Between Imagination and Reality:

Tales of Skilled Immigrants from China

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ABSTRACT

Sin Yih Teo provides an anecdotal look at the vision Chinese immigrants have of life in Canada before and after they arrive. For example, while most newcomers are optimistic at the start, many are disappointed to find they cannot secure professional jobs to match their training. The author suggests that the four major sources of information available in China are not always accurate, including reports from family and friends already living abroad. More detailed information about Canada is needed prior to migration in order to better prepare immigrants for the challenges they will face.

"Why are we in the countryside?" Wenxiu asked her husband as their plane touched down at Vancouver International Airport. A new immigrant, Wenxiu had anticipated towering skyscrapers – a feature of modernity associated with her native Shanghai, and a recurrent motif in popular Chinese television drama series such as *A Bejing Native in New York* that depict migrants abroad. The unexpectedly flat landscape was the first of several surprises to follow Wenxiu's immigration to Canada. This article is located precisely at the juncture between pre-migration imagination and actual reality upon arrival. Drawing on focus groups and in-depth interviews with 78 immigrants from the People's Republic of China – the top source country of immigrants to Canada since 1998 (CIC, 1998, 2002) – who landed in Vancouver, British Columbia, between 1996 and 2001, I briefly explore some of the disconnections that occur. At the same time, I emphasize that immigration is ultimately a *human* issue, faced with all the concomitant rationalities and irrationalities, contradictions and emotions.

Imagining North America

> *People think that North America is very similar. Canadian lifestyles are very close to the Americans' and their cultural backgrounds are very similar. Therefore many people who aren't able to fulfill their American dream have come to Canada.* (Haiwen)

Two issues lie at the heart of this replacement of Canada for America that Haiwen suggests. First, there is the People's Republic of China (PRC) migrants' idealization of America as a premier destination by virtue of its position as a world superpower. Despite this favoured status, several respondents explained that America was often not an option since its immigration policy was tailored towards family reunification. Instead, Canada presented an opportunity with its more open policy for skilled immigration. This leads to the second issue, which is the close identification of Canada with America for many migrants prior to departure. In their words: "Canada and America are one family" and "Canada is part of North America, basically the same, not much difference" (Teo, 2003). For some respondents however, there was a distinction. According to Selena:

> *Canada is different even though it is close to America. In terms of politics, I wouldn't really want to go to America as it is more extreme. It has a stronger sense of superiority towards other countries whereas Canada does not.*

When asked about specific impressions before migration, respondents relied on a fairly similar repertoire of images that included Canada's status as a member of the Group of Seven industrial nations, its scenic beauty, as well as its excellent educational and welfare systems, a consequence many respondents linked to the marketing rhetoric of immigration consulting companies. These contemporary images aside, a number of respondents also suggested that Canada might have a venerated place in the minds of the Chinese due to Dr. Norman Bethune (1890-1939), a Canadian doctor who cured many patients in China during the Second World War and lost his life in the process. Ironically, although some Canadians may not even know of Bethune, his remains lie in the Mausoleum of Martyrs in the city of Shijiazhuang, southeast of Beijing, where there is a Bethune International Peace Hospital and Bethune Medical School. Mao Zedong, then Chairman of the Communist Party in China, further immortalized him in an essay, which was part of a selection of reading materials that were considered to be ideologically correct during the early days of the Cultural Revolution;

primary school courses, for example, centred on them (Landsberger, 2002). Unsurprisingly then, to many respondents who had read and even memorized the essay, Bethune personified Canada's image as a friendly and peaceful country.

Experiencing Canada

After their arrival in Canada, the PRC immigrants' expectations often did not coincide with reality. One respondent, Siwan, revealed, "I have told my family and friends not to imagine what this place is like. It is totally different from their imagination." Siwan's remark stemmed primarily from a commonly felt disappointment over the acute difficulty faced by many PRC skilled immigrants in finding commensurate employment. It has become a routine observation among immigrants and immigrant service agencies alike that former engineers, accountants, and doctors are now working as dishwashers, factory workers, and janitors.

