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Rethinking integration and identity: Chinese migrants in the Republic of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Using historical narratives and a qualitative research approach, this paper analyses the social, cultural and cognitive causes of differentiation and stratification among Chinese migrants in the Republic of Ireland. It discusses individuals' diversified capabilities, attitudes and actual levels of integration, as well as their disparate patterns of self-identification. In the research area of Chinese migrants in Ireland, in-group diversity and its implications is still a novel research topic. With this introductory work, the authors seek to draw more attention to this particular group, especially to the need for studies of encounters between subgroups and longitudinal investigations. The paper points out that subgroups of Chinese migrants in Ireland are divided according to social classification and self-categorisation, which have distinct significances for subgroup members' integration and identity.

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Despite being a small and relatively peripheral country – with a population of only 4.58 million and a territory of 70,273 square kilometres – the Republic of Ireland has become one of the world's most globalised nations since the late 1990s (McCabe 2013). The influx of foreign migrants¹ illustrates the changing face of this Celtic nation in a globalising world. The rapid economic development of the 1990s and early 2000s – known as the 'Celtic Tiger' era – brought prosperity to Ireland and has transformed it into a popular immigration destination. In contrast to the outflow of Irish migrants to the United States, United Kingdom (UK), Canada and Australia in the 19th and early 20th centuries, from the second half of the 1990s, this remote island country began to experience a significant inflow of foreign migrants from around the world.

The Chinese are among those foreign migrants who travelled to Ireland to chase their dreams. It has been six decades since the first group of Chinese migrants arrived in Ireland. This paper intends to review the lives and identities of Chinese migrants and to understand how they have integrated into Irish society. In the scant existing literature, some scholars have taken the Chinese community as one homogeneous ethnic group based on the old paradigm of immigration studies, without noticing the historical and structural differentiations within the group. Meanwhile, the field of immigration studies is experiencing a paradigm shift from the ethnic/nationality-based model towards a flexible

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framework that is more pertinent to the liquidity of labour and capital in the era of globalisation. Only when the diversity of Chinese migrants is recognised can their different states of and attitudes towards integration, self-identification and other related issues be more thoroughly revealed and studied.

Using historical narratives and a qualitative research approach, this study examines the socio-cultural integration and self-identity of Chinese migrants in the Republic of Ireland. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect related data and information. Eleven interviews were conducted to obtain first-hand, in-depth data. The interviewees included a businessman, a university lecturer, a self-employed worker, two white-collar workers, a chef, a restaurant manager, a sports-club coach and three students. They were living in Dublin, Cork, Kerry, Kildare, Limerick and Galway. The interviewees' ages ranged from 18 to 60. Five of the interviewees were female; the other six were male. The interviews varied in duration from 45 minutes to 60 minutes.

A brief history of Chinese migrants in Ireland

According to social-identity theory (Tajfel 1978), members of a social group tend to think of themselves as unique individuals but would consider out-group members homogeneous 'others' and attribute the outcomes of their intergroup encounters to categorical stereotypes. This explains why migrants are often treated according to their ethnicity by the host society, especially in terms of immigration policy design and implementation. The gap between the complex reality and this 'we-others' scenario is an important reason for the inappropriateness or inefficiency of such policies. For Chinese migrants in Ireland, the in-group variety mainly lies in when and from where they migrated, factors which have resulted in their disparate situations and perceptions of integration and identity.

The first wave of migration (1950s–90s)

The first group of Chinese migrants in Ireland came from Hong Kong. Due to the colonial relationship between Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, the UK has historically been a popular destination for Hong Kong migrants. From the 1950s, Hong Kong migrants living in the UK began to settle in the Republic of Ireland. The following decades saw a slow but steady increase in the Chinese population in Ireland. Most of these migrants were ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Malaysia and other South-East Asian countries (Yau 2007).

The majority of these early Chinese migrants worked in the catering industry, predominantly in the Chinese restaurants and takeaways which started to appear in Ireland in the late 1950s and 1960s. In fact, many of them migrated to Ireland from the UK because of 'the saturation of the UK Chinese food sector and the low level of competition for jobs and the relatively safe environment in Ireland' (Wang 2009). Take Cathay, one of the first Chinese restaurants in Dublin, as an example: the restaurant was opened in Kildare Street in September 1957 by a Chinese-Malay businessman from London. He had travelled to Ireland on holiday and saw a business opportunity in Dublin. He then moved to Dublin with his family and recruited a chef and two assistants from Hong Kong to get the restaurant up and running (McGrath 2012).

