

# Heritagization of Chinese Migration: From Binaries to Connections

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## Abstract

In the last few decades, migrants' past experiences and memories have become increasingly recognized as a heritage. While this can be seen as a positive shift towards a more inclusive evaluation of the past, migration heritage is still overwhelmingly portrayed through a binary between the country of origin and country of settlement. This tendency obscures the multiple transnational connections migrants sustain with different locations along the migration process. Drawing on examples of Chinese migration to Europe, this article argues in favour of forgoing the national(istic) approach to heritagization and instead focusing on the connections formed during a century of Chinese migration to Europe.

**Keywords:** migrants' heritage, heritagization of migration, Chinese migration, Chinese diaspora, Chinatown

## Dediščinjenje kitajskih migracij: od binarnosti do povezav

### Izvleček

Pretekle izkušnje in spomini migrantov so v zadnjih desetletjih vse pogostejše razglašeni za dediščino. Medtem ko lahko ta trend prepoznamo kot pozitivni premik k vključujočemu prepoznavanju preteklosti, pa je dediščina migracij običajno predstavljena skozi lečo binarnega nasprotja med državo izvora in državo naselitve. Tovrstni pristop k dediščinjenju zastira številne transnacionalne povezave, ki jih migranti vzdržujejo z različnimi lokacijami vzdolž migracijskega procesa. Na temelju različnih primerov dediščinjenja migracij iz Kitajske v Evropo članek poziva k opustitvi nacionalnega modela dediščinjenja in k osredičenju na povezave, ki so se vzpostavile skozi stoletje kitajskih migracij v Evropo.

**Gljučne besede:** migrantska dediščina, dediščinjenje migracij, kitajske migracije, kitajska diaspora, kitajska četrt

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## Introduction

The increased movements of people, goods, ideas, and information supported by new communication tools and infrastructures on the one hand, and the breakdown of the fixed and sedentary narratives of social identities on the other, are transforming societies in the direction of multiple and diverse membership and belonging. The “autochthonous” heritage or interpretations of the past are progressively challenged by the contributions of past and present movements to the heritage and culture of a specific locality or nation. Consequently, questions regarding the modes of identity-making and representations of migrant and mobile groups and their understanding and uses of the past have proliferated in recent years, as have projects and initiatives addressing these questions. How do newcomers and their descendants become part of the cultural canon of the new societies? When are collective and individual memories of migrants included in the public discourse? How do localities and cultural institutions display (or not) the minorities’ experiences with the past (Dellios and Henrich 2020)?

These questions, now being addressed by a nascent field at the cross-section of migration and heritage research, were enabled by advances in critical heritage approaches, which treat heritage as a discursive and relational process where groups are constantly re-made through negotiations. The critical heritage approach also sees heritage as constructed in the present and not as something waiting to be unearthed from the past. In other words, to quote Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, 6), heritage is thus “a product of the present, purposefully developed in response to current needs or demands for it, and shaped by those requirements”. In the same vein, heritagization is understood as a process of transforming objects, places, and practices into heritage by attaching cultural values to them (Sjoholm 2016, 26). This approach challenged the prevailing “patrimonial regimes” (Hafstein 2018), resting on the nation-state matrix that bounds heritage with state borders. Various concepts have adopted the “beyond national borders” approach—transcultural heritage (Macdonald 2013), transnational heritage (Byrne 2016a), migrant heritage (Dellios and Henrich 2020), or diasporic heritage (Ang 2011; Reed 2015). They all, despite their different focuses, subject matters or intellectual origins, share a commitment to highlighting processes, or aspects of processes, that have been mostly overlooked by the mainstream national heritage industries.

