CIRCULAR MIGRATION BETWEEN CHINA AND CANADA: A FOCUS ON THE "RETURN" SEGMENT*

ABSTRACT

This article examines return migration, with a focus on immigrants from the People's Republic of China to Canada. Using qualitative interviews, the author describes the reasons for return, as well as the potential for future circular migration.

SIN YIH TEO

Sin Yih Teo is a doctoral candidate in Geography at the University of British Columbia. She has written a number of articles on skilled immigration from China to Canada.

Since 1998, the People's Republic of China (PRC)[1] has been the top source country of immigration to Canada, replacing Hong Kong's leading position. The growth has been particularly rapid, rising from 13,309 in 1995 to a peak of 40,363 in 2001 (CIC 2004). During this period, skilled workers have constituted the largest category of immigrants, overshadowing the family immigrant class. The impact of this large and concentrated flow of immigration from a single country within a relatively short period has altered the Canadian landscape in a number of ways, ranging from labour-market changes to societal effects, to settlement service agencies employing Mandarin-speaking staff, to issues of cultural diversity.

While understanding the motivations and settlement experiences of these PRC immigrants is important, there is an interesting counter phenomenon emerging, which is the return migration of highly skilled PRC immigrants from Canada back to China. This circular migration appears to contradict a fundamental assumption of the Canadian immigration model, that integration and permanent settlement follows after arrival. Does return migration indicate a weakness in the immigration system? Has there been a failure of integration that has resulted in immigrants leaving? Or are economic opportunities proving irresistible for these new migrants, just as they are for Canadian-born migrants to China?

Perhaps it is more constructive to think of return movements as being rooted in particular contexts. On a political level, the Chinese State has recently changed its attitude towards returnees, seeing them as a valuable economic resource in terms of human capital and investment. Various State efforts have been set in place to attract returnees, including the establishment of "science parks" and "special development zones" in Chinese cities, as well as recruitment fairs in countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia. Secondly, there is the economic context. Although the Canadian immigration policy may encourage skilled immigration, there may be a gap between the warmth of the State's welcome and the availability of job opportunities in the local economy. Thirdly, these political and economic developments have been accompanied by a cultural dimension, where resources such as television drama series and websites form a cultural context for imagining return.

Why return?

In recent years, media reports and anecdotal accounts by immigrant service agencies have noted the emergence of a return stream of migrants from Canada to China. However, research on return migration is difficult, as Canada does not collect exit data and therefore, there is a lack of reliable statistical information. For my research, I have adopted a qualitative approach to understand migrants' motivations for return, as well as their experiences thereafter in China. I conducted interviews with more than 100 respondents in Canada and China, with the aim of having access to a wide breadth of migration experiences and, as far as possible, I sought representation on the criteria of age, gender, marital status, occupation, number of years in Canada and citizenship status.

Among these respondents, the quest for better economic opportunities was the most common reason given for returning to China. Many had faced great difficulties in obtaining employment in Canada commensurate with their education and skills, resulting in the common scenario of former engineers, teachers and doctors working as technicians, factory workers and even dishwashers.

Respondents identified three main obstacles hindering their employment: the licensing requirements set by professional associations, the expectation of Canadian credentials and work experience from employers, and English language difficulties.

One respondent, Stanley, had worked as an engineer for seven years in China. He was 30 when he arrived in Toronto in 2000 with his wife. After spending four months searching for a job, he finally found a position as a sales assistant at a major electronics retail store, earning a salary that was dependent on commission. There was a basic salary of $1,000 but, according to Stanley, "if you received only the basic salary for two months in a row, you would be kicked out." He worked there for over a year. After his child was born in 2002, he reconsidered his prospects and moved to Vancouver to study for an MBA. By then, he had also decided that he "didn't see a promising future, not much job opportunity" in Canada, and after completing his MBA, returned to Beijing with his family in 2004, eventually becoming a business development manager for a listed American company. It was with an air of realism that he declared, "The position I'm holding is something I would not be offered in Canada. No matter whether it's the kind of company, the position, or income, these are impossible in Canada."

