

Target earning/learning, settling or trampolining? Polish and Chinese immigrants in Ireland

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This article provides a theoretical and an empirical analysis of the migration patterns and experiences of Chinese and Polish migrants in order to understand the human geography of these movements and the qualitative parameters and dimensions of contemporary migration into Ireland. Using theories of transnationalism, I argue that there are three general types of immigrant transnational orientations in the interviewees studied: target earners, target learners and trampoliners. Immigrant abilities to imagine a future in Ireland were shaped in large part by structural conditions such as: their visa status, race, gender and class backgrounds, the ability to move across borders freely, educational backgrounds and occupational skills. Their orientations were often expressed in terms of their communication with home, Ireland and many countries in between, through the use of digital media and technology.

Keywords: migration; Chinese; Polish; Ireland

Introduction

Migration to the Republic of Ireland reverses historic trends of Irish emigration turning the Irish notion of ‘diaspora’ back onto itself. Ireland now finds itself not a nation of emigrants exiled, but of immigrants, few of whom are historically tied to Ireland through the flow of recent investments (Sassen 1988) or through former colonial relationships (Winant 2004, p. 104). Ireland is unique within Western Europe because it has experienced perhaps the most significant and rapid immigration in the last decade. To understand what types of migration we see in Ireland and why, I examine the cases of two of the largest contemporary migrant groups – Polish and Chinese – in Ireland; a country to which they have had little prior connection. This is an interesting case study of human movement as a) the economic development of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ in contemporary Ireland has both promoted and been driven by the shift from emigration to immigration; b) Chinese and Polish migrants are the two largest groups to come to Ireland in recent years; and c) this migration has been both rapid and relatively autonomous of historical linkages. The article provides a theoretical and empirical analysis of the migration patterns and experiences of Chinese and Polish migrants in order to understand the human geography of these movements and the qualitative parameters and dimensions of contemporary migration into Ireland. Using theories of transnationalism (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), I argue that there are three general types of immigrant transnational orientations in the interviewees studied: target earners, target learners and trampoliners. Immigrant abilities to imagine a future in Ireland were shaped in large part by structural conditions such as: visa status,

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race, gender and class backgrounds, the ability to move across borders freely, educational backgrounds and occupational skills. Their orientations were often expressed in terms of their use of digital media and technology to communicate with their home countries, Ireland, and many countries in between.

Migration and the ‘Celtic Tiger’

In terms of migration, 1996 was a watershed year in Irish history – when there were more immigrants than emigrants for the first time since the Famine, excluding a brief hiatus in the 1970s. Famous for the ‘haemorrhaging’ of people away from Ireland in the 1980s, the Celtic Tiger economy has brought home many of its own and brought in many others besides. In 2002, 400,000 or 10.4 per cent of the total population of Ireland was born outside Ireland. By 2006, 612,600 or 14.7 per cent of the total population was born outside Ireland – of which 63,000 were Polish (CSO 2006, p. 24). The US, by comparison, had a population of 11.1 per cent foreign born in 2000 (US Census 2000). For a country of Ireland’s size, migration constitutes a rapid and significant change. The concomitant changing ethnic diversity in Ireland has prompted a re-imagining of what it means to be Irish.

The move from outward to inward migration has been often examined in Ireland in terms of its effects on the economy (Barrett *et al.* 2006), on racism (Lentin and McVeigh 2002) and on Irish citizenship (Crowley *et al.* 2006). The ‘Celtic Tiger’ economic boom has significantly impacted migration and the demographic diversity of people now living in Ireland. The growth rate in Gross Domestic Product increased from 2 per cent in 1991 to over 10 per cent in 1997 (ESRI 2006), largely through US high-tech foreign direct investment in the 1990s and some growth of indigenous industries (Ó Riain 2004). Since 2000/2001 economic growth in Ireland has been driven by domestic demand for services led by the construction sector and personal services, i.e. restaurants, security, etc. (both of which are major employers of migrant workers) (Ó Riain forthcoming). Up to 3.5–3.7 per cent of GNP growth was attributable to migrant labour (Barrett *et al.* 2006). Therefore, the population has moved from a relatively homogeneous (often defined, since the Free State was declared, as white and Catholic) composition, although with small Jewish and Traveller populations, to a much more ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse one.