A lot of these early Chinese migrants came to Ireland alone in their teens or early twenties to join relatives or friends in the Chinese restaurant business. It was common practice

for these young migrants eventually to open their own restaurants and takeaways in Ireland using their newfound skills and experience. This, in turn, provided more jobs for new migrants from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia and other South-East Asian countries, and resulted in the further expansion of the Chinese restaurant and takeaway sector in Ireland in the following decades. Interviewee A and her husband were among those early Chinese migrants who moved to Ireland and joined the catering industry. She recalled:

My sister migrated to Ireland from Vietnam in the 1980s. After settling down, she invited me and my husband to Ireland. Later, my four other sisters and brothers also joined us. Back in the 1980s, you could barely see any Chinese people in Ireland. The Irish people were very friendly to us. We received a lot of support and help from the locals. We studied English in a language school for several years and later my husband opened a Chinese takeaway shop in Dublin.

Another group of early Chinese migrants to Ireland was made up of young professionals with college degrees. Some were first-generation migrants from Hong Kong, Malaysia and other South-East Asian countries; others were second-generation Chinese migrants from the UK. They arrived in Ireland later, in the 1980s and 1990s. Because of their educational backgrounds, they normally took up better-paid jobs, in both the public and private sectors, than the former group and obtained higher socio-economic status in Irish society.

The second wave of migration (early 2000s–today)

The fast economic growth in Ireland in the 1990s led to a second wave of Chinese migration in the early 2000s, when large numbers of Mainland Chinese professionals and students migrated to the country. Due to the labour shortages experienced during the Celtic Tiger era, Irish business organisations had called for and achieved reform of the old visa system, which had a long history of restriction on immigration. Consequently, an increasing number of work permits began to be issued to non-EU migrants. In 1993, the government issued 1103 work permits. By 2001, the figure had risen to 36,431 (Loyal 2003).

The Chinese were among those non-EU nationals who embraced Ireland in the Celtic Tiger era. From the late 1990s, a new generation of Chinese migrants consisting of Mandarin-speaking professionals from Mainland China began to rise. At the same time, with the rise of Chinese economy, an increasing number of upper-middle class families began sending their children to Ireland to study (Wang 2005). This was facilitated by the Irish government's 'Asia strategy', which encouraged the Irish higher-education sector to recruit students from China (Wang 2009). According to a 2012 survey by an Irish consulting agency, the majority of Chinese migrants in Ireland were student-visa holders (BusinessinChina.ie. 2013). The number of Chinese students was the highest among all foreign national groups in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

Because of the steady influx of young professionals and students from Mainland China, the number of Chinese migrants in Ireland has continued to grow over the last two decades (Central Statistics Office 2012), and the Chinese community here was soon dominated by young migrants from Mainland China. By 2006, a total of 11,161 Chinese people were living in Ireland – an increase of 91% on the 2002 figure of 5842 (Census 2011). Before the influx of Mainland migrants, the Chinese used to be a quite small group in Ireland. According to a survey conducted by the Department of Justice and

Equality (2011), the Chinese accounted for 9% of the 130,500 non-EEA (European Economic Area) nationals in the country (Census 2011). By 2011, a total of 10,896 Chinese people were living in Ireland – almost double the 2002 figure of 5842 (see Table 1).

The diversity of Chinese migrants and various causes

Citizenship status: initial classification

As the above review shows, after two waves of migration, Chinese migrants in Ireland have become a rather diversified group. A most obvious disparity is their citizenship status, which is due largely to their different migration times and origins. For example, the Chinese-British who came to Ireland between the 1950s and 1990s were not affected by their citizenship status, which was not the case for subsequent migrants from Mainland China. Citizenship status is a significant factor in the integration and identity of migrants in the host society, because it is associated with migrants' access to social supports, facilities and other benefits, as well as with the stereotyped and negative perceptions of migrants in the host society. A report by an Irish research group focusing on Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian immigrants concluded that citizenship status is 'a key factor in integration in Ireland' (The Migration and Citizenship Research Initiative, UCD 2008, p. 22).

In addition to the economic and institutional obstacles facing them, adopting Irish citizenship can be a hard decision for migrants from Mainland China because dual citizenship is not acknowledged by the Chinese government. Interviewee C's narration explains the trade-off that many other migrants may also have had to make and the complex psychology behind it:

Table 1. Population by nationality: 2002, 2006 and 2011.

