

TRANSNATIONAL PATHWAYS TO INTEGRATION: CHINESE TRADERS IN SERBIA²

Transnacionalni putevi integracije: kineski trgovci u Srbiji

ABSTRACT *This article focuses on the process of integration of Chinese immigrants in Serbia. It is based on a pilot study conducted among Chinese traders in Belgrade, and examines the ways in which this highly mobile group of people is becoming incorporated into the Serbian society. The discussion points to a set of opportunities that Serbia as a transition society and a non-immigrant country offers to Chinese traders who have been settling in Belgrade and Serbia since 1996. It explores multiple and various types of emerging social interaction embedded in daily life of both Chinese traders and locals, all of which shape their local integration. It argues that a society such as Serbia provides a space for choice and active management of risks involved in trading migration enabling Chinese traders to create a transnational pathway to incorporation. Although their primary aim is not to 'settle for good', but to remain mobile for the better, Chinese traders have established a wide range of contacts with the local population and have created some important inroads into the Serbian society.*

KEY WORDS *transnational incorporation, Chinese traders in Serbia, non-immigrant societies, settlement opportunities*

APSTRAKT *Rad se bavi procesom integracije kineskih imigranata u Srbiji, na osnovu pilot-studije sprovedene među kineskim trgovcima u Beogradu, kojom je ispitivano kako se ova izuzetno pokretljiva grupa ljudi inkorporira u srpsko društvo. U razmatranju rezultata*

¹ m.korac@uel.ac.uk

² The collection of data for this study was carried out during my sabbatical, from September 2009 to January 2010. The primary aim of this study was to map the situation of Chinese immigrants in Serbia within the socio-economic and political context of the country, and to carry out original (pilot) ethnographic research among 'hosts' and 'newcomers' in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. During fieldwork 20 semi-structured interviews, with Chinese immigrants were conducted. This study also benefits from additional (15) semi-structured interviews with local women childminders, as well as officials, academics and other 'hosts' about the phenomenon of Chinese migration to Serbia. Additional data were collected through (informal) group discussions with Chinese traders during my many observation visits to the Chinese market or our gatherings over supper in a Chinese restaurant, which they frequent after their shops close. Discussion also benefits from data collected on the local media coverage concerning 'the exotic stranger in our midst' in order to shed more light onto the economic, socio-cultural and political processes underpinning Chinese migration to Serbia.

ukazuje se na niz prednosti koje Srbija, kao tranziciono i neimigrantsko društvo nudi kineskim trgovcima, koji se u Beograd i Srbiju doseljavaju počev od 1996. godine. Istražuju se različiti tipovi nastajuće društvene interakcije u svakodnevici i kineskih trgovaca i lokalnog stanovništva, koja utiče na njihovu integraciju na lokalnom nivou. U radu se tvrdi da društvo kao što je srpsko nudi prostor za pravljenje izbora i aktivno upravljanje rizicima koje donosi migracija radi trgovine, što kineskim trgovcima omogućava da uspostave transnacionalni put ka integraciji. Iako njihov glavni cilj nije da se „zauvek nastane“ već da ostanu pokretljivi kako bi tragali za boljim životom, kineski trgovci su uspostavili mnoštvo kontakata s lokalnim stanovništvom i napravili neke značajne proboje u srpsko društvo.

KLJUČNE REČI *transnacionalna inkorporacija, kineski trgovci u Srbiji, neimigrantska društva, prilike za nastanjanje*

The phenomenon of Chinese trading migration to Serbia, which is one of their newest migration destinations in Europe,³ attests to a growing ‘diversification in migration patterns’ (de Haas 2008). It also points to effects of the socio-economic and political contexts and processes specific to China and its response to globalisation and restructuring. To understand the presence of traders from China in Serbia it is important to understand the ways in which global restructuring shapes transnational processes and practices linking new sending and destination areas (Pieke *et al.* 2004; Skeldon 2007; Thunø 2007). Intersections of these intertwined with the agency of the people who decide to move, shed a new light onto the notion of desired or attractive migrant destinations. In the following sections I shall discuss ‘theories’ on how and why Chinese migrants came to Serbia, analyse the advantages of transition society such as Serbia for establishing their livelihoods, and examine their incorporation strategies by focusing on the situation of Chinese traders in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia.