In the case of migrants and their descendants, the movement (or inability to move) across national borders is often at the core of their lived realities, and as such it may also be a vital part of individual and collective memories. The recognition of these memories and past experiences in the last few decades may be attributed to the multiculturalist turn in the light of contemporary societies’

increasing diversity and subsequent search for greater social cohesion under the slogan “unity in diversity”, especially in societies with substantial and prolonged immigration (e.g., the USA, Australia, Canada, and members of the EU). While this is often a top-down initiative, it can also be a grassroots effort of groups struggling for social, cultural, or political recognition (Dellios 2015; Nikielska-Sekula 2019). These shifts nevertheless mostly result in skewed and partial representations of the migrants’ lived realities, as their pasts and memories are overwhelmingly framed in a binary between the country of origin and country of settlement. In this view, they are either perceived as “emigrants” and as such deemed as a loss for the “homeland”, or “immigrants” with their (often) contentious contribution to the “hostland”. The heritagization of migration thus very much mimics the dominant explanatory framework of migration (Glick Schiller 2015) which, despite calls for a transnational and mobility research perspective, is still largely understood as a dichotomy between exit and reception. Heritage is thus like many other fields of social sciences under a particular but usually unreflected spell of methodological nationalism (Byrne 2016a), where nation-states are presumed to be natural units of analysis, and the borders of nation states are equated with those of society (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). This tendency neglects the multiple transnational connections migrants maintain with places of origin, places of settlement, and other locations that are part of their transnational social spaces. Drawing on the examples from the past migrations from China, this article thus argues one should forgo the national(istic) approach to the heritage of migration and instead focus on understanding migrants’ pasts in their complexity and move towards more inclusive spatial and temporal examinations of heritage processes. In what follows, I present some of the examples of the heritagization of Chinese migration to Europe from my own and other related research that highlight the binary approach in the heritagization of Chinese migration. I then discuss the possibilities for a more transnational understanding of migration legacies, one that can show not only the complexities of migrants’ lives but also the entanglements between China and multiple other locations of Chinese migration.

### **Heritagization of Chinese Migration to Europe through a Binary Lens**

David Byrne (2016b, 2361), in his study of the heritage of Chinese in Australia, laments the West’s heritage conservation ethics that has privileged the national over the transnational, especially in treating the migration heritage through narratives of arrival in, adaptation to, and settlement in the destination country rather than those of return, transnational circulatory flows and cross-border connectivity. The same can also be claimed for the heritage of migration between China

and Europe, where not only is the European side focusing on immigration, but where China's focus is solely on emigration. Thus, despite more than 100 years of migration connectivity, the legacies of these flows are neatly compartmentalized into representations of a Chinese immigration heritage in Europe and Overseas Chinese—a euphemism for Chinese emigrants—heritage in China.

The Chinese are among smaller migrant/minority groups in Europe, although their numbers are relatively high in some countries (e.g., the UK, Italy, Spain). Despite the wide variety of migration flows from China throughout the 20th century (seafarers, armed forces' hires, factory workers, entrepreneurs, students, professionals, etc.), the representations of past and present experiences and memories of these groups are mostly non-existent in the public space. One exception, albeit not unproblematic, are the "Chinatowns", parts of a city where Chinese migrants congregated either because of work or accommodation. Chinatowns are the most persistent image of Chinese presence in the countries of destination<sup>1</sup>, and also a symbolic place of marginalization and racism, making these spaces a contentious heritage. Chinatowns initially came into existence as the spatial manifestations of a particular identity, where migrants transplanted hometown streetscapes and institutions, most often due to racial exclusion and social marginality (Liu 2020). They were associated with vice and crime, and essentialized as inferior spaces. But around the 1970s, these places started to attract visitors who were interested in a voyeuristic gaze at an exotic other. Soon city governments recognized the potential of these heterotopias and were keen on reconstructing Chinatowns as sanitized and safe versions of local "internal exoticism" to boost tourism and consumerism. Rath and colleagues (2018, 15) argue that modern-day Chinatowns are largely "themed economic spaces", where Chinese and other entrepreneurs compete for a share of the market and, through this, also to the right to claim the area's identity. Still, beyond just urban transformation and consumerism, in line with the omnipresent discourse and practice of integration and inclusion as part of an orderly and modern city, ethnocultural diversity is increasingly seen as an asset crucial for modern city branding (Schmiz 2016). To this end, overzealous city officials and local ethnic entrepreneurs may "stage" Chinatowns to market the city as diverse and modern (*ibid.*). In short, Chinatowns today are contested heritage sites, where older diasporic understandings of Chineseness, racial exclusion, and ethnic bonding are unsettled by newer neoliberal interpretations of cultural diversity and urban renewal (Ang 2020).

