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Chinese traders in Serbia: Gender opportunities, translocal family strategies, and transnational mobility¹

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Since the late 1980s and early 1990s developing countries and transition societies have become attractive new destinations for Chinese traders. As “economies of scarcity” (Nyíri, 2007, 139) they provide opportunities to import and trade in a range of inexpensive Chinese goods. These new destination countries have become particularly attractive to Chinese traders also because they have weak links to the global economy, and do not have severe restriction to immigration. Consequently, many countries in Africa as well as Central and South Eastern Europe have become new destinations for Chinese migrants who operate in trade and services as transnational, petty entrepreneurs (Haugen, Carling, 2005; Mohan, Tan-Mullins, 2009, 595; Chang et al., 2011; Krasteva, 2005; Nyíri, 1999, 2003, 2007).

In this paper I focus on Chinese trading migration to Serbia. I argue that in choosing destinations for their businesses Chinese traders increasingly opt for underdeveloped regions and transition societies not because they provide good business opportunities measured by economic indicators alone. Rather, these destinations are chosen because they provide better opportunities for an entrepreneurial life embedded in self-reliance and self-management. Some of these opportunities, as my discussion will demonstrate, are importantly gendered, opening up new gender space for young families and for women in particular. My discussion will further point out that because business opportunities in Serbia do not necessarily imply desirable living conditions, Chinese traders diversify their family strategies, which are translocally and transnationally

1 This article is based on data collected from September 2009 to January 2010, for a pilot study on the situation of Chinese immigrants in Serbia. The study benefits from 20 semi-structured interviews with Chinese immigrants, 15 semi-structured interviews with local women childminders, as well as officials, academics and other ‘hosts’ about the phenomenon of Chinese migration to Serbia. Additional data were collected through (informal) group discussions with Chinese traders during my many observation visits to the Chinese market or our gatherings over supper in a Chinese restaurant, which they frequent after their shops close. Data were also collected on the local media coverage on Chinese traders in order to shed more light onto the economic, socio-cultural and political processes underpinning their migration to Serbia.

negotiated. In doing so, I argue, they become protagonists, actively involved in establishing their livelihoods and flexible ways of incorporation.

Chinese traders in Serbia

According to the official data, at the end of October 2009, there were 4,947 Chinese nationals living in Serbia, almost all had temporary permits to stay in the country, three had permanent residence permits, and only one had Serbian citizenship.² These official figures match my own estimates as well as those made by well established and connected Chinese immigrants in Belgrade/Serbia. According to these estimates, there are up to 6,000 Chinese traders in Serbia. Although the numbers involved are small, the fact that this pattern of migration has been continuous for nearly two decades indicates that it is there to stay and, thus, merits academic attention.

The majority of Chinese traders in Serbia/Belgrade come from Zhejiang province in Southeast China, which in the past two decades has become one of the main sending areas in China, both in terms of internal, rural-urban migration (Yang, 2000; Zhang, 2000) as well as international and European in particular (Skeldon, 2000). These poorly educated Chinese migrants speak the local dialect and come mostly from two or three villages in Qingtian County.³ Others come from the other two important sending areas in China, Beijing and places around Shanghai, as well as from the Northeast of China (Skeldon, 2000). They speak Mandarin, are (well) educated, come with professional experience and social capital that could be used to enhance their migration prospects.

Arrival of the Chinese traders in Serbia in the second half of the 1990s was facilitated through resources and networks linked to Chinese migration to Hungary, since the late 1980s (Nyíri, 1999). That was a good vantage point to assess the regional markets and economic opportunities as well as socio-political factors shaping conditions of entry. When the Hungarian Government tightened entry visa requirements for the Chinese in 1993, and increased import tariffs in 1995 (Nyíri, 1999) many turned to neighbouring countries seeking new opportunities, taking with them other compatriots. Some also came from Bulgaria, where they first obtained information about the possibilities of establishing small retail and trading businesses in Serbia. They mostly started off as shuttle traders, but by the end of the 1990s Chinese shops, as they are locally known, had become dotted around Serbia. Their main trading business is situated, however, within the so-called Chinese markets.

