of debates since mid the 1990s when scholars began to critically rethink the idea of „Essential Chinese-ness“ which might set aside the quests of its state-violence, human right record and patriarchal history. More importantly, a new Sinophone theory was formulated recently by a South Korean, American-based Taiwanese scholar, Shih Shu-mei.⁸ Shih counters diaspora theory/politics, claiming that diaspora is often used by Chinese scholars to propose that there is a „root“ of Chinese-ness. This approach, however, ignores how different languages and ethnicities are meant and practiced in China. It consequently also neglects the resulting differences among migrants from different regions of China.⁹

⁶Caroline Knowles, Reframing Sociologies of Ethnicity and Migration in Encounters with Chinese London, in: British Journal of Sociology 68 (2017) 3, pp. 454-473.

⁷Knowles, 2016.

⁸Shu-mei Shih, Against Diaspora: Discourse on Sinophone Studies, Taipei 2017 (in Chinese).

⁹Shih 2017, p. 36-37.

These living scattered in various places of the world, have recreated and modified because of variations in their migrant experiences, their distinct languages, and ethnicities rather than further pursuing the essential Chinese-ness.

Also, Shih captures that how diaspora is often employed as a political and cultural discourse to legitimate the Chinese nationalism. As the noted American- Chinese Harvard scholar Tu wei-ming's theory of „Culture Chinese“ which he used to recall the collective identity of Chinese diaspora from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and North American and so on. Confucianism is the core value Tu promotes in his project and claims it can contribute to China's democracy development yet it was seriously challenged during the 1989 Tiananmen turmoil. Again, Sinophone theory challenges this theory, arguing Tu's argument is a Hans-Chinese ethnicity centric and risking itself to Hans-Culture solipsism. Shih's argument also concludes that the purpose of Sinophone is to reread and re-present the multiple languages and cultural formulations in/outside China, reviewing how these different minor-cultures or identities are spoken and performed - how they communicate with each other or negotiate with the cultures they inhabit.

Please give us an example.

For example, we can see the Cantonese writing and ethnicities have a long-term immigration history from south China to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, North America as well as Britain, following the colonial historical paths. To take another example, the so-called ABC (American Born Chinese) have recently asserted their different identities and languages.¹⁰ It profoundly challenges both the essentialist Chinese-ness as well as American-ness; given Ien Ang in her famous article "On Not Speaking Chinese"¹¹ has already sharply noted , for people who like her whose "ancestors" were from Southeast China and settled in Indonesia in 18th century, not to speak Chinese or any

¹⁰Shih 2017, p. 86-88.

¹¹Ien Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West, London 2001.

Chinese dialects (such as Cantonese or Hokkein) has become a „sin“, blamed or countered by the late Chinese nation-state nationalism, pressure from (hidden or obviously) her inferior of speaking any Mandarin and Chinese dialects. This did ignore Ang's family came to Indonesia earlier than Deutch's colonialism but she has always still considered as „overseas Chinese.“ So, I see what Ang argues here is the ways in which the uses of Mandarin has attached to the Chinese-ness - and become the authority or identity/ethnicity politics to judge and challenge her and any other's skin color. As She argues clearly:

„Chineseness then, at that time, to me was an imposed identity, one that I desperately wanted to get rid of. It is therefore rather ironic that it was precisely our Chinese ethnicity which made my parents decide to leave Indonesia for the Netherlands in 1966, as a result of the rising ethnic tensions in the country. This experience in itself then was a sign of the inescapability of my notional Chineseness, inscribed as it was on the very surface of my body, much like what Frantz Fanon (1970) has called the 'corporeal malediction' of the fact of his blackness. The 'corporeal malediction' of Chineseness, of course, relates to the 'fact of yellowness', identifiable among others by those famous 'slanted eyes'.”¹²