The material heritage of Chinatowns is often accompanied by the intangible heritage of selected Chinese festivities (e.g., Chinese New Year) and cultural activities

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1 In Slovenia, for example, the main preoccupation of print media concerning Chinese migrants around the year 2000 was the possible emergence of Chinatown in the country (Bofulin 2016). Chinatowns also regularly feature in the cities' guidebooks as part of the "mainstream" heritage sites.

(e.g., lion dances, classical Chinese dances, martial arts, dragon boat racing, etc.). While this can be a grassroots initiative by migrant associations, an important role can be played by the representatives of the Chinese state (e.g., Chinese embassies and Confucius Institutes). People participating in such activities may not have had prior experiences with them, and have only been familiarized with them through active participation in Chinese migrant associations and cultural initiatives after they migrated to Europe. Apart from Chinatowns and Chinese festivities, only a handful of heritage projects represent migration from China to Europe. These most often take the form of photo exhibition halls or virtual exhibitions (mainly in the UK and France).

In China, on the other hand, the last two decades have seen a boom in heritage institutions and initiatives dedicated to the memory and role of the Overseas Chinese. The last significant period of emigration from China commenced in 1985, with the adoption of the law liberalizing travel abroad. As a result, a large number of Chinese joined existing communities of Chinese abroad or formed new ones in the countries of settlement, including in Europe. In this new era, Chinese emigrants turned from ideologically suspicious to patriotic, actively participating in the state's modernization goal (Nyiri 2005). Subsequently, the Chinese state put considerable effort into building numerous museums dedicated to the history of the Overseas Chinese. According to some estimates, there were at least 20 such museums across China, including in major metropolises (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou) and smaller towns with strong traditions of emigration in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Guangdong (Wang 2019, 2). Wang Cangbai (*ibid.*) observes that these museums may differ in style and size, but their monolithic patriotic discourse is very much alike. It emphasizes the contribution of the Overseas Chinese to China's Revolution (especially their contribution in the struggle against Japanese aggression) as well as subsequent modernization. It so portrays the Overseas Chinese as a highly unified "patriotic subject", who had suffered as victims of Western colonialism and imperialism (*ibid.*, 3). This depiction overlooks the complex lived realities of Chinese migrants in their countries of settlement, the diversity of migrant groups, and the modes and periods of migration. What is more, the more "unsettled" memories (*ibid.*, 4) of past persecutions and political denunciations of Overseas Chinese are downplayed in order to promote "transnational nationalism" (Ang 2004, 81) of a one, united Chinese diaspora.

While at the national level, the heritagization of Chinese emigration is highly ideological and does not depart from the prescribed forms of the state's metanarrative of the great revival of Chinese civilization under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the heritagization of Chinese migration at the local level pursues many more complex aims, including modernization, urban transformation and town branding

