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# Migration and Social Aspirations: Chinese Cosmopolitanism in Wenzhou Region (China)

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**Abstract:** This article explores what motivates the movements of Chinese migrants from China to Portugal. It presents an ethnographic account of social aspirations in Wenzhou, a port city located in South Zhejiang (Southeast China), where post-Mao economic prosperity, allied to the existence of networks of trade and migration, resulted in social and economic inequalities and great social pressure to become rich and successful. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Wenzhou and in Lisbon (Portugal) between 2008 and 2010, this paper argues that Wenzhou migratory projects are a result of modernity aspirations and desires for material modernization articulated with core Chinese values such as filial piety.

**Keywords:** Chinese migration; social aspirations; Chinese cosmopolitanism; Wenzhou

## 1. Introduction

This article explores the motivations behind the movements of Chinese migrants from China to Portugal and starts by presenting the cases of some migrants from Wenzhou to reflect on their expectations and engage in a dialogue with Appadurai's notion of social aspirations [1] as well as Lisa Rofel's [2] notion of "cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics". It also resorts to the idea of heterotopias in Foucault's sense [3], and to Bach's [4] definition of Zone to explore the effects of post-Mao prosperity in urban spaces such as Wenzhou. Ultimately, we argue that Wenzhou migratory projects are a result of modernity aspirations and desires for material modernization articulated with core Chinese values such as filial piety, which is so fundamental in the regulation of relationships between individuals in the family. This argument lines up with earlier arguments by authors studying transnationalism and migration under the influence of the famous proposal of Glick-Schiller et al. [5] in other contexts, namely South Asia such as Mapril [6] and Osella and Osella [7], who demonstrated how conspicuous consumption and spatial mobility were increasingly becoming measures of modernity and a mode of attaining social respectability at home.

## 2. Transnationalism and Social Aspirations between Wenzhou and Lisbon

Inspired by the experiences of reconstruction and the formation of associations and networks of ties connecting people and places and transactions taking place across the limits of nations-states, transnationalism emerged as a conceptual response to flows and connections challenges [8] (p. xxi). Since the publication of the seminal work on transnationalism by Glick-Schiller et al. [5], the field of migration studies has been dominated by theories on globalization and transnationalism. In this text, the author assumed that transnational migrants are involved in a more complex and fluid existence, which forces them to cope with different identity constructions such as national, ethnic, and racial, and also with different national and global contexts (p. 5). This perspective attributes to migrants a fundamental role as culturally creative actors especially through networking (p. 8). Transnationalism

has focused on immigrants by researching processes of identity and community construction, the idea of “place”, the connections between migration and capital flows, and of migrants’ particular ways of political engagement [8]. To give specific attention to subjects in transnational processes, aihwa ong [9] proposed the notion of transnationality to account for the condition of global interconnectivity and mobility through space intensified under capitalism (p. 4). Ong linked mobility to modernity projects and was in accordance with other scholars who in the last two decades have discussed modernity expectations brought about by globalization and the expansion of capitalism. Part of this literature has developed a line of argument that states that modernity projects are entangled with local cosmologies by providing explanations for economic inequality, attributing new meanings to consumption, or by offering alternative and faster ways of getting rich [1,10–12].

In China, modernity has been conceptualized in terms of the impact of economic reforms since the late 1970s. Explorations of the relations between market, socialism, and gift economy logics [13,14] have been interpreted by anthropologists as a consequence of the lack of values in Chinese society [15], but also as a fact related to China opening to market forces and to globalization [16,17]. The growing expansion of China’s political and economic power and increasing awareness of the embeddedness of Chinese transnational practices in global processes led Pieke et al. [18] to propose the idea of Chinese globalization as an enlarged context for understanding Chinese migration after 1978, an approach that has linked to contemporaneous Chinese mobility projects with desires for cosmopolitanism and social recognition [18–20]. My hypothesis is that Chinese migrants’ desires for prosperity, modernization, and consumption are part of a wider project of the “indigenization of modernity” [10], characterized by a social pressure to be wealthy and successful, but also by growing economic inequalities [21].

### 3. Materials and Methods

The evidence used in this article formed part of a larger PhD research project on Chinese migration based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lisbon (Portugal) with a two months fieldtrip to Wenzhou (China) (a total of 21 months during 2008–2010) [22]. In Lisbon, my fieldwork consisted of regular visits, between three and six times a week, to meet people, attend events, and to hang around observing, talking to people, and interacting as much as possible. Here, my fieldwork was conducted mainly through participant observation, non-structured and semi-structured interviews, and collecting life stories [23], mostly in people’s workplace or in public sites such as temples, restaurants, cafés, or the waiting rooms of public services where they had to go to solve issues. I also visited some of my Chinese interlocutors in their homes and accompanied them to festivals and other celebrations organized by and for Chinese migrants. In Wenzhou, I visited three families whose relatives were known to me in Lisbon. There, I stayed with their parents and siblings. In Wenzhou, I interviewed migrants, relatives and friends, a local official, local business people, and internal migrants. I participated in celebration dinners, accompanied people to temples, and participated in their daily activities. I did not want to enter the field using migrant associations as a point of entry as I feared this would jeopardize my access to people with less power resources or who chose to stay outside these associations. My previous teaching activities with Chinese people allowed me to establish contact with some of them without having to rely on intermediaries. During my fieldwork, I followed 12 families of small traders or employees of other Chinese businessmen (nine of them came or had family members from the Wenzhou region) in more depth. I was privileged to have a quality relationship with the families. These families were of different sizes, from two to ten people. All had relatives in China and in other countries in Europe or in the United States. There was no attempt to be representative, though it was important to account for the diversity of people and flows inside Chinese migration. Most of the families began to arrive at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, but there were three families with members who had arrived at the end of 1980 or the beginning of the 1990s. Three of the families had previous working experiences in another European country, namely Italy, France, and Spain. In terms of education, half of the people had completed or did not complete (ninth grade) compulsory schooling, while the other half had secondary school or college education. This was how I mapped