But who are these immigrants and why did they come? Immigrants have accounted for two-thirds of recent population increase. The Chinese and Polish communities are popularly seen as the two largest ethnic groups in Ireland (Fitzgerald 2006), with an estimated 62,100 Polish and 16,500 Chinese living in the country (CSO 2006). Other sources suggest that these numbers may be underreported. For example, according to the Quarterly National Household Survey 2006, the Polish population resident in Ireland is closer to 69,000, while the number of visas given to Chinese students in 2004 alone, as recorded by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB), was 15,933 (Interview with GNIB official, Burgh Quay, 7 Oct 2005). Despite uncertainty over exact numbers, the Chinese and Polish communities in Ireland are significant in relative terms, and their impact is felt strongly as they make up an increasing part of the population.

Methods

The data in this paper come from 50 in-depth qualitative interviews in the greater Dublin area with Polish and Chinese immigrants aged 18–40 who have arrived in Ireland since 1999. The greater Dublin area was chosen because it is where the majority of migrants

reside and it has been the focus of economic growth in Ireland. As there was no nationally representative sampling frame, interviewees were snowball sampled through dense social networks within these two communities. A semi-structured interview format was used (Gunaratnam 2003, Schutt 2006) to ensure some compatibility across interviews and an interview guide was designed. The interview guide included questions regarding migration history, push and pull factors influencing migration decisions, circumstances of getting into current employment, and plans for the future in professional and private arenas. The questions served as a framework and stimulated the interviewees to talk freely about their experiences in Ireland. The interviews lasted between 35 and 65 minutes and were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The 23 interviews with Polish immigrants were conducted in Polish, by a co-ethnic researcher (NUIM student and research assistant) and were later transcribed and translated into English. The 22 interviews with Chinese immigrants were conducted in Mandarin, by a co-ethnic researcher (NUIM student and research assistant) and were later transcribed and translated into English. Several expert interviews were also conducted by the author in English and later transcribed with people working in Polish and Chinese organisations serving the migrant communities. In addition to the interviews, participant-observation was carried out in the Polish Information and Culture Centre in Dublin, Irish Chinese Information Centre and at Polish and Chinese cultural events.¹

The sample of interviewees were a mix of men and women, in different age groups, from different regions in their sending countries, working and studying in different institutions. Their dates of arrival varied from three months to eight years prior to the research. Most of the interviewees lived in the greater Dublin area, and most lived in collective situations (sharing a house or apartment) with other co-ethnics. Respondents from China had mostly secondary education, having come to Ireland to pursue third level and English education. Polish interviewees ranged in their educational and class backgrounds. Most had some secondary education, but others had postgraduate degrees and were highly trained in their area of expertise (e.g. Architecture). The following analysis focuses on understanding the processes in the daily lives of migrants from Poland and China in Ireland.

Everyday transnational practices

Theories of transnationalism have tended to focus on the macro-economic reasons that people come to live in one country from another (Wallerstein 1974, Massey *et al.* 1993). While many studies of transnationalism focus on how migrants 'maintain a variety of ties to their home countries while they become incorporated into the countries where they have settled' (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, p. 130), we found in our research that in fact, although many immigrants indeed do have ties to home and away (or sending and receiving countries) they also have ties and orientations manifested in everyday transnational practices beyond just these two poles. In fact, they have very different goals in coming to Ireland. To unpack this, I examine here how the globalisation of the economy in Ireland and corresponding time-space compression in terms of transportation and communication which now makes transnational and cosmopolitan orientations possible for Chinese and Polish immigrants in Ireland (Vertovec 2004) plays out in everyday practice.