for touristic purposes (Oakes 2013). Localities with prolonged and extensive emigration, primarily situated in the southeastern provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, thus engage in diasporic place-making (Liu 2020), strategic action by local actors aimed at constructing the internationality and modernity of urban space by introducing foreign architectural and decorative elements as well as foreign life-style habits, such as wine-drinking, coffee bars, and Western restaurants as an authentic part of the emigration legacies. However, the diasporic place-making does not stop here; the local governments also partake in “heritage theatre” (Wang 2017, 197) with the construction of local level Overseas Chinese museums and memorial halls, parks with emigration-related sculptures, landmarks, and the organization of festivals dedicated to the Overseas Chinese. The city of Jingmen in Guangdong province, known for the strong emigration to Taiwan and Hong Kong, has built a new Jingmen Wuyi Overseas Chinese Museum, the Stark Park and Scholar Street, with more than 150 statues of famous Taiwanese or Hong Kong scholars, pop singers, and film stars, all thought to be connected to Jingmen by birth or place of origin (ibid., 203). In Qingtian county in the province of Zhejiang, a similar Overseas Chinese museum has recently been established, while the newly constructed Longjin Park with statues of Johann Strauss, Columbus, Napoleon, Michelangelo, Hercules, and the Manneken Pis is to express the century-long connection to Europe through sustained emigration (Bofulin 2020).

The heritagization of the migration from China at the local and national levels is thus limited to emigration without delving into immigration in the countries of settlement or the manifold transnational connections these movements entail. As such, it primarily serves national goals of patriotism and great revival under the CCP as well as the more mundane goals of (local) modernization and development. Examining the heritagization of the migration from China to Europe, a pattern of binary representations of the migration process emerges that could be attributed to methodological nationalism inherent in national models of heritagization both in China and Europe. What then are the alternatives for more inclusive and comprehensive accounts of the migration legacies which transcend the division between emigration and immigration?

### **Focus on Connections: Can the Legacies of Emigration and Immigration be Brought Together?**

In her influential book *Memorylands*, the anthropologist Sharon Macdonald asks whether it is possible to replicate national-scale models of heritage at another, transnational, scale as this would break the usually assumed consonance between

past, people, location, and culture (Macdonald 2013, 162). This is a crucial question for migration heritage, as this type of heritage can only meaningfully operate in a transnational space where national borders are part of the structural condition within which the migration process takes place, but are not the limits of the actors' social worlds. As David Byrne (2016b, 2361) emphasizes, migration heritage is not merely distributed or situated transnationally, but is rather *oriented* [emphasis in the original] that way. He thus proposes a focus on heritage corridors to conceptualize transnational connectivity between migrants' locations along the migration process as well as the bi-directional flows of ideas and capital within it (ibid., 2360), or even better—multi-directional flows. His approach builds on the earlier work of researchers of transnational movements, such as on Appadurai's ethnoscaples (1996) or Caglar's focus on connections (1997). To escape the limits of geographical borders, the constraints of "communities", and the isomorphism of culture, place, and people, the latter suggests focusing on "person-object" relations as these exist in space and time (Caglar 1997, 180). This approach is hardly novel, as researchers into world histories have shown the complex and often surprising mass of connections behind the migration of objects of ritual or everyday use among the world's centres (Pomeranz and Topik 1999; Brook 2008; Tythacott 2011) and peripheries (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2021; Grčar 2021; Visočnik Gerželj 2021; Veselič forthcoming). The people behind these objects—now evaluated as heritage—have been highly mobile but were considered as individual *travellers* (or adventurers, emissaries or recruits) to China rather than *migrants*, reflecting mainstream perceptions of migrants based on their class, ethnicity and even direction of migration.

But when discussing migration from China to Europe, the current process of heritagization does not allow for many examples of such heritage corridors or connections, despite the relatively rich material and intangible remnants of multiple connectivities in the last 100 years. Nonetheless, a few beacons of change have appeared recently, indicating new possibilities in the field of Chinese migration heritage in Europe. One example is the ongoing research and art project by Daniele Brigadoi Cologna of the University of Padova and artists Ciaj Rocchi and Matteo Demonte (Pearls from China 2020). Following Caglar (1997), this project focuses on the "person-object" relations—the commerce in fake pearls by traders from eastern Zhejiang in the mid-1920s and its importance for sustaining the earliest Chinese migration to Europe. Their early research reveals the global connections of this trade as well as the local consequences at various locations of the migration process. Furthermore, it highlights the infrastructure necessary for such connectivity (e.g., Trans-Siberian Railroad, Suez Canal) and the unexpected and surprising facts about the complexity of trade at the beginning