2 Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs, Department for Foreigners; data valid for October 31, 2009.

3 The population of Zhejiang province speak various sub-dialects of the Shanhai dialect group (Wuyu) (Christiansen, 2003, 17).

The Chinese market in Belgrade is the largest wholesaler facility in the Balkans. It is a run-down version of a shopping mall situated in Block 70, in the municipality of New Belgrade. It has some 500 shops with approximately 1,200 Chinese immigrants renting shops, trading, and working there.⁴ Almost all shops are rented to Chinese, except for a few cafes and fast food outlets owned by or rented to locals. Rents range from €800 to €1,600, depending on the size of the shop and its location.⁵ Additionally, there are also 12 shops rented to locals selling mostly Chinese goods too. Some of the rented spaces have been turned into Chinese restaurants, hairdressers, travel as well as import agencies, casinos and DVD shops, all of which are run by the Chinese and catering to their compatriots.

Most of these businesses are family run. Wage workers, who work for their relatives or compatriots, are relatively few. Chinese traders hire local people instead, at a relatively low cost. As they go back to China on average three times a year and stay between two to three weeks, hiring locals facilitates these frequent and prolonged visits and enables shops to stay open six or seven days a week. At the time of my research, some 300 to 400 local workers were employed in approximately 2/3 of shops at the Chinese Market in Belgrade. They were paid between €4.5 and €12 per day, in the local currency, depending on how long they have worked in the shop, whether they were “trustworthy, reliable and loyal”, as they explained the differences in their pay. A minority of these employees were working legally, others were not registered.

What makes Serbia an attractive migrant destination? Agency, entrepreneurial and gendered opportunities

Chinese traders started arriving in Serbia in 1996-97, during a ‘post-war moment’ in the country, after the wars in Croatia and Bosnia had ended (1991-95), and just before a full-scale conflict in Kosovo, its then southern province. Consequently, the first Chinese traders arrived at the time when the majority of the population in Serbia was experiencing immense economic hardship exacerbated by an exceptionally high number of refugees and internally displaced persons in the country.⁶

Agency of migrants in transforming disadvantages into opportunities can help explain how societies which are considered unattractive as migratory destinations, and are in fact themselves sending areas, may become desirable options to migrants. From

4 Data on the number of shops was obtained from the Head of Security, the company that provides security on the site(s).

5 These rents were valid for the second half of 2009.

6 In relative terms the country was ranked, at the time, as the third refugee producing country in the world (Castles et al., 2003, 6).

the vantage point of agency and its role in shaping motivation and goals of migration it is possible to understand how the intersection of economic, social, political and cultural factors unfolds in specific contexts of migration and how this in turn shapes migratory processes themselves.

Serbia was put on the map of potential migratory destinations worth considering or trying out for an initial period, before making any decisions to set up a trading business there, by the introduction of a more relaxed entry visa system for Chinese trading entrepreneurs in 1996. The rationale behind this more open door policy was the Serbian Government's hope for Chinese investment as well as the collection of steady revenue from visa applications, business registration and so forth.⁷ It is important to emphasise, however, that the relaxation of the entry visa regime for Chinese migrants wishing to come to Serbia in effect acknowledged and supported an already ongoing process of new Chinese migration since the late 1980s and early 1990s, as mentioned earlier.

This more open visa regime in Serbia prompted some of my respondents to reconsider their initial decisions to migrate to Africa, for example, in their search for better economic and life opportunities. There were also those who broke the pattern of chain migration from their village in Qingtian County, Zhejiang province, to Italy. After they learnt about a possibility of setting up a trading and retail business legally in Serbia many came to Belgrade initially “as tourists”, as they put it, to assess the situation and conditions in the country, before making a decision to “settle” there. More freedom and choice in developing their own businesses and consequently, their personal, family and household strategies compared to, for example, their relatives and friends in Italy, who were confined to long hours of low paid wage work, was emphasised. Furthermore, the opportunity to establish their trading and retail businesses legally in Belgrade/Serbia, also gives them access to social services, such as health care and (primary) education for their children. Chinese immigrants in Serbia are overwhelmingly young, in their 20s and early 30s, and very many of them start or establish their families there. On average, they have two children, in most cases both born in Serbia and, consequently, they benefit considerably from their right to access health care, especially when it comes to pre and postnatal care.⁸