In this article, I take into consideration the background of the economic situation in Ireland, Poland and China to understand the push/pull factors that these migrants from China and Poland went through in their recent migration to Ireland and use this to contextualize their 'modes of entry' (largely determined by EU membership or not) into Ireland, their 'modes of orientation' to Ireland, Poland, China or elsewhere, and the

strategies they employ to activate their local and transnational social networks (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). This approach is ‘interactionist’ in the sense that neither structural constraints nor individual characteristics or agency was given theoretical primacy, but rather the interaction of these factors in shaping the interviewees’ orientations and attitudes to Ireland was the focus. To do this, the research adds to theories of transnationalism (Portes *et al.* 1999, Vertovec 1999, Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004) an empirical examination of how immigrants can become a part of the host society while still identifying strongly and participating economically and politically in not only homeland (voting in elections at home from Ireland), but also hometown (regional), and global (in other countries’) issues. I also attempt to add a dimension to the rubric of ‘trampoliners’ who are oriented not just to hometown/land and host society, but also many times to a third community or space often linked through diasporic ties (Ni Laoire 2003). By using this theoretical frame, the migration experience can be seen not as an opposition between assimilation (or integration) and transnationalism, but instead as an interaction between two processes. This can then help us understand how Polish and Chinese people see Ireland, how they participate (or not) in Irish society and what implications this has for their own social action either to return, remain, or go somewhere else in the world.

The above is not to imply that Polish and Chinese immigrants come from similar situations (even if they may find themselves in similar situations once they arrive in Ireland). Clearly there are very different immigration flows and certain groups are more powerful within the global flow of people across the world (Bauman 2000). However, Favell (2003) found that even his ‘Eurostars’ – highly educated and mobile elite migrants in Europe – still had major barriers and issues with integrating into middle class life in their destination countries. Clearly there are very different cultural and political histories, which can explain why Polish and Chinese people end up in diasporic family structures. The situation in Poland with regard to migration to Ireland has been economically as well as politically driven (Iglicka 2001). With the collapse of communism in Poland, the economy has suffered and unemployment upon accession to the EU in 2004 was 20 per cent. While unemployment declined in 2006 to 14.9 per cent, the flow of young immigrants from Poland to Ireland seems to have slowed only slightly (Poland Unemployment Rate 2006). The push then for most of our Polish interviewees was to come to Ireland to work, since jobs were plentiful here. Polish immigrants in our sample seemed to have a set of advantages over other groups (refugees, Chinese, etc.) in that many are educated and have some competency in English, they did not need a visa to come to work in Ireland (and being able to work legally was a huge draw over some other EU countries such as Germany), they had freedom of movement and did not need to renew visas to come and go from Ireland, they can apply for citizenship in Ireland once they have lived and worked in Ireland for five years, they are now a critical mass (many joke that the second language of Ireland is Polish not Irish), are perceived as racially ‘white’, and many are Catholic.

Chinese migration comes from a very different context of scarcity of third level places for a growing Chinese population of students (Wang 2006). The Chinese in our sample were not as well educated, had poor English, they needed a visa to enter Ireland and to remain in Ireland (which had to be renewed through a time-consuming and relatively expensive process every six months to a year), which in turn affected their freedom to come and go from Ireland. The Chinese students interviewed here could not apply for citizenship from a student visa and many found it quite difficult to move from a student to a work visa. Most were not Catholic and were racialised as ‘not white’ and clearly a ‘visible’ minority in Ireland. These push factors from China and Poland combine with the structural aspects of Ireland in the late 1990s and 2000s as described above to create a

significant migration flow. With new limits placed on citizenship since 2004, which removed the right to citizenship based on being born in Ireland, this led interviewees to see settling in Ireland in very different ways (King-O'Riain 2006).