Nationality	2002	2006	2011	Change 2002–11	% change
Poland	2,124	63,276	122,585	120,461	5,671.4
UK	103,476	112,548	112,259	8,783	8.5
Lithuania	2,104	24,628	36,683	34,579	1,643.5
Latvia	1,797	13,319	20,593	18,796	1,046.0
Nigeria	8,969	16,300	17,642	8,673	96.7
Romania	4,978	7,696	17,304	12,326	247.6
India	2,534	8,460	16,986	14,452	570.3
Philippines	3,900	9,548	12,791	8,891	228.0
Germany	7,216	10,289	11,305	4,089	56.7
USA	11,384	12,475	11,015	–369	–3.2
China	5,842	11,161	10,896	5,054	86.5
Slovakia	297	8,111	10,801	10,504	3,536.7
France	6,363	9,046	9,749	3,386	53.2
Brazil	1,087	4,388	8,704	7,617	700.7
Hungary	409	3,440	8,034	7,625	1,864.3
Italy	3,770	6,190	7,656	3,886	103.1
Pakistan	2,939	4,998	6,847	3,908	133.0
Spain	4,436	6,052	6,794	2,358	53.2
Czech Republic	1,103	5,159	5,451	4,348	394.2
South Africa	4,185	5,432	4,872	687	16.4
Other non-Irish	45,348	77,217	85,390	40,042	88.3
Total non-Irish	224,261	419,733	544,357	320,096	142.7

Source: Census (2011) Profile 6 Migration and Diversity – A profile of diversity in Ireland, Central Statistics Office, Dublin, Ireland, 2012.

After more than 10 years of hard work, I finally opened a small Chinese takeaway shop. My wife and son joined me in 2014. Although I lost my Chinese citizenship, I am still Chinese. This fact won't change. My son and wife will keep their Chinese citizenship because this is the best solution for our family. We can travel between and live in the two countries without barriers. The Irish passport offers me a sense of security and stability. There is no need to go to the immigration office to renew my visa anymore and now I can finally bid farewell to all those restrictions on foreign nationals. My family and I are also entitled to all the social protections offered by the state, which make me feel more secure.

Education and occupation: further differentiation

Citizenship status is an instant form of categorisation, whereas education and occupation have cumulative effects on individuals' socioeconomic status and thereby further differentiate them into various social strata.

As the migration history summarised above shows, catering has been a conventional business for Chinese migrants in Ireland. When the early Chinese migrants secured footholds in Ireland, they started to bring over relatives to support and expand their restaurants and takeaways. As a useful way of mutual support, this practice has been adopted and carried on by subsequent migrants from Mainland China. Nowadays, chefs and cooks (19%), sales assistants (9%) and waiters and waitresses (9%) are the three main jobs held by Chinese migrants (Central Statistics Office, 2008). According to Business in China's 2012 survey, fewer than 11.4% of Chinese migrants own property in Ireland while 59.5% of the interviewees were living in shared houses/apartments (BusinessinChina.ie, 2013). This survey reveals the lower social position of the whole group of Chinese migrants, as well as an obvious pyramid structure to this group.

The reasons behind these plain facts are complex and sometimes intertwined. Historically, Chinese migrants have consisted of a large proportion of simple labourers with limited education and skills. This disadvantage, combined with the various barriers faced by immigrant workers, led to the formation and consolidation of the inferior status of Chinese migrants in Irish society. Now, after two decades of a continuous influx of students, the demographic structure of Chinese migrants has changed, particularly in terms of educational attainment. Theoretically, young, competent students should enhance the social mobility of the group and increase dynamism within the group. However, as suggested by the earlier-quoted data, this has not been realised. This is because Chinese students only constitute the middle stratum of the pyramid structure in terms of numbers; in actuality, this is a socio-structurally liquid stratum. As non-EU nationals, they face many obstacles in terms of employment and residence. In consideration of all these difficulties and restrictions, some students may leave for other Western countries to pursue better career development opportunities, and many others choose to return and use their new degrees and skills for self-development in China, where they can benefit from a lower cost of living and family support, and also fulfil family obligations.

In reality, every year, only a very small number of Chinese students can find full-time jobs and obtain employment permits to stay in Ireland after graduation.² The majority of Chinese graduates leave the country because, according to Ireland's immigration rules, student visa holders are not entitled to apply for long-term residency, regardless of how many years they have spent in Ireland. In order to remain in the country, non-EU students must be enrolled in academic programmes and renew their student visas annually. After

the 2008 financial crisis, many Chinese student visa holders left the country because their income from part-time jobs could no longer cover their tuition fees and the increased fee for registration with the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB).³ In 2012, the Irish government introduced the Student Probationary Extension, which allowed non-EEA national students who had first registered their residence in Ireland as students on or before 31 December 2004 and who commenced their studies in Ireland on or before 31 December 2004 to register for a two-year probationary period. At the conclusion of the two-year probationary period, eligible students would be entitled to apply for long-term residency in the state (Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service 2012). This policy was welcomed by those Chinese students who wished to stay in the country (Li 2011).

In general, if inferior social position can be seen as a consequence of historically formed migration patterns and the demographic structure of Chinese migrants, socio-structural factors, especially immigration and employment policies, have played a significant role in the consolidation of that position in recent decades.

Origin and generation: self-categorisation

Interestingly, whilst being categorised and further differentiated by historical and structural forces, migrants also carry out a self-categorisation process based on a range of standards. For Chinese migrants in Ireland, an important criterion is origin before migration.