This phenomenon is reflective of a more general problem in Canada where there is growing evidence that a substantial proportion of immigrants are not able to convert their foreign qualifications into jobs that match their training (Couton, 2002). Canadian policy makers are well aware of this situation: a number of key documents, including the 2001 Speech from the Throne, the new *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act,* many policy research projects, and statements by various federal departments list foreign credential recognition as a priority. At the provincial level, which is where most of the jurisdictional leverage lies, several policy initiatives have been introduced (ibid). Non-governmental organizations, such as S.U.C.C.E.S.S. in British Columbia, have also been providing more direct support to new immigrants through employment counseling and job-finding workshops. Despite much effort and rhetoric, the non-recognition of credentials remains a critical issue.

The experiences of Ruhao and his wife, Ailin, illustrate the employment difficulties faced by PRC skilled immigrants. Ruhao, 31, and Ailin, 30, were formerly an engineer and an accountant (respectively) in China, leading relatively comfortable lifestyles with an annual income of RM200,000 each. In 2001, they immigrated to Canada in search of better professional opportunities and to widen their horizons. Upon arrival, Ruhao sent out more than a hundred resumes to companies without receiving any response, and after discussing with fellow PRC immigrants, concluded that the lack of local credentials and work experience meant that he would not be recognized as an engineer in Vancouver. A friend subsequently suggested a job at a warehouse which paid $9 per hour. Reflecting on his situation, Ruhao confided:

> *I feel that it is very much a shame that the more than ten years of experience I have [in engineering] cannot be utilised here […] I think there is quite a huge impact on your state of mind when you have not been able to find a suitable job after searching for a very long time.*

As for Ailin, she volunteered at a non-governmental organisation to widen her social network while preparing to attend English lessons at the Vancouver School Board, and planned to eventually take courses for a certificate in accountancy. She too alluded to "a strong feeling of defeat" in her job search, a sentiment compounded by the absence of her two-year-old son who had been sent back to China recently. Their predicament echoed that of a significant number of other respondents with young children who have found childcare to be a source of concern. Previously in China, the children were usually looked after either by their grandparents or placed in childcare centres while both parents were at work. Now in Canada, the absence of the extended family and affordable childcare means that only one parent can work while the other has to stay at home, making it difficult for the latter to improve his or her career prospects.

Some respondents with children of school-going age raised a different concern: their unexpected finding that the Canadian educational system, which formed part of their initial reason for migration, was less rigorous at the elementary level compared to China, particularly in mathematics and science subjects. Peirong wondered aloud, "The adults are all very anxious. Can they learn anything? Especially for the kids in grades one and two, can they learn anything?" Nonetheless, there were also other parents who were pleased to discover that the schools in Canada encouraged creative thinking skills.

Turning to the adults themselves, the upheavals caused by migration and the drastic drop in household finances have caused marital problems for some families, and as Haojie poignantly noted:

> *You can say that every new immigrant family is under stress. If you ask ten people who migrated from Mainland 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.*

PRC immigrants face a further complication – that of English language proficiency (outside of Quebec), especially in verbal communication. Poor English language skills mean that it is even more difficult for them to apply for jobs other than in ethnic businesses, which in Vancouver's context sometimes require knowledge of Cantonese, rather than Mandarin, which is the national language in China. A vicious cycle is thus created: the more the immigrants cannot find jobs in an English-speaking environment, the more difficult it is for them to improve their English, which in turn lowers their chances of obtaining such jobs. Another possible serious implication is that it may become an obstacle for PRC immigrants to interact with the predominantly English-speaking society. Respondents frequently commented on 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 – a situation which they had not envisaged before migration.

The Significance of Information

The "large gap between expectations and reality" my respondent, Gerald, discerned among new immigrants, and their accompanying "sense of loss", can be partly

attributed to the kind of information that potential migrants receive when they are in China. I now turn to the four main information sources: immigration consultancies, earlier migrants, the media, and more recently, the Internet.