of the 20th century. Namely, the migration to Europe starts with the abrupt and tragic halt of the migration of Zhejiangese traders from China to Japan due to the aftermath of the 1923 Kanto earthquake. The migrants' return to China offered them opportunities to travel to Europe with the help of banking agencies sponsoring these journeys. This resulted in several hundred Zhejiangese traders appearing on the streets of Berlin, Milan, Madrid, Paris, and other European cities, joining their pioneering predecessors who had arrived in Europe two decades earlier (Thunø 1999; Beltrán 2003; Bofulin 2016). They engaged in street hawking of fake pearls as well as other, miscellaneous items. While these pearls were often passed off as made in Japan or China, Cologne's research suggests the pearls might have been manufactured in Central Europe, thus adding a layer to the complexities of the intersection between human and object flows between China and Europe (Pearls from China 2020). As one of the aims of Cologne and colleagues' project is to disseminate the findings in the form of graphic novels and animated documentaries to wider audiences, it has the potential to intervene in the heritage field of migration from China to Europe and transcend the existing binary representations of Chinese migrants either as a new (and often curious) element of European societies or as a victimized patriotic subject of the Chinese nation.

The volume and endurance of Zhejiangese migration to Europe and beyond provide us with great potential with regard to researching heritage corridors. One such example from my own work is the existence of the Chinese restaurants in the countries of settlement (Bofulin 2016). Drawing on the long-term and detailed ethnography among Chinese in Slovenia, I have shown how Chinese restaurants have emerged as the key material and symbolic spaces that have enabled and shaped early Zhejiangese migration to Slovenia. Long the default economic activity of newcomers, restaurants are a total social phenomenon, where "sensual and local, symbolic and global meet" and "where exchange of culture and practices of social distinction take place" (Beriss and Sutton 2007, 1). In that sense, Chinese restaurants in Slovenia have functioned as institutions that through work and living practices conditioned the inclusion of Chinese people into Slovenian society, constructed an image of China and provided space for translations of (culinary) tastes, practices and values between China and Slovenia. Through this, Chinese restaurants can be seen as a tool for alternative heritage-making highlighting the histories of "contact zones"<sup>2</sup> (Pratt 2008).

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2 Mary Louise Pratt (2008, 7) emphasizes exchange and encounters at "contact zones". She suggests that contact zones, set up as a powerful postcolonial tool of critique, highlight "complex processes of meaning-making that occurred as a result of the spatial and temporary co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures".



Both examples entail using Chinese sources as well as sources in the countries of settlement and/or collaborating with Chinese researchers, which is one of the prerequisites for transnational methodology (Faist 2012) that can address the methodological nationalism and essentialism of migration and heritage research. In this methodology lies the future of more inclusive representations of migrant and migration heritage as it must confront and negotiate different understandings and interpretations of the past. It may turn out that many of these negotiations and resulting representations of the “connections” will be an unsettling or even a “difficult heritage”, to use Sharon Macdonald’s term (2009), due to the uneven power relations framing movements from China in the 20th century (for a case study of the difficult heritage of Japanese occupation of China’s northeast amid contemporary Sino-Japanese mobilities, see Bofulin (2017)).

This article reflects on the current state of the heritagization of migration from China to Europe highlighting the existing modes of heritagization that either emphasize the “Chinese immigrant heritage” or “Overseas Chinese (i.e., emigrant) heritage” without attempting to go beyond these binaries in the direction of a more inclusive, transnational approach. This approach would need to focus on connections or corridors, that is the transnational spaces within which distinctive practices and representations have evolved on the basis of the constant exchange of ideas, people and objects. The recent shifts in the understanding of heritage towards more pluralistic notions of heritagization provide new opportunities to highlight the multiple connectivities in the migration heritage. The examples presented here signal the beginning of these changes that will eventually facilitate a broader understanding of heritage that does not just belong to one group but is shared, as was the past of the people and objects remembered.

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