Chinese migrants from the UK and other Asian countries and those from Mainland China see themselves as two distinct groups with regard to their citizenship statuses, backgrounds and experiences, lifestyles, language preferences and competences, and ideals and values, as well as other essential or contingent characteristics. Migrants from Mainland China also divide themselves into separate flocks, of which migrants from Fujian province and those from the north-eastern provinces are among the most prominent. For them, dialect difference is a main cultural factor that hinders communication and further interaction. Moreover, cultural indicators which are easily perceivable in daily life and historical and socio-economic backgrounds have a profound influence in activating individuals' group awareness and relevant behavioural patterns. To be more specific, the tradition of emigration in Fujian province dates back to the 19th century, with the primary destination being South-East Asia, whereas the massive outflow of migrants from the north-eastern provinces did not take occur until the 1990s, when large numbers of workers were made redundant from state-owned enterprises. (Zhu 2015)

The interviewees' descriptions reflect those inherent differences. Interviewee C's experience demonstrates the continuity of the emigration tradition in Fujian:

In my hometown in Fuqing county, Fujian province, migration to developed countries is a popular practice among young people. Japan, Australia, Canada and the United States are top destinations. Back in the 1980s, many of the young people would smuggle their way into those countries and work in Chinese restaurants. Young fellows who choose to stay in Fuqing face a lot of pressure because other people working in western countries always send money back home and they build big fancy houses in the village ... old people will say things like 'decent fellows go abroad while lazy people stay at home'.

After generations of this practice, working abroad has become accepted as a convention in Fujian. However, for people in other parts of China, especially in the northern provinces, seeking opportunities in developed countries is more like a gamble. International

migration is the process of human capital investment in a chosen microeconomic model. Migrants evaluate the costs and returns of migration and tend to move to countries with higher economic benefits (Lee *et al.* 2005). Any actual gains are calculated against possible losses in China to justify the risks they have undertaken in the first place. Interviewee Z, who works in a hotel in Cork city, recalled:

I am not good at studying. So, after graduating from secondary school, I joined a vocational school in Shenyang city and studied hotel management. I then moved to Ireland in 2003 and began to work as a waiter in a hotel in Cork. I really enjoy my work and life here in Ireland. Although I am not rich, I am happy with my income. In this country, there is no intense competition and there is no big gap between the rich and the poor. In China, the monthly salary for a hotel waiter is only around 300 euro. You can barely feed yourself with that type of salary. I feel that I am very lucky compared to my friends in China, who are still struggling in the job market.

Interviewee L, a computer scientist from northern China, commented:

I had a good job in Beijing but I was separated from my family because my wife was working in another city in eastern China. After we migrated to Ireland, although my wife can't work because of the immigration rules, my salary is good enough to support the whole family. Ireland is free from air pollution. There is no food safety issue. You wouldn't be able to 'buy' this good environment in Beijing, even if you were a multi-millionaire. My daughter is now enjoying Ireland's world class education and social welfare systems. She no longer needs to face the intense competition and pressure in Chinese society. We also plan to have a second child. If we had stayed in China [and had a second child], I would lose my job and face a big fine due to the 'one child policy'. By migrating to Ireland, we are free in our family planning now.⁴

Their historical and socio-economic backgrounds influence not only migrants' perceptions and attitudes but also their actual risk resistance capacity. For migrants from Fujian and other places with a similar tradition, their social networks are usually formed through kinship and long-term friendship. In this way, they can receive peer support when faced with difficulties and share and grow human capital within their networks. Chinese migrants also tend to form their social circles with Chinese colleagues or neighbours. Such temporary networks are usually fragile due to the instability of migrants' jobs, residence, and so on. In such relatively loose and fragile networks, an individual migrant would often struggle alone and thus is more exposed to the dangers of poverty and marginalisation.

Symbolic interactionists tend to believe that individuals are drawn to one another based on physical similarities and affective proximity, which they acknowledge or establish through personal interactions (Stryker 1968). According to social-identity theory however, group processes take place the other way around (Turner 1987). That is, individuals adhere to relevant stereotypes once they have been assigned membership of a specific group, even arbitrarily. For the subgroups of Chinese migrants mentioned earlier, they are not only attracted to people who are alike, but who also strengthen the 'in-group-out-group' boundary through the choices and judgments they make in everyday social interactions.

Students from Mainland China are excluded from the above discussion because their origins are scattered all over the country. More importantly, the student community is essentially different from the working population with regard to social classification and

self-categorisation. Because their environments and activities are relatively identical, differentiation among students is not as evident as that between the subgroups mentioned earlier.