In order to illustrate the different types of orientations of Chinese and Polish immigrants interviewed here, I demonstrate how their entry into Ireland and motivation for coming to Ireland has shaped their actions in various ways. Based on this analysis, I develop a typology of these immigrants as either Target Earners (rationally working largely in isolation from the mainstream Irish community to send money home to Poland), Target Learners (investing in human capital skills of speaking English to transfer them back to China or other English-speaking locations), or 'Trampoliners' (who have both social and human capital and can unlock opportunities to transfer their capital to a variety of global situations/contexts, not just Ireland and 'home'). The motivation for migration, shaped by the structural factors discussed above, shape these attitudes towards social networks (both of co-ethnics and mainstream society) and through them the process of integration.

Polish target earning

Many of the Polish interviewees in our sample were attracted to Ireland because of rapid economic development, flexible employment and work permissions (post-EU accession) and because there was a critical mass of Polish social networks already present in Ireland. They left Poland because of high unemployment (averaging about 15 per cent in some regions) and the fact that wages were four times higher in Ireland than in Poland (Kropiwięc 2006). One interviewee explains:

We came to Ireland, because they opened the border for foreigners. First, for the new EU countries, they gave their jobs as one of very few countries. So we didn't need a visa. You only needed a passport or the national ID to cross the border. (Polish female, 26, shop assistant)

Ireland's openness to the eight EU accession countries who joined the EU in 2004 and the decision not to require a work visa for migrants from those countries (only one of three countries to do so including the UK and Sweden) drew Polish immigrants to Ireland rather than other EU countries where the visa process was more complicated and costly. Most Polish interviewees echoed this and explained that they chose Ireland because they wanted to work legally. Another said:

I love my country. If only it could offer me a little more money, a little better living conditions. I think that Irish people have a very good life; for the money they earn, they can afford quite a lot. If I could have such a life in Poland, I wouldn't have gone abroad. (Polish male, 29, architect)

We want to work here, get experience and go back to Poland. I wouldn't want to stay here forever – not to settle down here. I think it is better in Poland; the whole family is there. (Polish female, 25, pharmacist)

For these 'target earners' it was a rational choice shaped by economic push/pull factors that helped them to make the decision to come to Ireland.

The first reason we came was because it was a new place. It was a half year ago, and it started maybe a year ago with Ireland. And it's really, with the economic boom, you earn more, you also spend a bit more. It was a cold calculation. And the second reason was because I had a friend here, who helped me. That would be the main reasons. (Male, 35, occupation not stated)

The existence of ethnic social networks and organisations helped them to ‘soften their landing’ in Ireland (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). But they could also limit the level of integration into Irish society, as one interviewee explains:

I call it colonizing: you start to live in a Polish colony, you don’t develop, you will only talk Polish, and get help from other Poles. I think that’s the minus of Polish community here that we colonise too much. So many people live in the colony and don’t have bigger ambitions than the whole group. (Polish male 26, factory worker)

But even target earners, working in Ireland and saving for an apartment or house, did not just want to earn money. Many also wanted international work experience, to learn English as a way to move ahead in their career and wanted to have an ‘adventure’ while they were young and, for many, single. Other Polish interviewees, though, felt that settling in Ireland was a mindset that one had to develop while living in Ireland. One Polish man said:

I don’t know if you have been in Dublin city centre, in the O’Connell Street area, where there has emerged a kind of Polish–Chinese ghetto. I looked for a flat in Dublin for 2 weeks, and I went through the whole of Dublin, especially the city centre. And I could see that Poles don’t assimilate to Irish society. When I’m here I can’t close myself to the Irish. I don’t have a problem to talk with Polish when I meet them but I don’t feel like being in some kind of Polish organisations, or participating in something what would integrate me with Poles here. I’m integrated with Poles in Poland, and I don’t look for Poland here. I didn’t come to Ireland to look for Poland. I live in Ireland and I try to assimilate with the society here.

K: What would be helpful to integrate to Irish society more?