my own network of interlocutors. Only later did I get to interact with different Chinese associations and leaders, but even at that time, I tried to stay outside power circles and associate more closely with the common migrant worker and small businesspeople, the condition of most of the Chinese migrants in Portugal. In this way, I was able to expand my network of acquaintances and interlocutors. However, my findings are based on interaction through conversations, interviews, and participant observation with many more people. Considering my field notes, I estimate that I interacted with around 100 people during my almost two years in the field. Nevertheless, the cases presented were selected due to their relevance to the situations analyzed. I should note that not all the people I spoke to were aware of my research purposes, but all the people I asked for an interview and the families I dealt with more closely were all informed about my research. All the texts I produced during fieldwork including evidence from participant observation, interviews, and life stories were subject to a content analysis as described by Bernard [23]. The aim was to find themes and categories, search for relations among them and with the major concepts under research.

#### 4. Money, Migration, and Cosmopolitanism with Chinese Characteristics

Migrants from the Wenzhou region make up the great majority of Chinese migrants coming from the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) to Portugal [24] and to Continental Europe in general. The influx of Chinese to Portugal dates to the early decades of the twentieth century, when Chinese from Zhejiang Province, mainly from the Wenzhou and Qingtian regions, extended their migratory chains across Europe [25]. After this peak migratory period, chains to Europe underwent a major drop during Maoism (1949–1978) [26,27]. In the late 1970s, political changes in China again made it possible to leave the country. These new migratory flows to Europe in the early 1980s have been termed the “New Chinese Migration”, an expression increasingly used among PRC migration scholars to account for the Chinese who in the early 1980s “left China to settle elsewhere regardless of their purpose, legal status, and citizenship” [19] (p. 3). The main objective was not to escape from poverty, but to improve their social and economic status [28,29]. New Chinese migrants are the paradigm of the new global and transnational citizen, flexible and in motion, participating actively in globalization processes through their transnational practices [9,28,30,31]. These new migratory flows used some of the old migration chains towards Europe, especially from Zhejiang Province [25,26], to start and develop a Chinese business sector in Europe, namely in France, Italy, and the Netherlands, fueling new waves of emigration from China to Europe. The expansion into the Mediterranean countries of Europe such as Portugal and Spain occurred during the 1990s and early 2000s. At the time, countries in Mediterranean Europe became attractive since they were experiencing a period of relative prosperity and were in the process of joining the Eurozone. In Portugal, a truly Chinese restaurant sector emerged in the 1980s. The 1990s was characterized by the expansion of catering activities all over the country and by new investment in import-export activities as wholesalers. At the end of the 1990s, Chinese started to invest in retail businesses. Around 2008, the Chinese bazaar sector was beyond its saturation point and Chinese people started to talk about a crisis in the sector. In the last decade, the competition between Chinese retailers sharpened and some entrepreneurs started to rent or buy large commercial spaces hindering the business of smaller stores. The restaurant sector was reconverted, it became more specialized and has also undergone an improvement in quality. At the same time, new business areas have emerged, from greengrocers to real estate, depending on the available capital.

According to the SEF (Portuguese Immigration and Borders Service) [32], in 2016 there were 22,503 Chinese residing in Portugal (last figure known). In terms of composition indicators, there is a relative equilibrium by gender (11,314 men and 11,189 women), with an average age of 31.1. Most Chinese are employed in commerce/service or as small business owners [33]. The evidence collected during fieldwork and in a previous research [34] allowed me to describe this flow as composed mainly of manual workers coming from rural and urban areas of the Wenzhou region (including Qingtian), but also from other provinces such as Shandong, Guangxi, Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, or Sichuan. At the same time, there was also a flow of students and educated people from several

places in China, namely Chinese urban centers such as Beijing and Shanghai, many of them who once in Portugal, entered the Chinese business sector. Many of these migrants, especially those coming from Wenzhou region, had previous experiences in other European countries such as Spain, Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Germany.

Eventually, many of these migrants came directly from Wenzhou to Portugal seeking to improve their economic condition. That was the case of Lanfen, a thirty-year old, female Chinese shopkeeper in Lisbon:

“In China now everything is modern and new, especially our city Wenzhou. It is the most modern in China! It seems like Hong Kong . . . you’ll see . . . but there I never had any money. That people really know how to spend money? . . . you’ll see . . . so I came here to make money (zhuan qian).”

Lanfen and Bojing have lived together since 1995, when she became pregnant at age 17. They eventually got married when she reached 21, the minimum legal age for marriage. By that time, they had already had their second child. As a result, they had to pay a heavy fine for breaking the law. They were left with only the money they could make from their small businesses. This made life difficult in Wenzhou, where success and power are measured by money-making capacity and conspicuous consumption, both taken as signs of modernity.

When I asked Lanfen, what made her come to Portugal, she said: “The problem is that Wenzhou is a very consumerist (xiaofeizhuyi) place. If my friend goes to an expensive place, I also want to go; if my friend buys something, I also want to buy. There is this constant pressure (yali) to spend money (huaqian). [ . . . ] We came because we want to improve our lives (shenghuo hao yidian). We want to make a change (bianhua) for our children.”