Another community which also has a special self-perception is that made up of the descendants of Chinese migrants who have grown up in Ireland with the hyphenated identity Chinese-Irish. With that ambiguous and sometimes ambivalent dual identity, there is little wonder that they tend to categorise themselves as distinct from other Chinese migrants and also from the rest of society (Yau 2007).

Implications of diversity for interaction and identity

As illustrated above, despite their common nationality, Chinese migrants are both socially stratified and culturally differentiated. Therefore, it is vital for Irish society, and especially the policymakers, to understand the historical, socio-economic and cognitive contexts of their diversity, as well as its implications for the integration and identity of individual migrants.

Heterogeneous Chinese identity

The question of migrants' integration and identity are usually discussed in the context of ethnic relations. A main focus of that discussion is the ethnic boundary, which, according to recent scholars such as Anderson (1991) and Bauman (2004), is real and imagined, instrumental and symbolic, ambiguous and dynamic, and hence always subject to negotiation and construction. However, most empirical studies on Chinese migrants in Ireland define that boundary in terms of a homogeneous Chinese identity from an essentialist and static perspective. Based on the above analysis of in-group diversity, this study further argues that the abstract Chinese identity is understood and performed heterogeneously by migrants from the various subgroups.

In the 2011 census, 17,800 respondents ticked the option of 'Chinese ethnic or cultural background', while 10,896 declared themselves Chinese nationals. Apparently, for those from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, as well as Malaysia, Singapore and other countries and regions, Chinese identity is not defined by nationality or ethnicity alone but more often by inherited and acquired cultural characteristics like language, diet, customs and beliefs. Consequently, group boundaries and intergroup relations are often interpreted and addressed by these migrants in a cultural context, whereas Chinese nationals in Ireland could have stronger political sensitivity and responsiveness. In other words, the cultural, affective and socio-political significances of Chinese identity matter differently to migrants of different backgrounds. Nevertheless, symbolic and instrumental connotations may also be interconnected in particular circumstances. For instance, Interviewee B, a Chinese British who was born in Hong Kong, expressed a sense of pride while talking about the rise of China:

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, when China was still very poor, overseas Chinese occasionally suffered racism and discrimination. Now China has become a major player in world economy. I can feel a change in western people's attitudes toward China and Chinese people, and this makes me feel proud.

Sometimes, however, the descendants of migrants from Hong Kong and other South-East Asian countries ‘opt out’ of their Chinese identity for political and ideological reasons. This has become more evident since the ‘Occupy Central’ movement, a civil-disobedience campaign, was initiated by Hong Kong political activists in 2015. Interviewee G, a young Hong Kong-born professional in Dublin, stated:

To be honest, I don’t like people to call me Chinese. Hong Kong is totally different from China. I am a Hong Konger. After Hong Kong was handed over to China by Britain, Hong Kong people’s lives were badly affected by Chinese influence. Many Chinese tourists don’t respect Hong Kong’s culture and law. They rush into Hong Kong to buy baby formula and empty the shelves in shopping malls. Local shops and restaurants were forced to close down to give way to luxury retail chain stores. Pregnant Chinese women came to Hong Kong in large numbers to give birth so that their babies would get Hong Kong citizenship. This resulted in the shortage of maternity beds in hospitals. Chinese investors also pushed up property prices in Hong Kong, making ordinary people’s lives very difficult. Now China wants to tighten its control over Hong Kong by interfering in its electoral reform. Hong Kong people are losing their freedom.

To conclude, the constructive nature of ethnic boundaries indicates that future research ought to pay more attention to the forming and changing processes of Chinese identity, as well as the contextual salience of its multiple meanings.

Stratified integration

Chinese migrants of different social economic statuses are consequently stratified in terms of their competences and degrees of integration. Another critical factor in stratified integration is language ability, which is quoted by most interviewees as a key barrier to integration. Interviewee H, who migrated to Ireland in the 1980s, commented:

Because of the language barrier, it is difficult for us to understand and integrate into Irish society. We live in a small circle surrounded by Chinese friends and relatives. We don’t know what is happening in Irish society. Although we have more Irish friends now, but we still feel that we are isolated from the Irish society. After all these years, the language barrier is still there. My English is only ok for daily communication, but not for in depth communication. For example, I could only understand a small part of the school principal’s speeches at my daughter’s graduation ceremony. I wanted to join other parents to chat but I can’t understand them well.

Interviewees also pointed out other barriers, such as knowledge of Irish history and culture and the scope and profundity of their contact with local people. Interviewee H explained:

For me, there is no language barrier when I chat with my Irish friends. [...] When they begin to talk about Irish stuff, for example, the GAA, it becomes very difficult to catch up because I only have a limited knowledge of Irish history, culture and society. I remember one time they talked about Freemasonry for the whole night. Although I could understand the language, I couldn’t understand the content. It was like if an Irish person sits by a group of Chinese people who are talking about the last emperor of the Tang Dynasty ...