‘Theories’ on how and why Chinese immigrants came to Serbia

Chinese migrants started arriving in Belgrade and Serbia in 1996-97. This period was in many ways the ‘post-war moment’ in the country. Although the armed conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia had ended (1991-95), the country was heading towards a full-scale armed conflict in Kosovo, its then southern province, followed by NATO bombing, in 1999. The years of war, and exceptionally high number of

³ In this article I only focus on Chinese *trading* migration to Serbia, rather than other types of migration from China that has emerged since 2010, after Chinese companies have won bids to build bridges and roads in Belgrade and Serbia. With them has arrived a group of middle class professionals as well as workers from China.

refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), were causing immense economic hardship for the majority of the population, citizens and newcomers alike.⁴

Given the situation in Serbia in the second half of the 90s, it is not surprising perhaps that the arrival and presence of Chinese immigrants in the country was viewed through a conflict lens. Internationally, it was understood as a consequence of conflict. According to academic and other analysts, poor governance, porous borders and the high levels of crime as well as bribery within the police ranks and border authorities were attracting Chinese migrants to Serbia. They were not there to stay; they were people en route to the West, using Serbia as a soft spot to enter Europe, that is – the European Union. In Serbia, the arrival of Chinese immigrants was perceived as a ‘conspiracy attempt’ of the then President of Serbia Milosevic and his regime to remain in power. Much of the population of Serbia at the time, and particularly those in opposition to Milosevic’s rule contended that he made an arrangement with China to allow tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants to come to the country and grant them full citizenship rights.⁵ Many in the opposition argued at the time that this move would secure Milosevic a vote to remain in power, as the Chinese would dutifully vote for him in return for the favour of becoming Serbian citizens. According to the local ‘analysts’ of the time, the interest of the Chinese Government to do this was purely ideological: Milosevic and his government were ‘the last bastions of communism in Europe’ and they were eager to support it.

Each of these ‘theories’ on the reasons for Chinese immigration to Serbia provided a fruitful ground for liberal estimates on the numbers of people either attempting to enter Europe illegally using the Serbian route or those who are granted Serbian citizenship in order to cast their vote for Milosevic. Some are as high as 50,000 (Milutinovic, 2008; Nyíri 2003) or even 100,000 (Nyíri 2007:70).

Chinese traders in Serbia: Where they come from and the work they do

There are not many Chinese traders in Serbia, as this type of migration is context specific and the numbers involved are small. The fact that this pattern of migration has been continuous for nearly two decades indicates that it is there to stay and, thus, merits academic attention. According to the official data, at the end of October 2009, there were 4,947 Chinese nationals living in Serbia, almost all had temporary permits to stay in the country, three had permanent residence permits, and only one had Serbian citizenship.⁶ These official figures match my own estimates as well as those made by well established and connected Chinese immigrants in

⁴ At the time, in relative terms the country was ranked as the third refugee receiving country in the world (Castles *et al.* 2003:6).

⁵ The media coverage at the time, i.e. newspapers, attests to this belief.

⁶ Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs, Department for Foreigners; data valid for October 31, 2009.

Belgrade/Serbia.⁷ According to these estimates, there are up to 6,000 Chinese traders in Serbia.

The majority of Chinese traders in Serbia/Belgrade come from Zhejiang province in Southeast China, which due to its phenomenal growth in the past two decades has also become one of the main sending areas in China, both in terms of internal, rural-urban migration (Yang 2000; Zhang 2000) as well as international and European in particular (Skeldon 2000). They come mostly from two or three villages in Qujing County, are poorly educated peasants or manual workers, and speak the local dialect.⁸ Others come from Beijing and places around Shanghai. These cities and areas are the other two important sending areas in China (Skeldon, 2000). There are also those who originate from the Northeast of China. Those from Beijing, Shanghai and the Northeast are (well) educated and speak Mandarin, come with professional experience and were well-paid (measured by Chinese standards of the 1980s); they also come with connections and social capital back home that they could use to enhance their migration prospects.

The overwhelming majority of Chinese immigrants in Serbia are self-employed small entrepreneurs involved in import, wholesale, and retail. Although all Chinese traders in Serbia are engaged in trading business, very few have become only importers, selling goods from China directly through Serbian commercial chains. This also implies that very few of them have access to the mainstream society, which contributes to their invisibility in the society at large. A minority run restaurants, fast-food outlets, and food shops. There are some who run both restaurants and wholesale-retail businesses. Although Chinese restaurants are more and more popular in Belgrade and Serbia, they are still mainly frequented by the Chinese themselves. Food shops or stalls almost exclusively cater for the Chinese.

While all larger cities and towns in Serbia have Chinese Markets as the focal point for the business of Chinese immigrants, the one in Belgrade is the largest wholesaler facility in the Balkans. The Chinese Market in Belgrade is not open-air

⁷ One of my informants was a very successful businessman who imports shoes from China and sells them to a local commercial chain. His company started publishing the first and only Chinese paper in Serbia in 2007. Because the paper was still not formally registered at the time of my research, it was not sold to Chinese living in Belgrade and Serbia, but distributed free of charge. He estimates the number of Chinese immigrants in Serbia to be between 5,000 and 6,000 (personal communication, December 7, 2009). An estimate of up to 6,000 Chinese immigrants in Serbia was also obtained from a representative of the Overseas Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Serbia (personal communication, November 16, 2009). My estimate of up to 6,000 Chinese immigrants, is based on the data collected on the number of Chinese shops in Belgrade, Subotica and Pancevo, at the three major Chinese markets in Serbia, as well as the estimates on their total number in Serbia. The latter were based on the official number of registered businesses by Chinese nationals in the country, provided by the Companies House of Serbia, October 2009.