It was after two of Bojing’s nephews migrated to Portugal in the late 1990s that Lanfen and Bojing also thought of migrating to Europe, looking for a chance to fulfill their aspirations of a good life. Inspired by Appadurai [1] (p. 67), here, I use the term “aspiration” as shorthand for all the wants, preferences, choices, and calculations of individuals. It is my contention that these aspirations have an influence upon decisions to migrate.

In Wenzhou, the couple felt trapped by a very demanding social environment in terms of social status, and in a social structure that could not offer them opportunities to become wealthy and powerful. They sensed an exit from their “social dead end” in the narratives of the easy prosperity described by relatives working in ethnic Chinese businesses in Portugal. Although Lanfen seemed quite disappointed with what she found in Europe, some years later she encouraged one of her brothers to join her in Lisbon with the same aim of becoming prosperous. According to Appadurai, social aspiration is a cultural capacity: “( . . . ) in culture ideas of the future, as much as of those about the past, are embedded and nurtured” [1] (p. 59). These ideas about the future are implanted in cosmologies and calculations that allow people to maintain a sense of dignity in poverty [1] (pp. 64–65). Still, expectations of a modern, cosmopolitan, and good life that fuel Chinese migration are also informed by the influence of long-term values based on cycles of intergenerational solidarity in the family such as filial piety (xiao) and self-sacrifice for others (qinlao). Lisa Rofel [2] (pp. 1–2) conceives desire in contemporary China as being associated with China’s opening out and exposure to global processes, namely heterogeneous liberal economies and liberal politics, under whose influence the Chinese state and Chinese citizens try to attain material and moral parity with the West. Cosmopolitan experiences enable individuals to transcend their localization in China through a kind of virtual mobility. According to X. Liu [35], throughout the history of China, a connection has existed between the spatial movement of individuals and upward social mobility. At present, this connection has become associated with the opening (kaifang) of China to global capitalism through the Special Economic Zones and mobility overseas. Travel and mobility are thus linked to economic and social opportunities. In a time of increasing globalization, migration has become a real option for many people, providing a channel to fulfill their cosmopolitan desires. However, these desires incorporate the values of xiao and qinlao

in such a way that the predicament of Chinese modernity for Chinese migrants is a combination of old and new values, of aspirations for social mobility and material well-being, both for oneself and for one's family. This is essentially what Lisa Rofel [2] describes as "cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics".

Lanfen emphasized that her hometown in China was a very cosmopolitan place, and that to be "cosmopolitan" in Wenzhou requires money, which she did not have. Thus, departure from China was essential to accomplish the modernity experience she observed all around her, which is the same decision made by many other Chinese migrants. The desire to make money, high expectations, and a fertile imagination were already identified by M. Li [36] as special factors of migration from Wenzhou. In the next sections, I will disclose how to be modern and cosmopolitan, and to accumulate money became a form of social communication and of social integration in places like Wenzhou, informing the daily practices that are themselves a manifestation of expectations for the future.

## 5. The Creation of a Zone

Wenzhou, a port city located in the south of Zhejiang Province, Southeast China, can be considered an example of what the literature of urban space has designated a "Zone"—a socio-spatial formation of late modernity that originated as export-zones and turned into places of imagined modernity [4]. According to the author, "The Zone is a spatial capital accumulation machine consisting of a designated physical area in which different rules apply to corporations, and by extension workers, than in the rest of a given state" [4] (p. 100). The creation of zones in China took place after 1978 with the outset of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Politics (*gaige kaifang*), which aimed to set out the four "modernizations" (*si xiandaihua*)—industry, agriculture, science and technology and defense—and to turn China into a leading country [16,37]. The reform of the economic system was at the heart of this full-scale modernization drive, although it was emphasized that the opening to market should retain a strong state-directed stance, which is proper for a country of socialist ideology.

The opening to market signified a decollectivization of society, an openness to foreign investment and business development, and encouraged wealth accumulation and consumption [16]. The reform allowed for a two-speed country where some regions could get rich first, serving as an example to others [37]. Wenzhou was not part of these initial vanguard spaces of development and economic reform defined by the government. However, it happened that Wenzhou became the first region in China to be dominated by private enterprise after 1978, characterized by economic development based on local entrepreneurs. From the beginning of the 1980s and onwards, rural households were also allowed to establish their own business enterprises and to hire workers. There was also a revival of rural markets with continued economic regulation of the state [38–41]. Wenzhou has a long tradition of long-distance commerce through its port, which has enabled the region to overcome its natural geographic isolation in relation to the rest of the continent and its lack of arable land for agriculture [25].

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many peasants from Wenzhou and Qingtian (today in Lishui municipality) migrated—especially to Europe, but also to other parts of the world—as traders and seamen in foreign vessels. Until 1949, Wenzhou trade and emigration were strongly linked to its port connections and to the local production of handicrafts. During Maoism, forced collectivization aimed at extinguishing private initiative and trade. This process was received with great resistance in Wenzhou, precisely in light of the challenge it presented to local traditional economic activities [38]. The political reforms of 1978 allowed Wenzhou to return to its traditional economic base. Not only did Wenzhou have to rebuild its economy based on trade and household industry, but it also had to revive its emigration networks linked to trade activities. After 1978, private initiative was slowly permitted, and migration was also decriminalized [42]. It is important to underline that migration has always played a major role in broadening the Wenzhou area of commercial activity, in the sense that Wenzhou migrants, who specialized in trading products from their region, constituted a network of information regarding markets and trade products to workshop manufacturers back home [40,43,44]. The position of Wenzhou in post-Mao China as a model region for Chinese economic development



whose prosperity raised from scratch, contrasts with the image of Wenzhou during Maoism, which was that of a rebel region to socialist practices, who had played an important role during the civil war by supporting the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) side. Wenzhou secular history as an important trade port and a manufacturing center, and the network of Wenzhouese people scattered all over China and beyond, was fundamental to the region's economic success. The Politics of Reform and Opening, namely its decollectivization and support to private initiative and profit-making practices, constituted the opportunity the Wenzhouese were waiting for.