The social rights of Chinese traders associated with temporary permits to establish their businesses and live in Serbia represent an improvement compared to the rights

7 Information comes from a retired official from the then Office for Foreigners, The Ministry of Interior; personal communication, October 29, 2009.

8 Some chose to have routine, minor medical checks privately, rather than on the National Health. This is a pattern they share with many citizens of Serbia, many of whom make the same decision about their health care provided that they can afford it. As Chinese immigrants are economically better off than the majority of local citizens, they are likely to be able to afford and benefit from this type of health care.

enjoyed by a majority of rural-urban migrants in China. This is because the largely unchanged household registration system within China permits only temporary residence in urban destinations within the country, meaning that rural-urban migrants do not have the right to education for their children, to health care, labour insurance, and old age pensions in their place of temporary residence (Davin, 1996, 26, Goldstein et al., 2000, 240).⁹ This comparison between the rights of internal migrants within China and Chinese migrants in Serbia is by no means to imply that the temporary nature of their permit to live and work in Serbia does not put them in a vulnerable position. Disadvantages arising from their legal status in Serbia are indeed numerous (see Chang, 2011). In assessing the legal status and situation of Chinese traders in Serbia today it is important, however, to view it not only from the perspective of the EU debates on legal systems and practices, discrimination and minority rights, but also from the context of the sending country. This approach provides a valuable insight about the structures and processes involved in turning specific migratory destinations into attractive places for migrants who themselves come from countries which do not fully protect their rights.

My research also reveals that Serbia has not been an attractive destination only for disadvantaged populations from rural China. The same theme of choice, self-reliance and self-management associated with entrepreneurial and other life opportunities in a society such as Serbia can be traced in experiences of Chinese men who lived and worked in highly regulated and competitive Western economies, such as Britain, Canada, and Germany, but then have decided to migrate to Belgrade, as discussed elsewhere (Korać, 2013a, 2013b). Clearly, from the vantage point of Chinese traders there are many advantages for them in a society such as Serbia. To appreciate this dynamics and to understand the meanings of migratory choices of those on the move it is important to explain specific migratory processes unfolding at a particular point in time and linking particular locations (Korać, 2009). Therefore, such movements should not be treated as “unexpected”, as some studies claim, referring to the instances of secondary migration of Chinese migrants to “the East”, despite their right to reside in the so-called ‘Western destination countries’ (IOM, 1998, 337).

The intersection of agency of Chinese migrants as well as of local people has also opened up a gender specific opportunity in Serbia, for young migrant families and women in particular. This, I argue, has become central to the development of their family strategies of creating livelihoods and of incorporation. Many of the Chinese traders in Belgrade/Serbia are women. Some are single women, running their own trading and retail businesses. Others are there with their husbands and families, but they did not always typically follow them, as in earlier waves of Chinese migration. In

9 For more information on the household registration system in China see Yang (2000, 198).

fact, many came to Belgrade and Serbia before their husbands and paved the way for their families to join them. Many also have their husbands stay in China with their children. This is not surprising, given the increased mobility within China linked to structural changes and development that prompted a segregated and gender-segmented market, resulting in the rising levels of migration of women (Yang, 2000, 203), and an increase in those who move in connection with their own businesses (Goldstein et al., 2000, 227). However, this gender pattern of Chinese migration does not unequivocally suggest radically different gender relations of power and greater gender equality in the family, community and the state. Indeed, as studies demonstrate (e.g. Goldstein et al., 2000, 228; Zhang, 2000, 193), women are not a monolithic category and although migration leads to the economic betterment of women's and men's lives and their households, many Chinese women remain or may become even more vulnerable in many aspects of their lives.