⁸ The population of Zhejiang province, Southeast China, bordering Shanghai, speak various sub-dialects of the Shanhainese dialect group (Wuyu) (Christiansen 2003:17).

but a run-down version of a shopping mall. The market in Block 70, as the neighbourhood it is in is called, has some 500 shops, located in two buildings with approximately 1,200 Chinese immigrants renting shops, trading, and working there.⁹ The old building, built in 1997, consists of two wings separated by a courtyard, and has some 350 shops. It was built originally to accommodate a growing number of local self-employed, small entrepreneurs created in response to the economic crisis and restructuring that hit Serbia in the 1990s. However, local small businesses such as hairdressers, beauticians, and computer repair shops were soon to be replaced by Chinese retailers whose businesses were fast growing enabling them to pay the high monthly rent for shops owned by locals. The new building was built in 2005, and has some 150 shops.¹⁰ Almost all shops are rented to Chinese, except for five coffee shops and fast food outlets owned by or rented to locals. Rents range from €800 to €1,600, depending on the size of the shop and its location.¹¹ Additionally, there are also 10 shops in the old and two in the new building rented to locals selling mostly Chinese goods too. Some of the rented spaces have been turned into Chinese restaurants, hairdressers, travel as well as import agencies, casinos and DVD shops, all of which are run by the Chinese and catering to their compatriots.

Most of these businesses are family run. Wage workers, who work for their relatives or compatriots, are relatively few. However, Chinese traders benefit from the opportunity to hire local people at a relatively low cost, which in turn enhances the possibilities to run a more successful trading business. To succeed they require frequent and prolonged visits to China, as well as having to keep their shops open six or seven days a week. As my research reveals, Chinese traders go back to China on average three times a year and stay between two to three weeks. At the time of my research, some 300 to 400 locals were employed in approximately 2/3 of all shops at the Chinese Market in Belgrade. They were paid between 450 to 1200 Serbian dinars per day (i.e. €4.5 to €12) depending on how long they have worked for the shop, whether they were 'trustworthy, reliable and loyal', as they explained differences in their pay. A minority of these employees were working legally, others were not registered. Furthermore, those who run bigger trading companies also hire local professional people to help operate them. Typically, the top managerial

⁹ Data on the number of shops was obtained from the Head of Security, the company that provides security on the site(s). It is important to note here that inaccurate data have been published about the number of shops in this market, contributing to exaggerated estimates on the number of Chinese immigrants in Belgrade and Serbia. Based on a second hand source Nyíri, for example, states that the Chinese market in Belgrade has 1,200 shops (2007: 71).

¹⁰ Both Belgrade residents and researchers often claim that the new building of Chinese Market in New Belgrade was built by the Chinese themselves (e.g. Lazarevic-Bajec and Maruna 2006; Chang 2011). According to the information obtained during my research, however, the building was built by Greek investors and is managed by a Chinese businessman who has lived in Belgrade since the 1980s, when he came to study, but stayed on.

¹¹ These rents were valid for the second half of 2009.

positions would be given to compatriots, either relatives or friends. Also, many local accountants and interpreters, sometimes also lawyers, are hired on a regular basis to provide professional advice and services concerning their residence permits and the administration of their businesses. Finally, many local women, predominantly of retirement age found well paid jobs as carers of the children of Chinese traders. Many of these women *de facto* foster the Chinese children as they are left in their care 24/7. In such cases they are paid just under the average salary in Serbia, plus expenses.

Clearly, the local economy and people benefit from all these types of employment, as well as from considerable revenue from import tax, other administrative costs, and rent for housing and storage of goods. It is worth noting, however, that the emergence of Chinese traders and retailers in Serbia caused also loss of livelihoods for many locals. Some local industries, textile in particular, have been hard hit as they could not compete in price with Chinese goods, causing resentment among trade unions and segments of the local population. Further, during the most turbulent period of the late 80s and early 90s, when due to the growing economic crisis many people lost their jobs or could not find employment, many earned their keep as shuttle traders, selling commonplace inexpensive goods imported (semi)clandestinely from Turkey or Hungary. In the latter case, the goods were Chinese products bought at the Chinese market in Budapest or Szeged. At the time, this type of economic activity was encouraged by the state apparatus, because during that period the state was heavily engaged in preparing and waging war. Consequently, turning a blind eye onto the widespread trading in undeclared goods was a way of easing off social tension and avoiding potential unrest caused by a drastic fall in the standard of living. With the emergence of Chinese traders in Belgrade and Serbia, they could no longer compete.