Because socio-economic status is normally positively correlated with the other listed elements, high-skilled Chinese professionals are presumably more integrated than low-skilled, working-class Chinese migrants, who tend to live in a small and isolated ‘Chinese circle’. Most of these low-skilled workers are in the catering industry. They work long

hours and rarely have time for entertainment and leisure activities. The majority of them are striving to save money. Some send their savings back to China to support their family members. Interviewee S, a chef in a Chinese restaurant in Dublin, stated:

I used to work as a chef in my hometown. The salary in Ireland is much higher than that in China so I moved to Ireland in 2006. By doing so, I can save more money and invest it in my children's education. My two children are in college now. They need money to cover their tuition fees and living expenses. Life in Ireland is not easy. I share a room with my colleagues. My social circle is very small. My friends are Chinese colleagues from the restaurant. After all these years I still can't speak English. I am 'deaf' and 'blind' and I don't know what is happening in Irish society. My plan is to work in Ireland for another few years and then go back to China to reunite with my family. As we Chinese people always say: 'The bitter must come before the sweet, and that also makes the sweet all the sweeter.'

Unlike working-class Chinese migrants, who often stick to small but close social circles, highly skilled Chinese professionals face fewer language, social and economic barriers. They are more actively willing to integrate into Irish society. However, they may also experience more integration pressure and identity anxiety. The above-mentioned Interviewee B described a strong consciousness of his Hong Kong/Chinese identity and explained the reason behind it:

Our family moved to the UK when I was still a kid. I am the so-called second generation overseas Chinese. I grew up in the UK and I am a native English speaker. I moved to Ireland in the 1980s and established my family here. But when I walk on the street, will people think that I am British or Irish? Of course not. Why? Because I don't look like a westerner. For me, the passport is only a legal document. It has nothing to do with my ethnic/national identity ... I am a Hong Konger, and I am Chinese. This is a fact and I also educate my children about this fact. They are the third generation of overseas Chinese. I don't want them to get confused about their identity.

Interviewee E, a college graduate from Inner Mongolia, arrived in Ireland in 2002 and studied at a private English school for two years. After that, he found a job in a local swimming club thanks to his college degree in physical education, and then established a family in Ireland. Compared to Interviewee B, his attitude is more ambivalent:

My family is here and Ireland is my second home country. My wife is Irish and my two children are also Irish. I sometimes thought about getting Irish citizenship, but I've decided to keep my Chinese citizenship ... In terms of integration, language is no longer a barrier for me, but Chinese culture is so different from Irish culture – the ways of thinking and communicating are so different. Yes, you can integrate into Irish society to some extent, but full integration is a mission impossible.

The perceptions of Interviewee B and Interviewee E suggest that, as more capable and autonomous migrants, Chinese professionals may actively integrate into Irish society for instrumental concerns but remain distanced from Irish culture and mainstream values for symbolic and emotional reasons.

Unlike their socio-economic status, migrants' self-categorisation, such as the differentiation according to Fujian or north-eastern origin, is often relevant to their symbolic identification. This kind of self-identity could acquire hierarchical meaning as long as it is stereotyped and adopted in social comparisons by structural forces. Hence, for policy-makers, it is vital to understand the origins and foundations of the various groups and sub-groups before designing integration schemes and to remain cautious about associating

integration with other aspects of public administration, like access to and distribution of resources and opportunities.

Hyphenated identity and dissociated position

Second-generation, foreign-born Chinese and students from Mainland China are two special subgroups with respect to their circumstances and perceptions of integration and identification.⁵

As pointed out by Nicola Yau, ‘the second generation are not migrants but rather the product of migration’ (Yau 2007, p. 52). As the minority in a minority group, they are quite conscious about their in-between situation, namely, their hyphenated identity. Based on empirical evidence gathered through interviews and an online forum, Yau argues that second-generation Chinese are often forced to identify with the Chinese identity due to the restrictive nature of ‘Irishness’ (being white) and the pressure of racialisation and marginalisation in the mainstream society, even though they are not regarded as fully or properly Irish by themselves or by society (Yau 2007). In this context, hyphenated identity (Chinese-Irish or Irish-Born Chinese), even though it is still a racialised one, is useful in providing them with a sense of belonging. Interviewee F, who immigrated into Ireland in the 1980s with her husband, spoke of the difficulties and confusion experienced by her children, which indicates that adopting a hyphenated identity was a strategy they acquired or an answer they eventually figured out during the self-identification process:

I have three children. They were born in Ireland in the 1980s. When they were young, they felt that they were Irish. But when they came across strangers on the street, people would say that they were Chinese. They got confused about their identity from time to time. They couldn’t understand why people wouldn’t acknowledge them as ‘Irish’. But now they are no longer confused about their Chinese identity. They explain to people that they are Irish-born Chinese.