Another important component of Wenzhou success was productivity. Traditionally, Wenzhou people often had to migrate due to the lack of arable land. In a situation of rural industrialization, however, this surplus workforce was channeled into manufacturing enterprises. Initially, small household enterprises started to use very cheap labor composed of unoccupied family members. Subsequently, they started to contract farming peasants from local and neighboring regions [41]. Working in the manufacturing industry constituted an improvement in the economic situation of these peasants because they could receive a regular and higher salary when compared to their previous income from agriculture. Wenzhou industries managed to achieve high productivity levels by producing "without slack" (using labor in a very intensive way through extending hours and allowing few or no days off), typical of economies of scale. Another important element were the raw materials, coming mainly from state industries leftovers, that were used to manufacture all kinds of synthetic products such as buttons, lighters, and electric equipment [40]. Following the tradition of Chinese industry production in the nineteenth century [45], the Wenzhou light industry produced cheap and poor-quality products intended for sale in China's poor and backward regions [40]. In time, these products were also sent to foreign markets. This market expansion was made possible due to the global network of the Wenzhouese.

The rapid development of manufacturing based on labor-intensive industries transformed the local economic structure in Wenzhou from one of poor agriculture to one of dynamic commerce and industry [38] (p. 295). This provided an improvement in peasants' standard of living and changes in consumption patterns [40]. Prosperity enabled people to aspire to a "modern", more urban lifestyle [41] and Wenzhou became known nationwide for its inhabitant's extravagant spending, not only on housing and clothing, but also on weddings, funerals, and grave sites [46] (p. 258). Furthermore, in the mid-1980s, Wenzhou's spectacular growth became known as the "Wenzhou model" among scholars and politicians in China. The pressing question among academics both at home and abroad soon became whether Wenzhou's economic growth could be used as a model for the development of other poor and backward rural areas in China [38,40,41,46,47]. Through this self-made process, Wenzhou became an important industrial and exporting zone during the 1980s. The accumulation of capital generated by Wenzhou's labor-intensive industries led to the emergence of a middle class eager to realize the "dreams of modernity" and to transform this exporting zone into a place that Bach [4] called an Ex-City or an Export City. Unlike the cases of other zones that were "places without history" [4], Wenzhou was a historical port of Chinese maritime trade deeply connected to global capitalism since the mid-nineteenth century, despite its loss of relevance in the more recent historical period under Maoism, which was marked by economic collapse and poverty.

After 1978, the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping allowed for the development of flexible strategies of capital accumulation, which were money-making opportunities that were seized with great tenacity by the Wenzhouese. The capital accumulated was invested in renovation and modernization, especially of the city center, to transform this middle-sized city in China into a modern and cosmopolitan place. This was made possible by the economic prosperity of the last 30 years and was mainly financed through fundraising from local entrepreneurs who, in the absence of initiative by the central government, poured money into important public works to improve accessibility and to renovate the city center. Until the end of the 1990s, Wenzhou communications continued to be based mostly around the port, but since then, an airport, two railway stations (one of them to receive a high-speed train—*dongche*—connecting directly to Shanghai) and four motorways have been built [48].

This modern urban landscape raised and nourished by its dwellers' conspicuous display remains surrounded by rundown suburbs crowded with sweatshops, where migrant workers live and work in conditions that, to a European eye, looks like sheer exploitation and wild competition, but which locally are perceived, both by employers and outside workers, as opportunities to accomplish "the Chinese dreams of modernity".

## 6. Recognizing "Home": Wenzhou in the Mirror

In this section, I apply Michel Foucault's [3] theory of heterotopias to analyze the social and urban contrasts in the Wenzhou Municipality landscape. The center and the suburb may appear to be strangers to each other, but in fact they reflect each other like a game of mirrors, and feed into each other materially and symbolically.

Huiqing has spent her last 20 years living in Europe where she migrated at the age of 17 to work in a textile workshop in Paris. Until then, she lived and worked in Nanbaixiang, a rural area in the outskirts of Wenzhou's urban district. During these two decades, she returned to China six times to visit family in her hometown. Wenzhou was a very different city at the beginning of the 1990s and has evolved very much since she left China. The city has acquired a modern and cosmopolitan look with many new buildings, especially towers made of glass and concrete built to lodge new businesses and to house the new Wenzhou urbanites. New wide avenues have replaced old Wenzhou alleys and narrow streets. The only survivors are a pair of streets with restored old buildings for tourism and commercial activity near the waterfront. Whenever she returns (*hui jia*), aside from spending time with her parents in the village, Huiqing likes to enjoy the city center lifestyle. During my stay with her in Wenzhou, we went shopping a couple of times to Wumajie, a pedestrian commercial street replete with stores of many local brands, nowadays the city center. For these tours, she always invited other women from the family—her mother and sister—seizing the opportunity to offer them garments, cosmetics, or accessories they would not buy otherwise. However, she also liked to buy items for herself, especially products not available or more expensive in Portugal. One of her favorite places is a set of smaller and narrower streets around Wumajie that host a great number of small stores, many of them selling counterfeit goods coming from Wenzhou workshops at convenient prices. However, in China, to bargain (*taojia*) is a balance of power where the buyer and seller anticipate the moment when the other will give in, and Huiqing's appearance and behavior of an emigrant warns sellers not to lower the price very much. Being in Wenzhou is also an opportunity to meet friends from Europe. This time, Huiqing got together with Lijuan, a friend from the time she worked in Paris more than ten years earlier. When Huiqing left Paris for Lisbon, Lijuan went to Rome, but they have kept in touch through the telephone and Internet ever since. Lijuan was in China for business, essentially to buy new merchandise to sell in her warehouses in Rome. During these encounters, they talk about their family lives and their business ventures, usually exchanging information about business achievements and prospects, about the latest business strategies, and about current difficulties. These kinds of informal meetings among acquaintances and friends from Europe are central to managing their lives in Europe. It was through this kind of information exchange that Huiqing decided to move to Lisbon and start a business in Martim Moniz. This was also how she met her husband. These encounters also have an important emotional component. Chinese migrants in Europe share similar experiences, and so they can fully understand the hardships of working in a sweatshop in Prato (in Italy) or of being looked down upon (*kanbuqi*) for being Chinese in a Parisian quarter, something that their relatives in Wenzhou cannot appreciate in the same way.