For most Chinese women who migrate with their families to the Western 'attractive destination', migration means that they carry the full burden of domestic responsibilities and childcare in addition to contributing to the family economy (Lee et al., 2002, 614). Their strong desire and need to work often runs into direct conflict with childcare needs, which are extremely difficult to meet (Zhou, 2000). In this respect, migration to a transition society has obvious advantages for women migrants, as many of them can afford to hire local women to care for their children. Thus, children of many Chinese traders are not only born in Belgrade/Serbia, as mentioned earlier, as very many of them are brought up by local women and their families. Many Chinese migrant women in Serbia hire local childminders to care for their children both "full-time", as they refer to 24/7 childcare arrangements, and "part-time", that is – from 9am to 5pm seven days a week. Due to such arrangements many local women *de facto* foster children of Chinese traders in Belgrade. Some of the children left in the care of "Serbian grannies", who are "good grannies", as Chinese traders refer to them with fondness, are often babies less than a month old. Their mothers immediately return to work for their family's trade and retail businesses. At times, they travel back to China for business a day after their 11-day-old child "had been dropped on my doorstep", as one of the "Serbian grannies" related.¹⁰

Local women doing paid childcare work are almost exclusively women in their late 50s, early 60s, who have not only children of their own, but also grandchildren. A majority are well educated middle class women who had been made redundant or had to retire early due to the economic crisis and restructuring in Serbia in the late 90s and early 2000. At the time of my research, full-time carer (*de facto* foster parent)

10 This woman *de facto* fostered children of several Chinese couples since 2000, some of whom were less than two weeks old (personal communication, November 25, 2009).

was, measured by the local standards, well paid, earning typically €300 per month, plus expenses; at the time, this was just under an average salary in Serbia. Although well paid, for the local women and very often for their entire families this work has become much more than an 'economic betterment' strategy. In many cases it brought a renewed sense of purpose in life at the time when "we felt that there was no hope for us", as a childminder said, "when our lives were overshadowed by prolonged economic problems and war". 'Serbian grannies' treat babies left in their care as one of their own, keeping their photographs in family albums, alongside the photos of their own children and grandchildren.

Because the work of local women childminders is highly valued, and consequently well paid, it allowed them to develop (or maintain) a notion of themselves as professional women, the identity that was shattered by redundancy/early retirement experience, the years of war, economic hardship. Their sense of the importance of the job they do has contributed to their perception of themselves as competent, particularly concerning their experience in childrearing, as well as their educational and class backgrounds compared to those of the young and inexperienced Chinese mothers. This sense of competence at times bordering the notion of 'superiority' has been importantly augmented by their experience and ability in domains of the local knowledge, values, culture and language. Consequently, identities of the local women childminders are carefully negotiated around the notion of professionalism with which they do this work, as well as their perceived role of "ambassadors of the local knowledge and culture". "Serbian grannies" take full responsibility for bringing up the children they have in their care and, thus, childcare arrangements with local women have become the preferred pattern of caring for children among the Chinese traders in Belgrade – so much so that a Chinese kindergarten opened by a group of Chinese women in Ledine in 2008, the part of Belgrade in which most of the Chinese immigrants live,¹¹ had to close down just after a year the opening, as the demand was low and it was not profitable to run it.

By making this type of childcare arrangements with local women, Chinese women migrants are to a certain extent 'undoing' their gendered obligations in the international system of care work, the role that has become associated with immigrant women in so-called attractive migration destinations.¹² This in turn enables them to

11 Ledine, on the outskirts of Belgrade, is a 15-minute drive from the Market. It offers affordable housing arrangements for (larger) families. Warehouses are also available for rent in the neighbourhood making it easier for Chinese traders to coordinate and oversee this important segment of their business. Since the Chinese immigrants have moved in, two Chinese restaurants have opened, catering primarily for their compatriots. Many go there after work, either for a meal with their families and friends or for a drink, chat and karaoke.