I think a change in the mentality. I can give you an example of a chat on a bus. I was on the bus from X to Dublin and behind me sat two Poles, a Russian, and I don’t know who else, a bunch of Eastern Europeans. And one Pole was talking openly that he doesn’t speak English. I admit he was older, in his forties, in his age you maybe don’t learn very quickly. But he was saying in such a way: I work in construction, I don’t need it at all, I live with Poles, so I won’t need English, and when I go shopping, in a self-service store, you just give the money and pay, you don’t need to talk, and why don’t they learn Polish, if there are so many of us, and so on. That mentality. In my opinion, it’s easier to come here and stay with Poles, and so emerge the ghettos. One house – 5 Poles, next door – 5 Poles. And it accumulates. And they don’t integrate, because it’s easier. It’s no problem, you can come here, have some friends, someone will tell you where to go, what to do. (Polish male, 25, engineer)

Rationally for many target earners, they may just be here to earn money and to send it back home with little interest in learning about Ireland. However, most of our interviewees, even if they claimed that their primary goal was to earn money and to return to Poland, still spoke of being interested in learning English, about Irish society and gaining something culturally from the experience.

Chinese target learning

Many interviewees from China came to Ireland not to ‘work’ but through student visa programmes to study English at private language schools or in universities – to target ‘learn’. Most were also young (in their twenties) and single. Many Chinese students started out in private English language schools in order to improve their English in the hopes of moving on to third-level education, though few were actually successful. In order to pay for the ‘show money’ (approximately €10,000) to obtain the visa and in order to pay for tuition and fees, many Chinese students work (as they are allowed to work for up to 20 hours/week in term and 40 hours/week out of term on their student visa) in low wage service jobs. One

interviewee explained the interaction between target learning (English) and target earning for learning.

It was not easy to get a good job in China, even if you have a degree from a university. The Chinese labour market was really competitive. It was easy to get a job in Ireland. So, I decided to come here to have a look. Maybe I can get a degree in Ireland to increase my human capital. (Chinese male, 25, shop assistant)

As 9.5 million students vie for 2.6 million university places in China, the competition, which is controlled by entrance examination scores, means that many cannot gain entry to the university of their first choice, and international education in an English-speaking country came as a second choice (Wang 2006).

Most of the interviewees chose Ireland as a destination for learning English because it was cheaper, they could work legally and the visa was easier to obtain than in the US or UK. Most students were recruited into English schools or courses through 'agents' in China who help students to come over for a fee. The agents often told students in China that Ireland was more affordable (not true in some cases) and that they can work legally in Ireland to support themselves. One important factor, though, was that Ireland is an English-speaking country and within the EU. One student explains how he chose Ireland.

At the beginning, I wanted to go to the States. However, since 9/11 in 2001, it was harder to get a visa there. The tuition in the States is really high, compared to Ireland. If I could not get a scholarship, it would be impossible for me to study there. (Chinese male, 24, full time university student)

Most Chinese students who were interviewed came to Ireland to study English and work and see both as an investment in their future.

Overall, most interviewees were impressed with Irish friendliness, thought people were easy-going, and liked the natural beauty of the country. However, there were also reports of negative cultural and racial experiences, which impacted on their orientation to integrate and settle in Ireland. The extent to which interviewees feel a sense of 'participatory belonging' may be influenced by the structural conditions of their migration (Hage 2003, p. 79). Because Chinese students are temporarily resident in Ireland on a student visa, many of them were quite frustrated with the fact that when they finish their study they will not be allowed to stay and work in Ireland. They felt structurally discriminated against within the migration system in Ireland because they do not have the same freedom to apply for jobs as members from other European Union countries. They spoke openly about how Polish immigrants had a further advantage over Chinese workers because they could 'blend in' better because they were white and did not need a visa in order to work legally in Ireland.