Chinese traders arriving in Serbia in the second half of the 90s did not have any previous longstanding diasporic links to Serbia. Their intention to set up their retail businesses here, thus, had to be facilitated through a different set of resources and networks. Since the late 1980s, thousands of Chinese migrants settled in Hungary and became (successful) self-employed traders in Budapest and beyond (Nyiri 1999). Chinese traders in Budapest were at the time a wholesale hub for the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe and the SEE (*ibid.*). That was a good vantage point to assess the regional markets and economic opportunities as well as socio-political factors shaping conditions of entry. When the Hungarian Government tightened entry visa requirements for the Chinese in 1993, after five years of a relatively liberal entry regime, and increased import tariffs in 1995 (Nyiri 1999) many turned to neighbouring countries seeking new opportunities, taking with them other compatriots. Some also came from Bulgaria where they first received information about the possibilities of establishing small retail and trading businesses in Serbia. They mostly started off as shuttle traders, but by the end of the 1990s and

early 2000, Chinese shops, as they are locally known, had become dotted around Serbia. Their main trading business is situated, however, within the so-called Chinese markets.

Attractiveness of Serbia for Chinese traders: The local context and beyond

What could have been attracting Chinese traders to come to a country that has been experiencing socio-economic and political turmoil for over two decades and is itself a sending region? The introduction of a more relaxed entry visa system for Chinese trading entrepreneurs in 1996, put Serbia on the map of potential migratory destinations worth considering for an initial, trial period before making any decisions to set up a trading business there. Some of my respondents, for example, had considered migrating to Africa in their search for better economic and life opportunities, before they learnt about a possibility of setting up a trading and retail business legally in Serbia. Many came to Belgrade and Serbia initially ‘as tourists’, as they put it, to assess the situation and conditions in the country.

The rationale behind this more open door policy was the Serbian (Milosevic) Government’s hope for Chinese investment and trading. Some of the first Chinese traders who came to Serbia in 1996 and 97 came in fact as representatives of Chinese state companies or were supported by the Chinese Department of Trade to explore and negotiate business opportunities with the local state companies in the country. Their visas, permits to stay in the country (for three months) and accommodation, as my research documents, were all taken care of by a local, (Serbian) state owned company. As any larger scale Serbian government sponsored business opportunities failed to materialise some of them extended their stay. As the majority of them invested their own money to bring with them a container of goods to be sold through the local companies, those who stayed on wanted to return the original investment.

Two of my respondents were among the pioneers.¹² One stayed on, married a local woman within a year of his arrival; at the time of my research he and his wife had two so-called Chinese shops selling Chinese goods – one at the Chinese Market

¹² Although the pioneers of the Chinese trading migration to Serbia, they were not the first Chinese citizens to come and stay in the country. Their predecessors were students who came to study in Yugoslavia in the 1980s, benefiting from good interstate relations at the time. Chinese students were never a majority within the foreign student population of Yugoslavia, but their presence was visible and for the most part well regarded. Some of these students stayed on and have become an important focal point for local information and support for the mid 1990s wave of Chinese traders. One of my respondents was one of the former Chinese students in Belgrade who had stayed on. At the time of my research he managed one of the buildings of the Chinese Market in Belgrade and was a successful transnational businessman with companies in China and Australia.

and one in Zemun, one of Belgrade's oldest municipalities. The other, who originally planned to return to China within a couple of months off arrival in order to be back in time for her son's first day at school, has become one of the most successful Chinese businesswomen in Serbia importing stationary from China and selling directly to the local commercial chain. By the time of my research her firm was employing 15 local residents and two Chinese nationals. Her son has, meanwhile, successfully completed his education in China and was about to start his university education in London, UK. Her husband has continued to work for the family export business in China.

In addition to the interest in Chinese investment and trade the Government was, at the time, also keen on collecting steady revenue from visa applications, business registration and so forth. According to my research, this revenue was totalling up to 10,000DEM per application, in the late 90s.¹³ Given the depth of the crisis in the country at the time, any amount of cash, especially in 'hard' currency was considered precious. The relaxation of the entry visa regime for Chinese traders wishing to come to Serbia in effect acknowledged and supported an already ongoing process of new Chinese migration, which was prompted by the economic recession and restructuring that hit China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This migration was importantly shaped by the Chinese state and government response to the economic crisis (Thunø 2007: 13-14; Skeldon, 2007:9).

