

FLOATING “HOME”: THE CHINESE DIASPORA AND THE DYNAMICS OF TRAVEL

Author:

Liu Meng¹
University of Debrecen (Hungary)
(China)

Reviewers:

Gábor Biczó (Ph.D)
University of Debrecen

Norbert Tóth (Ph.D)
University of Debrecen

...and two other anonymous reviewers

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Abstract

The phenomena of migration and diaspora are becoming more common in the context of globalization, and the idea of “home” has taken on several dimensions and complexity for dispersed populations. In order to investigate how the concept of “home” is recreated in the diaspora, this study focuses on Chinese immigrants. The study examines how culture and geography interact to define “home,” drawing on the idea of “diaspora,” and how travel affects “homemaking” in Chinese Migratory Movements. Additionally, the study discusses maintaining cultural continuity in globalization and reshaping individual and collective identities in the practices of “travelling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-travelling” (Clifford 1992,108).

Keywords: Diaspora; Chinese Immigration; Home; Cultural Identity; Travel Theory

Diszcipline: Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography

Absztrakt

LEBEGŐ "OTTHON": A KÍNAI DIASZPÓRA ÉS AZ UTAZÁS DINAMIKÁJA

A migráció és a diaszpóra jelenségei egyre gyakoribbá válnak a globalizáció kontextusában, és az "otthon" fogalma is több dimenziót és összetettséget hordoz magában a szétszóródott népesség esetében. A tanulmány a kínai bevándorlóakra összpontosít, annak megismerése érdekében, hogy az "otthon" fogalma miként jön létre a diaszpórában. A tanulmány azt vizsgálja, hogy a kultúra és a földrajz hogyan hatnak egymásra az "otthon" meghatározásában, a "diaszpóra" eszméjére támaszkodva, valamint vizsgálja azt is, hogy az utazás hogyan befolyásolja az "otthonteremtést" a kínai migrációs mozgalmakban. A tanulmány emellett tárgyalja a kulturális folytonosság fenntartását a globalizációban, valamint az egyéni és

¹ Liu Meng. Department of Ethnography, Faculty of Arts, University of Debrecen, Program of Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology, PhD School of History and Ethnography (Hungary) (China). E-mail address: liu.meng@arts.unideb.hu, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4058-076X>

kollektív identitások átformálását az "utazás a lakásban, lakás az utazásban" (Clifford 1992,108) gyakorlatában.

Kulcsszavak: diaszpóra; kínai bevándorlás; otthon; kulturális identitás; utazásemélet.

Diszciplína: kulturális antropológia, néprajz

Introduction

In addition to increasing population mobility physically, the deepening of global migrations has had a noteworthy effect on how diasporic cultures understand and experience "home." This study looks at how Chinese immigrants, who make up one of the biggest diasporic flows in the modern world, dynamically reconstruct "home." Through examining the relationship between travel, diaspora, and the idea of "home," this study advances our knowledge of the challenges encountered by transnational communities. It also provides a critical analysis of how travel functions in the continual process of creating a home, arguing that "home" is a fluid concept created by constant movement and cross-cultural interactions rather than a static location in the diaspora.

Home in Diaspora

The term "Diaspora" emerged as a result of Jewish immigration and the spread of religious culture. As scholar Martin Baumann points out that in its original context, "the 'diaspora' turned out to be an integral part of a pattern consisting of a fourfold process of sin or disobedience, dispersion and exile as punishment, repentance, and finally return and gathering" (Baumann, 2000, 316). The concept of the Diaspora, which clearly transgressed the boundaries of the Jewish community, began in the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the African American civil rights movement. The anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements on the African continent gave rise to the new term "African Diaspora" (African Diaspora) with a distinctly political meaning, which

demonstrated the political sensibilities of the leaders and scholars of the African civil rights movement of the time (Melvin, 2004, 430). The academic flow that began with the diaspora as a specific life form did not stop there. In the 1970s and 1980s, with the unprecedented expansion of the number of people, scale and distance of global cross-border mobility, cross-border survival gradually became the norm. The word diaspora, which is full of rich connotations such as migration, hometown, memory, imagination, etc., has been more and more commonly transplanted to various migrant groups under the pen of scholars. As Gabi Shefer (1986, 3). explicitly puts it a minority group known as the "modern diaspora" is made up of immigrants and their offspring who work and live in the nation from which they left but have close material and emotional ties to their home country. This one highlights the gradual characterization of modern diaspora groups as communities with transgressive characteristics. It is thus clear that the terms that were once primarily used to describe the Jewish, Greek and Armenian diasporas have taken on broader connotations, encompassing such diverse terms as "immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (Khachig, 1991, 4-5).