12 Lutz (2010, 1651) points out that middle class women in countries of immigration are 'undoing' their gender obligations in care work by hiring immigrant women to do it.

pursue their individual or family business, as immigrant women entrepreneurs. In this sense, migration to transition societies provides “gendered opportunities and motivations” (Lutz, 2010, 1659) for migrant women, which they would not have in global cities and other sought after immigrant destinations of the world.

For many young Chinese migrant women, this shift in gender roles within their own families does not necessarily imply an equally radical shift in gender power structures within the family and the community, as mentioned earlier.¹³ It does, however, give them an opportunity to exert agency over their livelihood strategies and to explore their entrepreneurial potential in trading. It also opens up a valuable space for them to negotiate and redefine their motherhood role and the notion of caring for their children, in some novel ways. This process for young Chinese women unfolds first within the local context, as translocal motherhood, while their children are in full-time care of local women childminders and their families. It is followed by the development of transnational motherhood strategies of care, because the majority of Chinese families in Belgrade/Serbia send their school age children back to China to live with their grandparents or other relatives, learn the language and go to school there.

Translocal family strategies and transnational mobility

Closely knit family and friendship ties among Chinese, as studies demonstrate, have become central to individual economic betterment as well as to the local, regional, and national development in China. Scholars argue that the economic success of Chinese reforms and industrialisation of rural areas, since the late 1980s, is centrally linked to the embeddedness of the local economy in social structure of family, kinship and personal networks (Christerson, Lever-Tracy, 1997). Translocal family and household life is an important feature of life in China and has also become an important resource and mechanism of support for those who decide to go abroad. Transnational family lives, households and businesses are a *sine qua non* in this process.

As people whose business strategies and family lives are “settled in mobility” (Morokvasic, 2004) and embedded in transnational and translocal connections, temporariness and flexibility are central to their mode of operation. Their strategies of incorporation are guided first and foremost by the transnational character of their trading and retail business and the economic betterment of their translocal families and households. One such strategy has been the organisation of childcare locally.

13 It is well known, for example, that it is normal for women, in both pre-modern and modern China, to be involved in the production from early stages of childbirth. The resulting shift in childcare responsibilities has not been associated to any radical shift in gender power relations in the family, the community or the society at large.

Children of Chinese traders cared for by local women and their families are brought up like the local children: they are fluent in Serbian, hardly speak any of their own language, eat local food, and socialise with the children, grandchildren, family and friends of their carers. Organising childcare locally is not, however, an acculturation or assimilation strategy on the part of the Chinese traders. Rather, it is a pragmatic decision and a strategy to capitalize, at least short term, on the structural disadvantages of the receiving society, i.e. unemployment of the local population/women, and to turn these disadvantages into an opportunity for immigrant parents, particularly women, and their family run businesses. Moreover, given that most of the children of Chinese traders in Belgrade/Serbia are sent back to China to obtain their primary education, their parents are securing their cultural and other types of literacy within China, equipping their children with skills, knowledge, and social capital they will require to tap into the economic and other resources and opportunities in China and use them globally.

My research reveals that there is an emerging trend among the Chinese immigrants in Belgrade: some are bringing their teenage children from China and enrolling them in international secondary schools in the city. Although costly, this is still a more affordable option than having them educated in the same type of schools in the West, and it is yet another comparative advantage of a society such as Serbia that Chinese traders benefit from. Once they graduate from these schools, hopes and plans are that they will be able to obtain a university degree somewhere in the West. It is hoped that this will help them to take over and expand their family businesses and/or establish their own companies in China and/or abroad, including Serbia. As they are continuously monitoring and exploring trading opportunities in other transitory places and less developed economies, lacking access to global markets, more and more Chinese traders in Belgrade have started to use strategically the opportunity to enrol their children into a more affordable international (private) secondary schools there. In doing so, they are preparing them to join and expand family businesses.