Commercial opportunities in trading globally for the Chinese population have been prompted by the intersection of the rapid growth of local manufacturing of commonplace goods and China's adaptation to global markets. Although Chinese entrepreneurs have established themselves successfully in the developed countries, such as Italy (see Ceccagno 2007), developing countries and transition societies have become particularly attractive new destinations for Chinese traders. As 'economies of scarcity' (Nyiri 2007:139) they provide opportunities to import and trade in inexpensive Chinese goods, ranging from clothing and footwear to toys and small household appliances. These new destination countries have become particularly attractive to Chinese traders also because they have weak links to the global economy, and do not have severe restriction to immigration. Consequently, many African countries, such as Morocco, Ghana, Angola, Cameroon, Namibia and Cape Verde, have become new, attractive destinations for Chinese migrants who operate in trade and/or services as transnational, petty entrepreneurs (Haugen and Carling 2005; Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009: 595). Similarly, countries of Central and South Eastern Europe (SEE), such as Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania, and Serbia, have also become profitable business options (Chang *et al.* 2011; Krasteva 2005; Nyiri 2007, 2003, 1999).

¹³ Data comes from a retired official from the then Office for Foreigners, The Ministry of Interior; personal communication, October 29, 2009.

In choosing destinations for their businesses they increasingly opt for underdeveloped countries and transition societies, because they provide better opportunities for an entrepreneurial life embedded in self-reliance and self-management. Societies such as Serbia provide a space for choice and active management of risks involved in this type of trading migration. In contrast to the situation of immigrants in many societies of immigration, which tend to prescribe how the newcomers should 'fit in' by developing (exclusionary) policies of immigration and integration, a non-immigrant country such as Serbia opens up a space for Chinese traders to become protagonists, more actively involved in establishing their livelihoods and ways of incorporation.

Migrants, understood as social agents, are central to this process. They engage in transnational activities and practices linking their countries of origin and destination in some fundamental ways. They are simultaneously involved in a range of legal and regulatory systems of sending and receiving states, they are also engaged in many non-institutional transnational as well as local links and practices. In doing so, they actively manage risks involved in this type of migration and are able to control better their livelihoods as well as the quality of their existence.

A group of Chinese traders from a village in Quingtian County, Zhejiang province, for example, related in interviews that experiences of their friends who migrated to Italy, played a role in their decision to come to Serbia. Although they work hard, continuously confronting the risk of failed investment and on average do not make a substantial profit, they pointed out that by running their own business in Serbia they feel they have more freedom and choice in developing their personal, family and household strategies. Thus, for these migrants betterment of individual and family life is decoupled from a direct connection to the improvement of economic conditions of life. Rather, it is linked to opportunities for self-reliance and self-management. Their friends in Italy, they asserted, are confined to long hours of low paid wage work. They also have fewer opportunities to start their own businesses and gain more freedom in developing their life and migration strategies, because of a much tougher market regulations as well as higher business registration costs.

The same theme of choice, self-reliance and self-management associated with an entrepreneurial life opportunity in a society such as Serbia can be traced in experiences of Chinese men who lived and worked in highly regulated and competitive Western economies, but then have decided to migrate to Belgrade. Some of them came from global cities such as Toronto or London, and countries such as Austria, Belgium and Germany. One of my respondents, for example, was a Chinese-Canadian, who moved to Belgrade in 1998, after living in Canada for six years and after obtaining citizenship there. He was employed in a small trading company in Toronto, but was not satisfied with his working environment and experience there. He initially came to Belgrade on a three month tourist visa,

travelled the region extensively, and concluded that he would have good business opportunities in Belgrade. Harry, as he called himself, was also dissatisfied with his private life in Canada. He was in his late 30s and unmarried before moving to Belgrade, and did not think that his lifestyle and the situation in Canada were conducive to finding a partner and establishing a family there. At the time of my research, he was married to a local woman, with two children, aged six and three, the older one, a son, was living in Beijing with relatives and was going to school there.¹⁴ Since his arrival, Harry has also helped his extended family from China to come to Serbia and establish their trading businesses in Belgrade. Harry's experience as an employee in Toronto and his agency in searching for options that would provide him with better opportunities to achieve his business and other personal and family goals prompted him to undertake a secondary migration and move to a transition society, such as Serbia.

Clearly, from the vantage point of Chinese traders there are many advantages for them in a society such as Serbia. They should not be treated as 'unexpected', as some studies claim, referring to the instances of secondary migration of Chinese migrants to 'the East', despite their right to reside in the so-called 'Western destination countries' (IOM 1998: 337). Rather than being labelled as 'unexpected', this type of mobility should be viewed as a result of migrants' agency, of their weighing and considering their options, juxtaposing their aims and goals with their migratory experiences and life trajectories. This is not to imply that these processes are always entirely rational. Indeed, they very often rely on partial information and encounter unexpected twists and turns in the process of assessing the 'pros' and 'cons' of making a decision where to go; the process which can and often does involve an element of surprise. When focusing on agency of the people in migratory processes, as I argued elsewhere (Korac 2009), it is important to explain specific migratory processes unfolding at a particular point in time and linking particular locations.