According to Clifford (1994, 305), the primary traits of the diaspora are "history of dispersal, myths/ memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship".

Furthermore, William Safran discusses the traditional elements of diasporas, emphasizing themes of dispersion, exile, and the idealization of the homeland. Taking “homeland” and “return” as an important basis, Safran (1991) proposes six characteristics of contemporary diaspora groups:

- 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions;
- 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements;
- 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;
- 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate;
- 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
- 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran, 1991, 83-84).

According to Safran, the memory of home and the myth of return are essential features of contemporary diaspora, and for the diaspora in a foreign land, the bond of “home” can have a cohesive effect on the diaspora. The collective consciousness and solidarity of ethnic minority diaspora groups can provide a defense mechanism against unfair treatment by the country of removal. The “return” is largely mythological in nature and can be seen as an eschatological concept (similar to the second coming of Christ) in which the majority

of the diaspora do not actually or intentionally return to their homelands, and which is presented as a utopia – or heterotopia – to make life in a foreign country more bearable (Safran 1991, 84-85).

Gabriel Sheffer (2003, 55) similarly emphasizes the importance of the homeland for diaspora groups, pointing out that although diaspora communities, represented by Jews, Greeks, and Armenians, have different reasons for leaving their homelands to survive in a foreign country, these communities share a common characteristic: they have always maintained a connection with their homeland and have a desire to return to it.

Thus, the essence of diaspora is centered on “home.” However, the desire to return home should not be confused with the desire for a homeland, and this is where the distinction between ‘mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination’ and ‘the lived experience of a locality’ is made (Brah 1996, 192). Brah argues that at the heart of the concept of diaspora is the image of a remembered home at a distance in both time and space. This “place of origin” may be the subject of a continuing “ideology of return” (ibid., 180). Additionally, despite their occasional attachments to certain locations or social groups, migrants may feel unable to see these locations as home due to practical issues like housing, language barriers, etc., ‘yet the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home’ (ibid., 193).

However, the concept of diaspora has in fact been expanded to include situations not related to forced dispersion or a desire to return.

The Hungarian diaspora, for example, is not characterized by a search for roots in the Chinese community in Hungary or a desire to return permanently to the motherland. They put down roots in the Chinese community to do business to sustain their livelihoods, and they maintain their relationship with their homeland through regular visits to it.

As Vijay Agnew and Rishma Dunlop (2005, 4.) argue, diaspora is defined by its ability to rebuild culture in different locations. And diaspora can denote a transnational sense of self and community and create an understanding of ethnic and racial bonds that transcends nation-state boundaries and borders. People who live in the diaspora have constant tensions between their physical and metaphorical homes, between living “here” and remembering “there,” and between their memory of their birthplace and their connection to it.

This tension forms the genesis of hybrid identities. Clifford’s intervention suggests that rather than being rooted in a singular origin, diasporic identities are produced through multiple attachments, often characterized by a sense of hybridity and cultural mixture (Clifford 1994, 302-338). Hybrid identities are a response to the realities of living between, or among, multiple cultural traditions, negotiating belonging, and navigating the often-fluid boundaries of cultural norms and expectations. As Bhabha argues being excluded and undergoing perpetual change are the sources of hybridity. He argues that “the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference from the minority perspective is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformations” (cited in Jussawalla 1997, 29.).

Negotiated negotiation in the group makes the self a flexible region, where the self is linked by memories of the past and anticipated memories of the future of the ever-changing present (Hall, 2015, 226.). This process exacerbates the blurring of group boundaries comprising the self. Ethnic and racial groups are gradually assimilated and minority identities will eventually disappear (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, 44.). Thus, we should acknowledge that the concept of diaspora is shifting

towards discussions about “home” rather than remaining a static, definitive paradigm. In addressing this topic, we discover that travel emerges as an undeniable factor. We should recognize that the notion of diaspora is evolving rather than solidifying into a definitive paradigm. Clifford (1994, 306.) notes that the Jewish (as well as the Greek and Armenian) diasporas can be viewed as non-normative starting points for discourses on travel or hybridization in new global contexts.