I cannot integrate into the Irish society. Nowhere is better than my Chinese home. I am always the worker who works for the Irish. I will eventually go back to China with my wife once my daughter finishes her education. (Chinese male, 30, salesman)

Another Chinese student described how she feels foreign and could not settle in Ireland.

I think I am foreigner here especially when I am out with my Irish boyfriend. The longer you stay in Ireland, the less you think about that. But something specific happens and you know you are still a foreigner. For example, you walk on the street and the Irish people know you are Chinese straight away from your physical appearance. Even if your English is really good, when you talk to local people, they know you are Chinese. (Chinese female, 25, private language school student/hotel worker)

Most interviewees were quite positive about Ireland, but were not sure that they would stay, even if they were allowed, to raise a second generation.

English, or lack thereof, was also seen by Chinese students as a barrier (along with their visa status) to being able to integrate fully into Irish society. Other Chinese students felt that the cultural differences were too great for them to settle in Ireland permanently and that with their visa status they could not think of staying.

To a certain extent, you cannot accept their culture; on the other hand, they will not take you eventually. For example, drinking is part of the life style and their culture. I do not like drinking at all. I think drinking has already brought a lot of social problems to this country. When I worked in a pub, same customers came to the pub every afternoon, drinking to them is like drinking water for me. (Chinese female, 33, health care worker)

Trampoliners

Perhaps the most interesting group of interviewees was made up of both Polish and Chinese immigrants who neither wanted to just go home nor to just settle in Ireland. They saw Ireland as a ‘trampoline’ propelling them forward (and upward?) to bigger and better opportunities in other countries and destinations.

We see Ireland as a ‘trampoline’: professional and financial. Nothing more. (Polish male, 25, engineer)

The trampoliners were not just oriented to the sending country and Ireland, but also to more globalised identities and spaces. Cohen (2006, p. 189) describes this as ‘everyday cosmopolitanism’, a cosmopolitanism that is transcending nation-states, mediating both global and local ideals, is culturally anti-essentialist and represents a complex (made up perhaps of networks) of allegiances, identities and interests. They represent what have been described as transnational immigrants living simultaneously in two places, with two languages, and using multiple media and technology to do so (Kerr 2007).

It was the more highly educated Polish and Chinese interviewees who tended to see themselves not just as oriented to Ireland, but to a globalised diaspora of fellow nationals who can help them with their educational or economic advancement (Massey and Akresh 2006). One interviewee argued that Polish migration to Ireland is not international because it is within the EU where nation-state borders matter less. He explains his logic:

At some point the notion of a ‘country’ is vanishing. To settle here and become a patriot – to stay here – there is not something like that anymore. (Polish male, 35, factory worker)

He went on to argue that he could be in Ireland, but not really know he is in Ireland, that, in fact, Ireland could be anywhere. Another interviewee describes the initial chain migration pattern, but then reveals a more global orientation to their future. She said:

It started with his uncle. His uncle came here four years ago. And then, about two years ago the uncle got my father-in-law here, the father of X. And about two months later my father-in-law got my husband. And I allowed it, but under the condition, that in three months I'll come too. I don't know if England is not a better country. Even though, they've got the same climate, but, as far as I know, many people said, that life is better in England. It's easier to find a job and you get better money. Although, then we were thinking, my friend is in Paris now, in France, and she says that the country is beautiful, but the people are not pretty, at least not the men! [laugh] (Polish female, 26, sales assistant)

This cultural ‘translocal orientation’ (Werbner 2005) not just to Poland and Ireland but to other places as well where other family and friends reside was clear. However, the global cosmopolitan lifestyle is made possible by persistent ethnic networks and localised ethnic communities. Communities of ‘settlers’ enable cosmopolitan lifestyles, since trampoliners draw on established local networks for quick access to information and employment.

Another interviewee described her global family constellation living around the world.