Chinese Markets as the focal point of business and social life of Chinese immigrants in Belgrade and Serbia

The Chinese Market in Belgrade, with a high spatial concentration of Chinese enterprises is the focal point of their business.¹⁵ It is also the main hub of their social

¹⁴ Harry's family, although he married a local woman, follows the transnational family strategy of most of the Chinese in Belgrade/Serbia: when their children born in Belgrade are five years old they are sent to China to live with relatives, learn the language and go to school there.

¹⁵ At the time of my research very few Chinese outlets operated in other parts of the city. However, with the economic crisis deepening as the consequence of the recession, since 2010 Chinese shops are opening up in different fashionable parts of Belgrade, replacing closed down local shops and department stores.

life. Most of the Chinese traders in Belgrade lead frugal lives despite the fact that a majority earn more than many locals. They invest a great deal of time (and money) in running their shops and businesses. They live in close proximity to the market and are hardly ever to be seen in other parts of the city.¹⁶ Their lives revolve around their businesses and their day-to-day activities around the market, contributing to their invisibility in the city at large.

Day-to-day life at the market is very much domesticated. Families and friends gather for a meal or a lively chat. While some prepare food inside their shops,¹⁷ a vast majority of Chinese traders and retailers buy food prepared at one of the Chinese restaurants on the site, but have their meals in or most often outside their shops. If they hire locals to help them in shops, they would be typically sent to order and bring food.¹⁸ Although very many of the Chinese families hire local women to care for their children, as mentioned earlier, those who do not, bring their small children to the market and to their shops. Babies can often be seen sleeping in their prams; toddlers are often playing inside or outside the shops on their own or with one of the family; older children can be seen in groups of three or four playing outside the buildings or running around the shopping area. On quieter days, when there is not much trade ‘Serbian grannies’, as the local childminders are called with fondness, bring the children to see their parents. Even on the busiest days it is possible to see people talking to their family or friends on Skype, smiling into the camera or instructing a toddler to wave ‘goodbye’ to someone in China. Some appear to be glued to their computer screens watching one of the latest DVDs from China; men would break their busy day to watch one of China’s state TV channels broadcast on two big television screens in the main hall of the new building. Although the life at the market is domesticated, as pointed out earlier, some spaces at the market are considered more ‘public’ than others. One such space is the main hall of the new building in which on no occasion during my research did I see

¹⁶ Originally, most of the Chinese traders rented flats in the immediate vicinity of the Chinese Market. In past few years, however, new arrivals as well as some of those originally settled in the immediate neighbourhood of the market have started renting flats or houses in a part of the city called Bežanijska kosa and Ledine, on the outskirts of Belgrade, 15 minutes drive from the Market. They find this living/renting arrangement more satisfactory as the rents are lower, larger families can live in close proximity or in the same house, warehouses are available for rent in the neighbourhood making it easier for them to coordinate and oversee this important segment of their business, before or after regular working hours at the market. Since the Chinese immigrants have moved in, two Chinese restaurants have opened catering primarily for their compatriots. Many go there after work, either for a meal with their families and friends or for a drink, chat and karaoke in a bar located at the ground floor of the restaurants.

¹⁷ During my research, the company responsible for security on the site was struggling to implement measures to curb this practice for health and safety reasons.

¹⁸ Very limited seating areas of these restaurants are frequented primarily by locals; some of them like to eat there after shopping, others come only for food, as it is ‘a real Chinese food’ rather than ‘a European version’ of it.

women gather there to watch television. This space, constructed as 'outside', seemed to be mostly frequented by men, thus, pointing to the prevalence of a traditional notion of public/private divide. This indicates that the expansion of 'inside' space into the public/'outside' space has its clear limits. It also shows that public-private divide remains to be clearly and importantly gendered.

This transformation of Chinese Markets into domesticated spaces is linked to the nature of these businesses, and the centrality of shops to the financial survival of the household and family. Zhang's (2000) study on Wenzhou migrant entrepreneurs specialising in garment sales in Beijing shows how the process of profit-making through production and trade of commodities embedded in the family and household realm is bringing about the process of social transformation of a public space, typically conceived as 'outside', into an 'inside' space (*ibid.*: 187). The public space of markets, their stalls and shops are transformed into an extended part of the domestic realm because they are bounded and stable (*ibid.*). Although for the Chinese retailers in Belgrade this sense of stability is not related to the private ownership of the shops, they do present the focal point of their localised, day-to-day lives in Belgrade, as well as of their translocal/transnational practices. The intersection of these processes transforms them into places that are at the heart of their translocal and transnational businesses, households, and family lives.