Having this understanding of language, namely Mandarin, and its authorized intimacy with Chinese-ness, Ang seeks to reexamine this self-evident Mandarin centric logic and how it may produce culture and identity violence toward those „Chinese who cannot speak Chinese“ at all. Who are making this Mandarin Centric politics, and relating it to the Chinese nationalism today? Why? As Shih sharply, asks, when migrants from Mainland that has lived in Southeast Asia such as Indonesia or Malaysian long before the birth of contemporary „nation-state“ - why, after many centuries till today, they are still called „overseas Chinese“ instead of Indonesians or Malaysians. Shih strongly accuses, the diaspora discourse/politics has let the „receiving societies“ such as American a good reason to exclude the Chinese

¹²Ien Ang, p. 22.

citizens by thinking they are always „Chinese migrant“,¹³ instead of seeing them as citizens on the one hand. On the other, „Chinese migrants“ also have to be suffering from the Chinese-centric discourses, launched by Chinese government today to check their authenticity of Chinese-ness, royalty to the Chinese culture and state. This is an eternal double burden for American Chinese in States, likely the „overseas Chinese“ in Indonesia or Malaysia today have to face the severe ethnicity violence toward them - due to their „overseas Chinese“ positions. Or, because of the intense diplomatic relationship between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea today, for example, the „Vietnamese Chinese“ has become the scapegoat, facing the Chinese-exclusion violence.

To reiterate, for me, Sinophone theory is helpful when one see how it emphasizes Sinophone as a politics of heteroglossia as shih alerts us to the fact that different „dialects“ from more than fifty ethnicities that were called „Chinese“ now are questioning the umbrella Chinese identities. So, as the theory argues, the politics of „roots“ and „routes“ should be reordered - while the roots should be place-based, localized and open for people who choose to stay and create their own life - from different routes. I noticed that Sinophone announces the end of „diaspora“ as well as the end of „nostalgia“ politics in many Chinese cultures and political representations that often romanticize the „root“, say, the homeland or the nation-state.¹⁴ Sinophone theory constitutes a critical extension of Benedict Anderson's „imagined community“, employed to counter the homogenous Chinese „diaspora“ concepts, questioning its „regime of truth“ following the rise of Chinese power and nationalism that China is promoting in post-socialist period.

How do you connect your theoretical research about Sinophone theory with the East German context and your interview partners? Bring this idea to research migration, I contend it is useful and important for us to rethink the Chinese migration in East Germany- given

¹³Shih 2017, p. 110.

¹⁴Shih, 2017, p. 49.

cities such as Berlin and Leipzig have become places that many new Chinese migrants stay and start to make their own life on the one hand. On the other, as abovementioned discussion underlines, I use sinophone theory to review the migrant's remake of „roots“ in host GDR societies, how different post-socialist values and experiences they carry to the new places. How they confront each other and co-operate each other? In short, what intricacies we can capture from Chinese migration " when they make life in East Germany?

What is your outlook about? In which direction is your project going to develop?

As mentioned above, I wish this project can be expanded in the future by collecting more data from the local Chinese organizations (such as church I visited), entrepreneurs (Chinese restaurant owners I interviewed) and the individual migrant. I also contacted the local government in Leipzig that is working on Chinese investment, and I intend to interview some Chinese officials and units that are based in GDR (Confucius Institute at University of Leipzig) in the future. At the same time, as I iterated above, the theoretical framework of Chinese immigration and identities will be expanded from the perspective of Sinophone theory.

Appendix

Contact made at EEGA including fieldwork at local Chinese church

Name Profession City Home country

Mr. Wong Business Berlin PRC

MR. Kuo Business Leipzig PRC

Mr. Ren Musician Leipzig PRC

Mr. Chen Priest Leipzig Taiwan

Ms. Lee Artist Leipzig Taiwan

Mr. Xu Entrepreneur Leipzig PRC

Ms Gabriele Goldfuss Leipzig Government

Official Leipzig Germany

Mr. Thomas Rotting Leipzig Government

Official Leipzig Germany