Unlike the former community, Chinese students are unlikely to have identity confusion because they are socially regarded and self-identify as Chinese in every sense: nationality, ethnicity, language and culture. They show a much lower motivation to integrate in comparison with not only second-generation Chinese but also Erasmus students from European countries. They tend to spend their spare time with Chinese classmates and friends and generally prefer ‘Chinese-style’ leisure activities like going out for dinner to going out to pubs and clubs. As Interviewee G stated:

I used to live in one of the university’s student apartments and I shared with several Irish and American students. They liked to go to pubs in the evening. I know pub culture is very important in Ireland, but I don’t like to drink. Most of my Chinese friends, especially the girls, don’t like to drink either. However, it was difficult for me to say no if they invited me. So, a few months later, I moved out and began to share a house with a couple of Chinese students from the university. We organized a dinner party every week. Everyone would contribute one dish. By doing so, we could enjoy a variety of traditional food from different parts of China. We chatted during the dinner and shared our experiences studying and living in Ireland. It was great fun.

Financial resources are believed to be another barrier to social integration for Chinese students. Interviewee I explained:

I do have Irish friends but it is too expensive to integrate into Irish society. Irish socializing is pub oriented. In the past, my Irish friends always liked to invite me to go out for a pint, but normally I would refuse – only because I can't afford it. A pint in the pub costs 5 euro. I only have 30 euro for my weekly living expenses! How can I afford those expensive pub rounds? I can't just join them but contribute nothing. So after I refused [their invitation] several times, they no longer invite me. Some of my Irish friends believe that I am a nerd. I felt embarrassed but I don't know how to explain this to them.

Exclusive 'Chinese circles' and introverted dispositions appear to be common representations of Chinese students. From their own perspectives, however, active integration is neither practicable nor desirable in consideration of their temporal residence, high mobility and dissociated position in Irish society. According to a recently conducted survey by Cao Yu, the majority of Chinese students have no intention of staying after graduation due to various concerns and restrictions, such as the strict immigration policy, family obligations in China, the small size of the Chinese community in Ireland and cultural differences. Some Chinese students see Ireland as a stepping stone for migration to other English-speaking countries like Australia, the United States and Canada, which have bigger Chinese populations and relatively welcoming immigration policies. Interviewee G, a postgraduate student at University College Cork, stated:

After graduating from Shanghai University, I decided to come to Ireland to study international business. My parents supported me. In Shanghai, it is popular for middle-class families to send their children abroad to study. Ireland is a beautiful country and the standard of living is quite high. However, Ireland is too small and it is not a country for immigrants. After graduation, I will need a work permit to remain in Ireland, which seems impossible. I am now in the process of applying for a PhD programme offered by a Canadian university. Canada always welcomes young immigrants and Canada has a big Chinese population. My long term plan is to get my PhD degree, find a job, settle down, and eventually bring my parents over to Canada.

To compare the two communities briefly, it appears that some of the second-generation Chinese are plagued by self-doubt and the fear of marginalisation and, accordingly, resort to a hyphenated identity for a sense of stability and togetherness. Conversely, Chinese students, short-term residents who seem to be more autonomous in remaining dissociated, essentially stay on the fringes of the social system. This suggests that, hyphenated identity and cautious dissociation are both strategies configured and consolidated during the negotiation and construction of group boundaries. In the long term, these strategies can become embedded in one's habitus, the constructed and constructive as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1980).

Conclusion

In just over half a century, the Chinese in Ireland have changed from being a largely 'unseen', small group to having the fifth largest population of non-EEA nationals in the country. In the meantime, Irish society, which used to be relatively homogeneous, both ethnically and culturally, has embraced a range of ethnic groups and heterogeneous cultures. These intertwined transformations have created challenges for both groups – Chinese migrants and local Irish people – and also raised questions for researchers and policymakers.

This article has examined the historical process and social, cultural and cognitive causes for the differentiation and stratification of Chinese migrants and further discusses individuals' diversified capabilities, attitudes and actual levels of integration, as well as their disparate patterns of self-identification. In the research area of Chinese migrants in Ireland, in-group diversity, and its implications, is still a novel research topic. With this introductory work, the authors seek to draw more attention to this particular group, especially with regard to the need for research into encounters between subgroups and longitudinal investigations.

Subgroups of Chinese migrants are determined according to social classification and self-categorisation, which have distinct significances for subgroup members' integration and identity. As briefly mentioned in the article, symbolic differentiation, based on geographic and cultural origin, for instance, may be used by members and the rest of the society for instrumental purposes. Using the theories of the power–conflict paradigm and a case-study approach, future research could probe into this interesting subject. A case study could, for example, look at the relations between second generation Chinese and students from Mainland China. Nicola Yau has touched on this topic while arguing that “new” immigrants from mainland China ... [are] further compounding the invisibility of the second generation’ (Yau 2007, p. 57). This statement is worth further study because, as a member of the group of second-generation Chinese, Yau’s idea represents, at least in part, that group’s attitude towards the ‘other’ group.