Transnational opportunity, mobility and local incorporation in Serbia

While contact between the Serbian state and Chinese traders is sporadic but regular,¹⁹ it is also individualised and of a practical nature. It lacks a more structured liaison between the authorities and representatives of Chinese associations, or what is often termed the Chinese 'community'. There have been a few (unsuccessful) attempts to organise so-called native-place associations of Chinese traders in Belgrade, only one of which had been registered, but was no longer active at the time of this research. This was due, as one of their founders stated, to the transnational character of the lives and businesses of the Chinese traders and the consequent lack of time for such activities (personal communication October 21, 2009). A Pan-Chinese association, called Overseas Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Serbia, was founded in 2002, and at the time of my research it had between 200 to 300 fee-paying members, according to its representative. Their main aim is to help Chinese traders settle and start their businesses. They provide help concerning legal issues as well as administrative rules and regulations in Serbia. If individual members have difficulties in any of these areas, the association occasionally seeks help from the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, which then intervenes with Serbian officials (personal communication, November 16, 2009).

¹⁹ Because of the temporary nature of their permits to work and stay in the country.

My study indicates that there may also be another reason for the absence of community organisations in Belgrade and Serbia. My research reveals difficulties in communication as well as tension between those who come from villages in Quingtian County in Zhejiang province and those from other parts of China. Studies show that this type of divisions reflecting China's inner divisions and differences along educational and geographic lines, exist in other settlement settings (Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009:591), contributing to flexible identities and a sense of community among the Chinese. Only those better educated speak Mandarin, thus, many Chinese immigrants in Belgrade and Serbia confront the language barrier in communicating with their own compatriots, not only in contacts with the local population.²⁰ With respect to the geographic divisions, the resentment is primarily about rural-urban differences, sometimes referred to within the context of 'underdeveloped and backward Southeast, as opposed to the developed and modern Northeast', which was a reoccurring theme in conversations with my better educated respondents from urban areas. Those better educated, from cities and bigger towns look down upon 'the Quingtian peasants' who are 'backward, rude, have no manners' and are creating 'a wrong' and 'embarrassing' picture about China and Chinese.

Despite these differences and inner tensions that my research reveals, Chinese immigrants arriving in Belgrade and Serbia since the second half of the 90s relied heavily upon their own, informal networks to obtain information and support necessary to facilitate their arrival, initial settlement, as well as the establishment and development of their businesses. These networks are primarily linked to their closely knit family and friendship ties that, as studies demonstrate, have become central to individual economic betterment as well as to the local, regional, and national development in China. Scholars argue that the economic success of Chinese reforms and industrialisation of rural areas is centrally linked to the embeddedness of the local economy in social structure of family, kinship and personal networks (Christerson and Lever-Tracy 1997). Translocal family and household life is an important feature of life in China and has also become an important resource and mechanism of support for those who decide to go abroad. Transnational family lives, households and businesses are a *sine qua non* in this process.

As people whose business strategies and family lives are 'settled in mobility' (Morokvasic 2004) and embedded in transnational and translocal connections, temporariness and flexibility are central to their mode of operation. While they are setting-up and developing (small) trading businesses in Serbia, through their transnational connections and activities in China, they are also continuously

²⁰ The ability to speak Mandarin, associated with formal education levels, is also a barrier to internal migration (Yang 2000: 207).

monitoring and exploring trading opportunities in other transitory places and less developed economies, lacking access to global markets.

Despite the high mobility of Chinese traders and their transnational business and living arrangements their contacts with locals are regular, multiple and varied in nature. Although most of these interactions with locals unfold at the Chinese Market and are business and work related, Chinese traders have established numerous day-to-day contacts with locals that are shaping their social integration. Their connections with local women childminders and their families, for example, although based on receiving and paying for a service, go beyond a businesslike relationship between locals and newcomers. It incorporates elements of high levels of trust as well as inter-cultural encounters of a very special kind. Moreover, my research documents that there are Chinese traders in Belgrade, both men and women, who have married locals and are engaged in creating qualitatively different type of links with locals, the local culture and society. Through all these types of connections, relationships and communication, Chinese traders are being incorporated into the local settings and the society in some important ways.

Concluding remarks

The discussion in this article aimed at pointing to the intersection between the local and global contexts shaping the situation of Chinese traders, who as social agents create opportunities for themselves and their families in a transition society such as Serbia. Through their transnational livelihood strategies and translocal practices embedded in webs of global, regional, national and local connections Chinese traders are shifting the meaning of 'opportunity' as well as of the 'attractiveness' of migratory destinations. They perceive Serbia as providing them with opportunities to become settled in mobility and to be actively involved in various types of social interaction with local population embedded in their daily lives and enabling their incorporation.

Although Chinese immigrants for the most part keep themselves to themselves it would be hard to argue that they represent a segregated ethnic community focusing on the process of maintaining visible difference and fostering separation from the receiving society. They are not focused on integrating into the mainstream society either. Their strategies of incorporation are guided first and foremost by the transnational character of their trading and retail business and the economic betterment of their translocal livelihood strategies.