Although they spend most of their time in Europe, Wenzhouese migrants also participate in the local culture of conspicuous consumption through investments, especially in the real estate market. Recently, Lijuan bought a brand-new apartment in the city center and took Huiqing to visit it. She was impressed by her friend's new house and was located near the riverside, one of the prime areas of the city, well-ordered and delimited by modern residential and commercial buildings. According to my Wenzhouese friends, here are situated the most expensive apartments in the city, valued at

hundreds of thousands of Euros. The most distinguished hotels are also located here, lodging fancy restaurants and internationally renowned boutiques of French and Italian designers. In the streets of the center, high-end cars of renowned European brands abound, and people tend to exhibit a modern and sophisticated look. Migration gave Huiqing and thousands of other Wenzhouese the opportunity to participate in Wenzhou's modern lifestyle. As a poor worker in a shoe factory in Nanbaixiang, Huiqing could never long for a comfortable life such as the one she enjoys now. However, downtown Wenzhou also exposes the inequalities that underlie the prosperity of private enterprise. In the stores and restaurants we visited, there are internal migrants working for salaries that locals refuse. When the night falls, beggars, cripples, and old people finally dare to roam the streets of the city center.

Although she does not have an apartment in Wenzhou, Huiqing can enjoy the brand-new apartment bought by her brother in a private condominium in the city center. In Wenzhou center, the most expensive residential quarters are organized in private condominiums where communication with the outside is made through several gates guarded by private vigilantes. Inside these residential citadels, a dozen towers (dasha) shelter the city's most distinguished dwellers in their comfortable and sumptuous apartments. Her brother and sister-in-law, a business couple in Wenzhou, had attempted, unsuccessfully, a decade or so earlier to be smuggled to Europe. After this failed attempt, they managed with the help of relatives to open a grocery store in a new neighborhood outside the center. For ten years they lived in the store, working every day from dawn to dusk. Last year, they finally bought this new apartment and moved in. People told me that the great majority of these private condominiums were owned by local businessmen and factory owners, and by people who lived abroad. The sale of prized land for construction in urban Wenzhou has also enabled owners of old houses to afford new and big apartments in these condominiums.

Huiqing feels attached to Wenzhou not only because of her origins, but also because to be a Wenzhouese today is to be identified with the modernity the city has achieved in the national context. Although she does not intend to return to China in the future, Huiqing sees Wenzhou as a place for vacation, and this mood very much dominates her activities and manners in the city. After so many years in Europe, her knowledge of the place is that of a tourist. She constantly asks her relatives for information and advice about places, services, and itineraries and she also seizes the opportunity of being in town to sightsee and visit local attractions. One of the last times she and her husband visited Wenzhou, they even stayed in one of the city's most expensive hotels. Her unawareness of the local habits and lack of orientation skills in Wenzhou is easily perceptible by locals and new locals (internal migrants), making her feel like a stranger in her own land. Interestingly, although she sees Wenzhou and China in a more distant way, Huiqing continues to be very influenced by them. This visit to Wenzhou encouraged her make a decision: she will buy a new house in Portugal.

Huiqing's transnational life between Wenzhou and Lisbon has caused a reconfiguration of her sense of "home", anchored in both places and in the multiple points of migration and business networks by which they are connected. To be at "home" is not only to be in Wenzhou or in Lisbon, but to be in this transit between the two places. The emergence of a transnational identity of "home" [49] is very likely the most novel aspect of transnational migration [50]. Regarding Chinese migration in particular, the emergence of a transnational notion of "home" accounts for the lack of intent among my interlocutors to definitely return to China, as was common among Chinese migrants before 1978 [51]. A definitive return "home" to China becomes pointless in a world where "home" is perceived as being in a process of dislocation between two sites.

Downtown Wenzhou is the quintessence of Wenzhou's heterotopic nature; it is a real place, and yet one whose perfectness creates a sense of illusion [3] in relation to most external places of the suburbs. The suburb and the center are two extremes of a spectrum. The center is an illusion that unfolds many layers of crisis and deviation, mostly represented by old beggars and young migrant workers. Yet, the unattained center also represents a utopia for outsiders, either locals from Wenzhou suburbs or internal migrant workers. For all of them, it is the inspirational source of their aspirations.



When Lanfen and Bojing left Wenzhou in the first years of the new millennium, the city was already an economically vibrant place, in the top ten of the most economically developed cities in China, thereby offering its residents a materially modern life. The experience of being excluded from participating in this material modernity, portrayed by the acquisition of goods and services, encouraged them to leave. In Wenzhou, they had no money and felt poor. These feelings of poverty arose not from starvation or material misery, as in the past, but from contemporary inequalities found throughout Chinese society, of which Wenzhou is a paradigmatic illustration. Social aspirations are thus the most important aspect of Chinese migration from Wenzhou. In the next section, I will show how this capacity to aspire and to project into the future is nurtured in the experience of inequality in the present.