My closest family is spread around the world. My mother has been living in the USA, in Chicago for five years. My father's been living in London for almost two years, and my brother is finishing studies in Poland, in Rzeszow. And he is concerned where to go now, to whom. He's got a broad choice. And friends are spread as well. In Poland and abroad. That's life ... we have phone calls and SMS (text messaging) and we talk through the Internet, Skype, email, Gadu Gadu. Every day, there is a contact to someone. Now we have Internet at home, Gadu Gadu is always on, so you talk to people. I check my emails every day and send. And SMS. Phone calls more seldom. I try to call once a week, to my brother, grandparents, friends. My parents call me because it's cheaper. (Polish female, 23, sales clerk)

Clearly the world is a connected place for this family and there is interpenetration of different places and contexts, both national and international spaces and flows in their daily routines and lived experiences. This is facilitated by communication technologies, which are used as a part of the daily patterns of communication, which reveal several issues. First, the trampoliners are situated as diasporic focusing on ‘sameness in dispersal, not togetherness in difference’ (Ang 2001, p. 13). They are trans-destinational migrants, oriented (and perhaps headed) for many destinations, but in such a way that they see other ethnic diasporic communities as the next destination, not necessarily Ireland or home. To do this they are using technologies, such as the internet, which require economic, social and cultural capital. Secondly, the use of the technology also reveals the extent to which these emerging transnational practices and identities are themselves constructed within the context of profound and rapid change in the take-up and daily use of these technologies in Ireland (Keohane and Kuhling 2004). Often, Polish and Chinese global cosmopolitans have come from far more technologically advanced situations in terms of infrastructure and are surprised by the lack of penetration of broadband in certain areas within Ireland.

Others were quite clear that Ireland was a link in the chain of their educational and occupational investment, but that they were not headed back to the ‘homeland’ anytime soon. Many liked Ireland and saw it as a convenient stopover point on their way to some other global location (not necessarily back to China or Poland).

I did not know much information about Ireland ... all I knew was that Ireland is close to the UK. The Irish scenery is beautiful. Ireland is in Europe and maybe it is easier for me to travel to other European countries. (Chinese female, 25, student)

Ireland may serve, then, as a ‘gateway’ for Chinese immigrants to connect with other Chinese diaspora communities in Europe, e.g. Miss China Ireland won the Miss China Europe regional beauty contest last year and the Chinese community was hence made more apparent within the Chinese diaspora scene in Europe. While structurally limited by the visa system in Ireland, many Chinese students felt that even if that could be solved, they could never see Ireland as ‘home’. While there are superficial similarities between Polish and Chinese trampoliners, when we explore them in detail it is clear that there are important differences in how they understand their place in Irish society and in relation to wider diaspora networks.

Often these orientations are shaped by visa regulations and the larger attitudes towards immigrant groups in Ireland. Racialisation and membership in the EU may play a role in

the increasing acceptance of Polish as ‘deserving’ and Chinese as ‘less entitled’ immigrants in Ireland. From the data in this article, it seems that perhaps the ‘target’ or ‘trampolining’ orientations are partly produced by lack of ‘welcome’ in Ireland. Chinese students in the language schools seemed fairly isolated from Irish students and society and often their classmates were fellow non-Irish nationals from South Africa, the Philippines, Japan, and so on. There were relatively few Chinese students in third-level education, where most Irish students would be. Those Chinese students who are in the language schools do not have time to socialise as they balance work and study. Currently, Chinese students are the main form of revenue for the language schools and increasingly universities see them as ‘revenue streams’ and not as human beings. They do not have many chances to meet Irish students. The workplace is probably the only place for them to meet Irish people and people of other nationalities. Most of the interviewees get on well with people from other ethnic groups, including their Irish work colleagues, but they do not socialise with them. They feel there is not much to talk about.