By developing transnational links and translocal livelihood strategies, Chinese traders are transforming disadvantages of both sending and destination areas into opportunities. This helps to explain how societies that are considered unattractive as migratory destinations, and are in fact themselves sending areas, may become

desirable options. These transnational processes and strategies of individual traders, their families and households are linking sending and receiving countries across a range of socio-spatial levels and structures: macro, mezzo and micro. This type of multi-level mediation of migration opens up possibilities for Chinese traders to act and live their lives in translocal fields of economic, social and ethnic relations, rather than within the boundaries of sending or receiving (nation) states.

References

- Castles, S., H. Crawley and S. Loughna. 2003. *States of Conflict: Causes and Patterns of Forced Migration to the EU and Policy Responses*. London: IPPR.
- Ceccagano, A. (2007) 'The Chinese in Italy at the Crossroads: The Economic Crisis' in Thunø, M. (Ed.) *Beyond Chinatown: New Chinese Migration and the Global Expansion of China*. Copenhagen: NIAS;
- Chang, F (2011) 'The Chinese under Serbian Laws', in Chang, F. and S.T. Rucker-Chang (Eds.) *Chinese Migrants in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe*. London, New York: Routledge
- Chang, F. and S. T. Rucker-Chang (Eds.) (2011) *Chinese Migrants in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe*. London, New York: Routledge
- Christiansen, F. (2003) *Chinatown, Europe: An exploration of overseas Chinese identity in the 1990s*. London, New York: Routledge
- Christerson, B. and C. Lever-Tracy (1997) 'Emerging industrial districts in rural China', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 21(4): 569-588
- De Haas H. 2008. *Migration and Development: A theoretical perspective*. IMI, University of Oxford, Working papers No. 9.
- Haugen H.O. and J. Carling (2005) 'On the edge of the Chinese diaspora: The surge of baihuo business in an African city' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (4):639-662.
- IOM (1998) "Chinese in Central and Eastern Europe: The Cases of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania", in G. Benton and F. N. Pieke (Eds.), *The Chinese in Europe*, Macmillan, London.
- Korać, M. (2009) *Remaking Home: Reconstructing Life, Place and Identity in Rome and Amsterdam*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books.
- Krasteva, Anna (2005) *Имиграцията в България*. Sofia: International Centre for Research on Minorities and Cultural Relations
- Lazarević-Bajec, N. and M. Maruna (2006) 'From Project to Plan: Mixing of life styles, the role of Chinese community in New Belgrade – Lessons for urban planning', paper presented at the Fudan University International Urban Forum (FUIUF) 1st Biennale Conference Urbanization China: culture, identity and spatial transformation; Fudan University, Shanghai, November 3-5

- Milutinović, S. (2008). Chinese Transnational Entrepreneurs in Budapest and Belgrade: Seeking Markets, Carrying Globalization" in *Transnational Ties: Cities, Migration, and Identities*, Smith, Michael Peter and John Eade (Eds.), Transaction Publishers
- Mohan and Tan-Mullins (2009) 'Chinese Migrants in Africa as New Agents of Development? An Analytical Framework' *European Journal of Development Research* (2009) 21: 588-605
- Morokvasic, M. (2004). "'Settled in Mobility': Engendering Post-Wall Migration in Europe." *Feminist Review* (77): 7-25
- Nyiri, P. (2007) *Chinese in Eastern Europe and Russia: A middleman minority in a transnational era*. London and New York: Routledge
- (2003) 'Chinese Migration to Eastern Europe', *International Migration*, 41(3): 239-265.
- (1999) *New Chinese Migrants in Europe: The case of the Chinese community in Hungary*. Aldershot: Ashgate
- Pieke, F. N., P. Nyíri, M. Thunø, and A. Ceccagno (2004) *Transnational Chinese: Fuijanese Migrants in Europe*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Skeldon, R. (2007) 'The Chinese Overseas: The End of Exeptionalism', in Thunø, M. (ed.) *Beyond Chinatown: New Chinese Migration and the Global Expansion of China*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press
- (2000) *Myths and Realities of Chinese Irregular Migration*, IOM Migration Research Series. Geneva: IOM
- Thunø, M. (Ed.) (2007) *Beyond Chinatown: New Chinese Migration and the Global Expansion of China*. Copenhagen: NIAS;
- Yang, X. (2000) 'Interconnections among Gender, Work, and Migration: Evidence from Zhejiang Province' in Entwisle, B., and G. E. Henderson (Eds.) *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China*. Berkeley, L.A., London: University of California Press.
- Zhang, L. (2000) 'The Interplay of Gender, Space, and Work in China's Floating Population' in Entwisle, B., and G. E. Henderson (Eds.) *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China*. Berkeley, L.A., London: University of California Press.