## 7. Mobility, Immobility and Exit in Wenzhou

Nanbaixiang is a small town (zhen) consisting of a conglomerate of villages (cun) in Ouhai district in the rural and suburban area of Wenzhou city. The villages spread along the main road in many cluttered streets. The traffic is rather chaotic, with trucks, buses, cars, motorbikes, vans, and pulling carts flowing all the time. The great flow of traffic, especially of trucks, is related to the intense industrial activity going on in these villages. Despite being only a 20-minute drive from the center, there is a great distance between the luxury and modernity of Wenzhou urban districts and the unruly landscape of these suburban villages. In daylight, old, dirty, and unfinished buildings form a grey smudge on the landscape. Here and there a white spot appears, corresponding to more recent white-tile building. Many of these buildings are factories; some of them used to be in the urban districts of the city, but with the process of urban renewal, factories have expanded to Ouhai, transforming this former rural area into an industrial place. Construction here, including more recent additions, is rather anarchic. Most of the streets are dirty, and garbage of all kinds accumulates everywhere. Though the main streets are asphalted, mud and filth abound on the back of the buildings and on the roadside due to the spring rains. Nanbaixiang has greatly evolved since Huifang (born in 1965) was a little girl. Her own family epitomizes some of these changes. Huifang's father used to work in the fields, but after 1978, he found a job as a locksmith, and only farmed the shan (a plot of land) as a part-time job. Huifang, her sisters, and brother started to work when they were very young. At the age of 14, she started to work in a small shoe factory in a two-story traditional wooden building near one of the many water channels in Wenzhou. Her younger sister joined her a few years later after finishing the ninth grade. Every day their mother would wake them up early in the morning, then they would ride their bicycles for half an hour to the workshop and come back late at night, after 12 hours' work. The two sisters left the shoe factory more than 15 years ago. Huifang lost her job when she became pregnant with her second child, and her younger sister (xiaomei) Huiqing emigrated to France. Her older sister (damei) migrated to France in 1985 to marry a boy from a Wenzhou family who had lived there since 1978.

Huifang had thought of leaving China when she was younger, but her father would not allow it. He claimed she had to stay to take care of parents when they grew old. Time went by, she got married and had children, and leaving became increasingly more difficult. Besides her siblings, Huifang saw many of her relatives and hometown fellows make their way to Europe, leaving their Wenzhou low-paid jobs behind. Huifang belongs to a small group of people in the village who did not leave Wenzhou nor engage in developing their own business. Most of her friends are workshop owners or businessmen. The others who, like her, failed to become wealthy in Wenzhou migrated in search of fortune. Changming, Huifang's husband, is a party cadre, although he does not earn much money, he also does not work so much, spending most of his time at banquets and cocktails and playing poker with his friends, businessmen, and other cadres. Despite his five brothers and sisters having all migrated to Italy and France, he enjoys living in his hometown and does not believe he would do any better abroad. In the few last decades, the prestige afforded to Chinese official bureaucracy has decreased in comparison to the growing power acquired by entrepreneurs due to their capital

accumulation capacity. Working as a bureaucrat in Wenzhou has allowed Changming to retain a certain prestige and at the same time avoid the pressure to migrate. Huifang, on the other hand, continues to think that considering the lack of success opportunities offered to locals in Wenzhou people would do better leaving the country. Huifang's generation started to work in local factories, but they soon discovered they would never better their lives in this manner. Therefore, to borrow from Hirschman's theoretical toolkit (discussed in more detail below), going abroad became the "exit" towards their upward mobility. Huifang did not take this exit, as a result, she feels stuck in the village, a feeling also recorded ethnographically by Julie Chu [20] in a migrant area in Fujian Province, where success is also measured by the capacity for mobility, and to be fixed or "emplaced" is synonymous with failure.

To be ambitious enough to leave one's hometown in search of prosperity is part of the new valorized ethos in China. The condition of being fixed to a place is sensed by Huifang as putting her in an inferior position, one easily looked down upon by relatives, friends, and acquaintances who have managed to move to another place or are upwardly mobile. Huifang explicitly saw her condition being degraded when she accepted a job in a local factory, work usually done by outsiders. This meant downward social mobility. Having said that, in post-Mao times, there are important values other than money and success that make Huifang's condition more complicated. Old Chinese values such as filial piety and self-sacrifice for others continue to be important and valorized, especially among families. Huifang's positioning between modern and old values exposes some of the moral tensions surrounding projects of making money and becoming successful in Chinese modernity. On the one hand, Huifang feels looked down upon in respect of her and her husband's immobility, especially before their successful relatives. On the other hand, she is praised by her parents and siblings for her moral qualities in accepting a low-paid job to make enough money to help her children and parents. Despite the comments of friends and some relatives, however, she did not think that working in the factory was bad. On the contrary, she told me that in this way she was busy all day working and surrounded by people, instead of being idle at home. In addition, she was acquainted with the owners and so she was treated more favorably than other workers. Indeed, Huifang did not give up on success in accepting a low-paid job as a means of earning money for her children, in whom she instills her expectations. She has instead resorted to a different strategy, postponing success by passing it down to the next generation. She does not want her children to stay in Wenzhou and accept low paid jobs as she has done. She wants them to migrate to Europe, and for that she is considering resorting to help from her sisters in France and Portugal. "There's nothing for them to do here. In Europe they can make much more money". In fact, Huifang attributes a lot of value to money, a sign of the times. One of the problems of Wenzhou "immobility" has to do with the fact that Wenzhou industries do not offer opportunities to climb the ladder. In most of the household enterprises there are only two categories of people: employers and workers. The intensive working conditions, and the lack of career opportunities, causes wage labor in factories to be perceived by workers as a transitional situation. People prefer to use their labor energy in their own businesses.