Children of those who arrived in the late 1990s, and who were left behind with their grandparents or other relatives, are now joining their parents in Belgrade. Many of the Chinese immigrants are referring to them as “the second generation” of the Chinese in the city. These young people in their late teens or early 20s have secondary education from China and are gradually entering their family businesses in Belgrade and Serbia. On arrival, most of them take intensive Serbian language courses and are able to speak it better than their parents. While “the second generation” is gradually taking over the running of their family businesses in Belgrade, their parents focus more on the establishment or further development of their businesses or property in China. Many also talk about “retirement”, which

in most cases means returning, living, and working in China, thus settling in one place, rather than living transnationally.¹⁴

Concluding remarks

The discussion in this article aimed to point to the intersection between the local and global contexts shaping the situation of Chinese traders who, as social agents, create opportunities for themselves and their families in a transition society such as Serbia. Societies such as Serbian society provide a space for choice and active management of risks involved in this type of trading migration. In contrast to the situation of immigrants in many societies of immigration, which tend to prescribe how the newcomers should 'fit in' by developing (exclusionary) policies of immigration and integration, a non-immigrant country such as Serbia opens up a space for Chinese traders to become protagonists, more actively involved in establishing their livelihoods and ways of incorporation. Migrants, understood as social agents, are central to this process. They engage in transnational activities and practices linking their countries of origin and destination in some fundamental ways. They are simultaneously involved in a range of legal and regulatory systems of sending and receiving states, they are also engaged in many non-institutional transnational as well as local links and practices. In doing so, they actively manage risks involved in this type of migration and are able to control better their livelihoods as well as the quality of their existence. Some of these opportunities, as argued in this article, are importantly gendered and linked to a radical shift in gender roles of childcare. This shift, as argued, is central to their transnational pathway of incorporation aiming not to 'settle' somewhere abroad 'for good', but to remain mobile for the better.

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14 The parents of 'the second generation' are in their late 40s, early 50s.

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Kitajski trgovci v Srbiji: priložnosti spolov, translokalne družinske strategije in transnacionalna mobilnost

Ključne besede: spolno zaznamovane strategije skrbi, translokalne družinske strategije, transnacionalna mobilnost in umeščanje, kitajski trgovci, Srbija

Članek razpravlja o položaju kitajskih trgovcev v Srbiji, eni njihovih novejših destinacij v Evropi. Zasnovan je na v glavnem kvalitativnih/etnografskih podatkih, zbranih za pilotno študijo trgovskih migracij v Srbijo. Članek preiskuje intersekcijo med lokalnim in globalnim kontekstom oblikovanja položaja kitajskih trgovcev, ki kot spolno zaznamovani akterji ustvarjajo priložnosti zase in svoje družine v tranzicijski družbi, kakršna je Srbija. Trdi, da je nekaj teh priložnosti pomembno spolno zaznamovanih in povezanih z radikalnim zamikom v vzorcih spolnih vlog v skrbi za otroke in druge, ki so značilni za večino družb sprejema. Medtem ko je bilo v zadnjih desetletjih skrbstveno delo v imigrantskih družbah v glavnem vezano na delo imigrantov in še posebej imigrantk, tranzicijska družba, kot je srbska, kitajskim trgovkam omogoča, da skrb za otroke poverijo večinoma lokalnim ženskam srednjega razreda. Ta obrat vlog pri »delitvi dela« v skrbstveni sferi med imigrantkami in lokalnimi ženskami prevladuje v t. i. »privlačni« migrantskidestinaciji – kot demonstrira tudi razprava v pričujočem članku, je v prid tako kitajskim trgovkam in njihovim družinam kot tudi lokalnim ženskam in njihovim družinam. Ta premik je osrednji v razvoju spolno zaznamovanih translokalnih in transnacionalnih družinskih strategij kitajskih trgovcev v Srbiji.

Razprava v pričujočem članku dokazuje, da so te spolno zaznamovane strategije pomembne za transnacionalne poti umeščanja kitajskih trgovcev, katerih cilj ni nekje se »namestiti« za vedno, ampak ostati mobilen za »na bolje«.