Upon return, however, some respondents found that their prospects were not as rosy as they had imagined. Many found that Chinese society attitudes to returnees had changed. Previously, returnees had frequently been portrayed as successful high fliers who were better paid than locals, and even acquired the term *haigui* (sea turtle) as opposed to the locally educated natives who were termed "land tortoises." Although this kind of admiration still persists to some extent, there has been a growing scepticism towards returnees in the past few years, such that *haigui* have now been called *haidai* (seaweed), a pun that refers to those returnees unable to find employment. Respondents frequently recounted that unlike the past, when returnees were scarce, employers are now very practical and are less likely to pay more to hire candidates based on their overseas experience alone; instead it was their actual ability that was central.

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Another return?

When asked where returnees consider their home to be, a fairly common response was that it is where their family members were. Although working in Shanghai, Chen Shu, 43, considered his home to be in Vancouver, since that was where his wife and son were living, and it was also a place that he liked. Equally, Lindsay, 32, is living in the city of her birth, Shanghai, but feels that it is not her home – at least not until her husband joins her. The experience of having lived in both Canada and China appears to introduce fluidity to the concept of home, which changes according to the prevailing circumstances.

At the same time, some respondents indicated a preference to locate their home in Canada because it offered a better quality of life. Though they were concentrating on their careers in China, many respondents yearned to spend their twilight years in the more peaceful environment of Canada. For those with children, there were plans to bring them back to Canada either in time for elementary school or high school, depending on how long they felt it would take for the children to be integrated into the education system. Parents varied in their assessment of Canadian elementary education; some prefer what they deem as a more "relaxed" way of learning, while others favoured the relative rigour in Chinese schools, especially in maths and sciences. Also, the time spent in China provided an opportunity for the children to be immersed in Chinese culture and language. The goal, however, was to return in time for the children to be able to study in a Canadian university, which they believe to be superior to a Chinese university. Return to Canada was also considered as an option in case of future political instability in China. Ultimately, this second return epitomizes how circular migration is determined by both the wider contexts of sending and receiving countries as well as the changing expectations of a migrant over his or her lifetime.

Conclusion

There are two broad policy implications from return, and by extension, circular migration. First, the return of immigrants to their countries of origin may not necessarily mean a permanent departure. Respondents from my research often maintained linkages with Canada, whether with family, friends and ex-colleagues or through Canada-China business dealings, such as in the trading of goods and the provision of education services. Many professed an interest in returning in the future. Moreover, they revealed a change in personal identity that had resulted from their time in Canada. Most retained their Chinese ethnic identity but often expressed a sentiment of being both Chinese and Canadian in terms of their national identity. It is worth noting that China does not recognize dual citizenship, so once PRC immigrants obtain Canadian citizenship, they are meant to relinquish their Chinese citizenship. For a returnee, this may bring certain inconveniences; however, Canadian citizenship is also valued for the mobility that its passport offers relative to a Chinese one.

Furthermore, formal citizenship may not always reflect the layered nuances of a migrant's personal identity, yet there are real consequences in its impact on a migrant's life, such as in deciding their length of stay in order to fulfil he three years minimum residency requirement to obtain citizenship. For many respondents, citizenship became an

objective *after* their arrival in Canada, rather than the main motivation for their initial decision to immigrate to Canada. Rather the hope for personal development, the chance to give their children a better education, and a desire for a different environment, whether social or natural, were the major reasons for their immigration (Teo 2003b). My reason for highlighting this is to demonstrate that an understanding of a migrant's decision-making process is absolutely critical. Otherwise, drawing correlations between citizenship acquisition and migration motivation not only oversimplifies the story, but may also impute a strategic intent that may not have been there in the first place.

By focusing on the return segment in circular migration, I hope to have shown that migration is not always a one-way journey. Rather, it is a dynamic process depending on the changing contexts of nation-states and migrants' personal lives. Essentially, circular migration, like all migrations, is a profoundly human topic, with all the reasons and feelings, complexities and surprises that accompany our everyday lives.

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Notes

* For the purpose of this article, all references to the "People's Republic of China" or "China" exclude Hong Kong.

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