In Wenzhou, international migrants constitute a middle group: those who are aware of their own limits in China, but who have enough financial backing to afford the necessary expense associated with international migration [44]. Migration, due to the region's poverty, had long been a traditional way of moneymaking in Wenzhou. Now, in a period of great affluence (and an atmosphere of growing inequality and intense competition for wealth and success that has come with it), migration is once again an attractive exit. Here, I borrow the sense Hirschman [52] attributed to "exit" as opposed to "voice" in his study of management, to account for the attitude of the Wenzhouese before conditions they perceive as adverse to their advancement. In these cases, Wenzhouese choose to abandon the social arena instead of voicing their dissatisfaction with it, a characteristic many attribute to the Confucian legacy of not questioning authority.

## 8. Waidiren and Dangdiren: Workers and Businessmen in the Global Flows

In Huifang's factory I met Cuifen, a smiling 20-year-old girl from Sichuan Province who came to Wenzhou in search of a way to make money. She followed some of her friends who also abandoned their hometown as it was without opportunities for ambitious, but uneducated, young people. Cuifen regretted that she did not go to university as some of her primary school classmates had. "Now they are making a lot of money holding well-paid positions in the administration." Cuifen followed a friend who was already working in a factory and found a job there. Like the majority of workers from other provinces, she intends to go back soon. She has already saved enough to buy a house and to give some money to her parents. For waidiren (outsiders), as with dangdiren (locals), mobility is the first step towards success, and the reasons that make people move in search for better-paid jobs are very similar. Migration has been a major influence in the Wenzhou labor market, especially in the manufacturing industry. The migration of locals in search of ways to overcome Wenzhou inequality has deepened the dependency of the industry on an outside workforce. This is one of the challenges Jianyu, a young Wenzhouese entrepreneur, is currently facing in managing his workshop. Jianyu comes from an entrepreneurial family who were able to financially support him in starting his business, so he never thought of emigrating. Being a businessman has afforded him the luxury of driving a dark blue series 500 BMW, and to live in a comfortable and fancy apartment in one of the most expensive condominiums in Wenzhou's city center. According to Jianyu, the workforce is composed of around 20 migrant workers from other provinces, especially from Sichuan and Hunan Provinces. Each one works 12 h a day, with one day off per month. Each month they receive 2000 yuan (around 200 Euros) for their work. This is considered a very low salary by local standards, although for waidiren, it is a very good salary he says, an opinion that has also been corroborated by many other locals and migrant workers. The salary is so good that, ironically, Jianyu is having trouble finding people to work in his factory, and he anticipates the problem is going to worsen. Recently, the government has been putting pressure on entrepreneurs to increase workers' wages, so that they can take more money to their home provinces. The lack of workers has led major Wenzhou companies to relocate to poorer provinces such as Hunan near the sources of labor [48]. Increased salaries mean that workers are making more money sooner, and so they stay less time working in Wenzhou.

The Wenzhou industry started to accept waidiren, poor peasants coming from the poorest provinces in the interior of China, as early as the 1980s, when political reforms slowly allowed employers to contract workers outside the household. During that time, Wenzhou industrial expansion attracted workers from neighboring municipalities and counties [41]. Later, they started to come from more faraway places such as Sichuan, Yunnan, or Gansu Provinces. As local workers (such as Huifang's sisters) started to migrate to big cities in China and to Europe (mostly), the labor force in Wenzhou became too small for the city's growing industry. Since the 1980s, the industry in Wenzhou has undergone a restructuring process with the emergence of larger firms. Despite this, Wenzhou's enterprises remain largely dominated by small firms, workshops that tend to be low tech and lack R&D capacities [48] (p. 440). The Nanbaixiang industry is mainly composed of these kinds of small workshops operated by waidiren workers and local bosses.

The use of waidiren workers is by no means a feature exclusive to the development of Wenzhou. It is a widespread phenomenon of the Chinese urban economy due to rapid rates of development [53], particularly of the exportation industries in coastal areas [43]. Waidiren workers enable labor-intensive industries to remain competitive in the global market and, at the same time, migrant remittances and their return after years of hard work contribute to developing more remote and backward areas in China. Due to the migration of locals, the internal migrant workforce came to perform a major role in Wenzhou economic development, feeding in particular the export industries of the zone composed mainly of light industries producing electric appliances, textiles, shoes, and other leather products.

Nanbaixiang is one Wenzhou municipality with high levels of waidiren. Waidiren now make up the majority of inhabitants of Nanbaixiang zhen. According to one local cadre, Nanbaixiang has around 17,000 local inhabitants (of which 7000 are currently living outside the locality) and 200,000 waidiren in

an area of two square kilometers. Their presence is strongly felt in the streets of the villages. Over the years, waidiren have turned Nanbaixiang into their own place and not only an exporting zone. During the day, the streets are empty, and it is hard to believe that so many people work and live in so little space. Factory work is detected through ground shaking and the clap sounds of machines coming from behind a closed door. In Nanbaixiang, a workshop can be installed almost anywhere: commercial spaces of new residential buildings, old two-story houses, new multi-story buildings, warehouses, and barracks. Open doors reveal men and women alike operating machines and doing simple manual work in these workshops. The Nanbaixiang industry produces mainly leather products such as shoes, coats, and bags.