At the fast food restaurant where I work, I do work better than other staff. Everyone admires my work, but my English is quite weak. English is still a barrier to my future progress in Ireland. If my English were better, I would get some easier job with higher pay . . . sometimes I still do not fully understand what people say. I have to guess from their body language. Actually, I am quite good at observing people’s body language. If my English is good, maybe I will think about going to college. (Chinese female, 37, restaurant worker)

Chinese students are more isolated, less likely to say they will remain in Ireland, and they feel limited by their visa status and racial discrimination. Young Polish immigrants with good English and some education see freedom of movement and global possibilities in Ireland and elsewhere. The boundaries of the diaspora within Ireland for Polish immigrants are more porous as they draw on Polish networks both in Ireland and elsewhere. For the Chinese, the boundaries are more rigid. They can only draw on local resources in a limited way and therefore depend on (and are oriented to) other Chinese diasporas. Racialisation clearly affects the treatment of Chinese student workers in Ireland. As non-white, non-Catholic, non-EU immigrants they tended to report more experiences of racism both in work and on the street than Polish interviewees. This again is produced in part by Irish immigration and citizenship policies which prioritise ‘Irish ancestry’, often read as ‘white’, over and above others for citizenship (King-O’Riain 2006) and Polish people as more desirable and more deserving (also read as ‘white’) immigrants into Ireland over Chinese.

Conclusion

Interviewees in this study seemed to cluster into three types of transnational migrant orientations, driven in part by their mode of entry and structural positions within the labour force. The target earners and learners see themselves as being here temporarily and moving between Ireland and the homeland with a destiny in the homeland. While here, they actively stay in touch with the homeland and rarely read Irish newspapers or try to speak in English or to integrate. They are here to target earn or learn and then return ‘home’. Push/pull and rational choice theories can help us to understand how they come to make these decisions within the context of Irish migration.

Settling in the receiving country has long been the focus of assimilation theorists (Lal 2003), but some of the settlers are oriented more to both places. For example, many Polish workers see the possibility of legally remaining in Ireland and working, and see an

advantage to staying in Ireland (to meet the habitual residence rule in order to access social service benefits, etc.), but culturally and linguistically feel more oriented to Poland. Chinese settlers were few and far between, perhaps because of their more precarious visa status (being ineligible for long-term residency at present) and economic status (being concentrated in low wage jobs).

For the trampoliners the world is their platform and they often saw Ireland as a convenient stop over point in which to improve English, job training and get international work experience, with the next stop neither Ireland nor their home country. This group also presented an interesting opportunity from an Irish perspective. These migrants are often actively involved in diversifying and globalising Irish society (which is also done by Irish who have lived abroad and returned home). However, they also bring into Ireland Polish and Chinese diasporic connections, increasing Irish contacts with these parts of the world. For example, the development of a SIM card phone which would call China directly from mobile phones in Ireland (an idea of one of our Chinese interviewees and used by many, many Chinese immigrants) was bought and developed by an Irish mobile phone company. This increased revenue in Ireland for the company but also allowed them to increase their familiarity with the Chinese phone market, i.e. who and where Chinese in Ireland were calling in China. These trampoliners may be better described as 'global cosmopolitans' within literature on transnationalism (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). They are not strict settlers or returners, neither strict assimilationists nor pluralists, but both, often simultaneously and often oriented between home and away to other diasporic ethnic communities.

The Irish diaspora is returning home and no doubt has brought global influences home with it. They also have Irish connections to the Irish diaspora (700,000 people who claim Irish descent) all over the world (Robinson 1995). But, the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom and its corollary in increased migration into Ireland has had new and profound impacts on Irish society, diversifying it from within. This demographic shift has meant rapid social, economic and cultural change in Ireland creating collisions (Keohane and Kuhling 2004) between 'old and new' 'traditional, modern and post-modern' and between an assumed dichotomy of 'local' and 'global' understandings of what it means to live in Ireland today.

Note

1. For more information about the methodology and findings of the original data gathering and preliminary results of this research see the published reports whose funding was from the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism: Wang 2006 and Kropiwiec 2006. Both can be viewed at: <http://www.nccri.ie>. The author led the research team with the two NUIM students listed above serving as research assistants.

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