Immigration consultancies play a very important role in promoting immigration to Canada. An interviewee even suggested that the geography of migration in China could be mapped according to where their offices were located (Teo, forthcoming). The consultancies maintain a very high profile through holding frequent immigration seminars in prominent hotels, advertising in newspapers, and maintaining Internet websites. A general sentiment was that the consultants only highlighted Canada's positive aspects, emphasizing its excellent living conditions and natural beauty, with little mention of the local employment conditions.

On the whole, earlier migrants are regarded as the most trusted sources (Teo, 2003). Yet when relaying their news to family members in China, many respondents admitted to a convention of *baoxibubaoyou* (reporting only the happy news and not the bad news), a kind of self-censorship to prevent their families from worrying. For a different audience, the issue of *mianzi* (face) was significant for some respondents. A fear of "losing face" meant that they would not want other people to hear about the problems they were facing in Canada. Eventually though, Gerald believes:

> *The information will return to China with a certain discount, but once the time is long enough, and there are more cases, people will slowly understand that it is quite tough here in the beginning […] The earlier the information returns, the better, and the more detailed the information, the better; potential immigrants can consider this for reference. They can then make a more complete judgment.*

While one group of respondents would censor the information transmitted to friends planning to immigrate, another group was emphatic in stressing that even though such a practice might be common, they would "tell the truth as it is" – the "truth" almost invariably being the difficulty in finding professional jobs in Canada. How then do potential migrants react to this information? Here, I suggest that the phenomenon of the "inadmissible truth" plays an important role (Teo, 2003). Contrary to rational expectations of information reception, potential migrants may not necessarily change their decision even when they learn of the negative aspects of immigration. Cecilia espoused this view:

> *Basically 80-90% [will come]. Most of the people who have this thinking are almost there already. We can't really prevent them much. They have already made up their minds. They just want to hear the positive news. Maybe they can't even absorb the negative ones! Just like when we first came, we thought how bad can it be, right?*

A third important source has been the media, which has popularized the notion of a migrant in the social imagination in China, for instance through television drama series that reflect the fate of Chinese migrants overseas. One particularly well-known example is *A Beijing Native in New York,* which nearly all my respondents watched. Most felt that the message was that migrants had to work very hard during the first few years, but eventually their efforts would pay off, thus representing a success story. The series was part of a wider cultural context which saw the appearance of a new genre of autobiographical and semi-fictional writings by Chinese who lived in the United States or Japan. In the last few years, immigration guidebooks have also appeared on the market, with titles such as *Walking towards Canada: A Guide for Studying Abroad, Working Abroad, Immigration, Business, Family Visits, and Travel.*

Recently, potential migrants have been turning more to the Internet as a source of information. The immigration websites range from pragmatic guides on application procedures to personal accounts in the form of journal entries, some of which have gathered a steady following. The anonymity of the Internet suggests that stories which earlier migrants might not have been willing to share may now be more freely circulated. However, the reliability of the information remains an issue, and a respondent pointed out that the rationale of the "inadmissible truth" may still apply.

Conclusion

I suggest that there are two possible policy implications from my findings. First, there is a critical need for potential migrants to have more detailed information about Canada prior to migration. All my respondents agreed that this would have helped them to be better prepared for life in Canada, not just mentally, but also in the more pragmatic aspects of job-finding. Second, there could be greater assistance for those who are already in Canada, particularly in terms of credential recognition, to enable immigrants to obtain jobs that reflect their professional skills more closely. Apart from the important consideration of social justice, there is also the real possibility that these immigrants may decide to return to China. When asked about their future plans, some respondents declared that they will stay on while the majority have yet to decide, with the common refrain being "*zouyibukanyibu*" (taking one step at a time). Their experiences during this period hence determine to a large extent whether or not they will remain. Thus for the PRC skilled immigrants, migration is a lived reality, and a geographical process that does not necessarily end at the point of landing.

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