Five years before, construction fever in Nanbaixiang began to monopolize gardening terrains, and also demolish old one- or two-story houses to erect new buildings. These new buildings of lower quality construction usually have five floors divided into small humble apartments specifically constructed to rent to waidiren workers. The owners of these buildings are local people, some of them migrants abroad, who saw a way of making money out of their old houses and unprofitable terrains. After selling their houses and terrains, those who were not abroad either left the villages to new residential districts in the city center, or simply went abroad.

As locals leave, Nanbaixiang is increasingly perceived as a more dangerous place. The use of adjectives that point to criminality and danger when referring to outsiders expresses the increasing lack of control of space by the locals. This conveys the perception that local space is increasingly becoming other people's space as well, and so locals have started to see it as a hostile environment. In Nanbaixiang's case, at the same time as the waidiren have made Nanbaixiang their own place, the dangdiren have moved to less "dangerous" and more "modern" places: the city center or abroad. Although Wenzhou is itself a land of migrants, the category of waidiren continues to be associated with negative stereotypes. In Wenzhou, the difference between the dangdiren and waidiren is also the difference between cleanness and dirtiness, wealth and poverty, urban and peasant. From the standpoint of locals, waidiren continue to live in a peasant style, a label Wenzhouese have been striving to remove since the early 1980s. In Wenzhou, as a strategy for starting up a conversation, several people asked me how I was dealing with the disorganization and the lack of keqi (ceremony) and wenming (civilization) of the people, especially in the villages. During these talks, I was confronted with locals complaining about this population's lack of suzhi. Wenzhouese participate in the national discourse on population suzhi, promoted by the Chinese government [54], which "incorporates cultural quality, ideological quality and eugenics and physical quality" [55] in order to establish temporal, spatial and social boundaries between locals and migrants. Wenzhou dangdiren consider themselves as living a modern and urban life, especially those inhabiting luxury apartments in private condominiums surrounded by all the signs of wealth and success, through ostentatious consumption, money, and power. In dreaming of a modern and urban life, many Wenzhouese have left for Europe. When confronting waidiren in Wenzhou, locals see themselves as they were 30 years ago, with neither the modern nor cosmopolitan characteristics they have since struggled to get rid of. To stay in Wenzhou working with and as a waidiren is to be stuck not only in space, but especially to be stuck in time, in a backward temporality.

To continue with Foucault's mirror games, we could say that unsuccessful Wenzhouese look at the "mirror" of the city center and see themselves in the suburbs. Their exit from Wenzhou is also a way of repositioning themselves in Wenzhou, to place themselves in the center in a way that when they look at the suburbs they see themselves in the modern, cosmopolitan, and conspicuous city center. It is not only a mirror game of heterotopias, but also, as Foucault would say, of heterochronies [3] in that each of these places is related to a specific temporality: the "modern" urban center and the "backward" rural suburbs. As in China in general, the relationship between waidiren and dangdiren in Wenzhou is ambivalent. Despite being considered dangerous, waidiren are also the ones who provide Wenzhou workshops with cheap labor and, consequently, the means of reducing production costs and ensuring that local entrepreneurs achieve huge profits. In search of fortune, Wenzhou dangdiren

accept becoming waidiren in other places when they decide to migrate, and most of the time they take with them the Wenzhou mentality of working.

## 9. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, I proposed that in China, prosperity promotes desires of modernity and a particular Chinese way of being cosmopolitan, and that migration, especially from the Wenzhou region, should be understood through this framework. In this last section, I will address the conclusions I have reached throughout this article.

First, migratory flows from Wenzhou region to Portugal are part of a historical movement to Europe that acquired transnational characteristics after 1978. The migrants' transnational lives between China and Portugal are characterized by a more fluid existence [5] through flows of capital, commodities, information, emotions, and also through a more frequent physical presence. Migrant lives are a product of this constant flow between Europe-China.

Second, Wenzhouese migrants leave their homes in one of the wealthiest regions in China pushed by feelings and fears of downward social mobility. The economic development of the region has brought about a general improvement in the living conditions of the population, though it has also amplified the sense of relative poverty.

Third, money raised by migrants in Portugal and in other places in Europe, is spent (or invested) in consumption activities locally understood as signs of modernity and prosperity such as new houses, top-end foreign brand cars, fashionable designer clothing, or banquets. By exhibiting certain consumption practices, migrants are assured a certain social position and respectability by their family and friends back home. Similar relationships between consumption and migration have been tracked in other ethnographic contexts [6,7]. In Wenzhou, conspicuous consumption practices also make a distinction between locals (migrants and non-migrants) and internal migrants.

Four, values such as filial piety (xiao) and self-sacrifice for others (qinlao) are evoked to justify decisions of mobility and also of immobility. The decision to migrate is fundamentally conceived as a family decision. From the point of view of the generation that migrates (usually young adults), it is conceived as involving self-sacrifice from both the older generation and the forthcoming one. The older generation needs to be taken care of economically and emotionally, according to the prescribed retribution of care between children and parents in filial piety. For the forthcoming generation, migration is seen as a way of expanding opportunities of upward social mobility as an important part of the money raised by Chinese migrants is invested in education (in China or elsewhere). In line with Appadurai's 2004 argument, social aspirations are fundamentally culturally-based and not necessarily a result of an economic disadvantageous context.

These concluding remarks on the transnational practices and discourses of Wenzhouese migrants takes me back to the above-mentioned literature on Chinese modernity. The discourses and practices of transnational Chinese migrants I have sought to illustrate in this article contradict previous arguments by Croll (2006) and others where the market economy, consumption, and material modernization are eroding Chinese values. On the contrary, from the point of view of the interplay between the need to fulfill family obligations and the pressure to be rich and successful, transnational lives lived by Wenzhouese can be seen as an expression of Lisa Rofel's cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics.

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