The longitudinal approach is widely adopted in sociological research to supplement cross-sectional data and rigid structural analysis. A useful analysis paradigm is Glen H. Elder’s life course theory/method (Elder and Giele 2009). It provides researchers with a perspective on human development, which ought to be a core value of (im) migration studies. From a longitudinal perspective and a life course approach, future researchers could study the general social mobility of Chinese migrants across generations, as well as examine integration and identity changes in certain focus groups. For instance, a small number of Chinese students who manage to secure a job after graduation choose to stay in Ireland for a certain period. Because of changes to their social position (from cautious dissociation to mandatory involvement) and social network (from Chinese classmates to Irish colleagues), they undergo social, cognitive and behavioural transformations, all of which could be fundamental to their integration and identity. The changes experienced by newly employed Chinese graduates is so far a brand new topic, and also an important one in consideration of the fact that students now account for over half of the entire Chinese population in Ireland.

As a country that is ‘new to the migration experience’, Ireland has been working on an integration strategy that could ensure a positive migration experience and enhance social cohesiveness (The Migration and Citizenship Research Initiative, UCD 2008). In July 2007, the Irish government appointed a Minister for Integration to develop strategies on integration and immigration (€9m allocated to office for integration, 2007). The Office of the Minister for Integration published its first report entitled ‘Migration Nation – Statement on Integration Strategy and Diversity Management’ in 2008. The Statement indicated that the government intended to produce a comprehensive strategy for all legally resident immigrants and develop co-ordinating mechanisms to implement such a strategy. A range of strategies is also expected to be pursued as part of the National Action Plan Against Racism. However, eight years after the establishment of the Office, there has

been a lack of progress in the field of integration due to the impact of the 2008 financial crisis. In 2008, the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism was closed down because of budget cutbacks. The Office of the Minister for Integration was also abolished in 2011. The country's integration policy was put on hold. While the Irish economy has begun to recover since 2015, it is to be expected that the government will initiate a new integration strategy in the near future (Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration). Ideally and practically, the government's new integration policies and strategies must be based upon a comprehensive understanding of the particularities and diversities of each migrant group. This would necessarily require communication and debate, to which this article hopes to contribute.

Notes

1. The term 'migrants' in this article refers to foreign nationals who study, work or live in Ireland.
2. In general, non-EEA nationals must have an employment permit in order to work in Ireland. Employment permits are issued by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. Generally, applicants for employment permits must have a minimum annual remuneration (pay) of €30,000. All new applicants must provide evidence that a labour market needs test has been carried out. The test requires that the vacancy must have been advertised with the Department of Social Protection (DSP) employment services/EURES employment network for two weeks, in a national newspaper for at least three days and in either a local newspaper or on a jobs website for three days. This is to ensure that an EEA or Swiss national cannot be found to fill the vacancy. (General Employment Permit, http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/migrant_workers/employment_permits/work_permits.html).
3. Legally resident non-EEA nationals who have entered Ireland with the intention of residing in Ireland for a period of more than three months must register with their local immigration registration officer. An immigration certificate of registration (GNIB Registration Card) is issued by the Garda National Immigration Bureau to any non-EEA national who so registers. Before 2008, a fee of €100 was charged in respect of each immigration certificate of registration issued to a non-EEA national. The fee increased to €150 in 2008 and €300 in 2012. (Registration of non-EEA nationals, http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/moving_country/moving_to_ireland/rights_of_residence_in_ireland/registration_of_non_eea_nationals_in_ireland.html).
4. During the past decade, the one-child policy has been gradually relaxed in some provinces. The policy was abolished by the Chinese government in 2015. Urban residents are now allowed to have two children.
5. Chinese students in Ireland can be divided into two groups: 'non-degree course students' and 'degree course students'. In this section, the term 'students' refers to degree course students. Non-degree course students also enter Ireland on a student visa. They attend private English schools and, at the same time, many take part-time jobs. During the Celtic Tiger era, some of these students rarely attended school and spent most of their time working. Some of the language schools offered to provide attendance records for visa purposes as long as the students paid their tuition fees. After the 2008 economic crisis, many non-degree course students returned to China or migrated to other countries. Others invested their savings in education and obtained college degrees from Irish universities. Some were issued work permits by the immigration office after graduation and work in both the private and public sectors. 'Degree course students' refers to full-time students enrolled in higher education courses. They came to Ireland to pursue college degrees, hoping to become more competitive in the job market. Computer Science, Accounting/Finance, Engineering, Science, Commerce/Business and Marketing are popular subjects.

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