Building on this, the concept is further extended and expanded. We should also concur with Safran’s six features defining diaspora but acknowledge that the significance of “travel” in this concept has been overlooked. In this article, we propose to underscore the importance of travel and discuss it within the broader context of diaspora characteristics, while preserving the essence of Safran’s definition of diaspora.

Chinese Dwelling-in-Travel

The literature on diaspora and home has increasingly focused on the transient and fluid experiences of migrants as they navigate identities across borders. The traditional understanding of “home” is based on a static description, often associated with static, boundary, identity, and immutability. Heidegger argues that dwelling is an essential feature of existence, and that space is given meaning by the act of dwelling, and that people acquire a sense of real existence (Heidegger, 1971, 161.).

Bachelard (2009, 2.) describes how the home becomes the original space in which people’s earliest experiences take place and how this shapes their perceptions of the external world. More than that, the home is not just a physical or a geographical place, but often an emotional space, an amalgamation of multiple emotions associated with a special place (Easthope, 2004, 128-138.). Thus, people’s emotional attachment to special places is often a

key factor in the formation of “home” (Tuan, 1974, 4)(Note: All Chinese translations by Liu Meng, 2024).

And the experience of place is repeated through daily habitation and habituation (Massey 1992, 65-84). The home thus becomes the most important spatial scale to which a place is attached (Papastergiadis, 1998, 2.). However, when the definition of home is discussed in the context of migration, the mobility of family members has broken the fixed spatio-temporality of home (Minh-ha, 1994, 14.).

Home is no longer a fixed location, and along with traveling, home can be home-making by moving.

In the interaction between “home,” “travel,” and “dwelling,” modern mobility has drastically altered migrants’ “sedentary lifestyles” (Bauman, 2000, 13.).

For the Chinese diaspora, travel is more than just the physical movement from one location to another; it may also be a way to improve the financial conditions of families. Chinese migrants do not stay in one home forever, and their notion of “dwelling” in the field of travel encompasses a wide range of experiences. The economic situation of Chinese immigrants has always been a major factor driving the mobility of Chinese people. Throughout Chinese history, people have left their homes to survive and develop, and this has always been shaped by mobility. “Migration” or “mobility” has been the basic survival strategy of the Chinese people (Li, 2009, 75.). Therefore, Chinese migrants move “in search of better living conditions for themselves and for their loved ones or escaping dramatic situations in their homeland” (Lee, 1966, 47-57.). Thus, the traditional link between home and the fixed space of the house is slowly disintegrating (Wardhaugh, 1999, 92.). The meaning of travel for Chinese migrants is actually, what James Clifford calls, “dwelling-in-travel” (Clifford, 1992, 108.). However, even when Chinese people establish their homes while traveling, they

still show attachments and material ties to their original hometowns. The migrants often carry with them the desire to revitalize their families and even clans, and their “roots” remain firmly planted in the land where they were born. What the Chinese call a family may live in different places thousands of miles away from each other, but through economic reciprocity, they still regard each other as a family. Thus, Chinese migration is not a separation from their birthplace and innate blood group, but rather a geographic expansion of existing ties (Li, 2009, 75.). When these migrants earn money, they send it back home to build houses and land for their families, to support the elderly and relatives who are unable to migrate with them, and even to support the construction of their hometowns. In a series of interviews, respondents testified:

Taking advantage of my children’s summer vacation to have two months of free time, I went back to China to help my parents rebuild their house, two months I do not dare to delay at all, the whole day at home to keep an eye on the progress of the construction. I will go back to China this summer to continue to help my parents rebuild their house [. . .] I went abroad to earn money in order to support my family's living (Li, 2022). (Note: The source of the information comes from the author's interviews with Hungarian Chinese immigrants in the context of immigrant interviews being embedded in the global context); „I've been abroad for 20 years and I've been sending money to my family every year, and now I'm 60 years old, so I've kept this habit for 20 years. I work to make my family's life better” (Yang, 2021).

„I think Chinese people are used to supporting their hometowns when they make money in foreign countries. Those who have done well in their hometowns donate money to the construction of their hometowns, repair temples, and help the poor and needy” (Liu, 2022).

It is thus clear that Chinese migrants are not only keeping their “roots” in their hearts but also moving with their “homes” on their backs. This has

also formed the characteristics of Chinese migration culture, which is characterized by both “keeping” and “leaving,” and the coexistence of geographical separation and attachments and economic connection.

In the context of Chinese migration, the concept of “home” is extended, as Chinese migrants are often on the move and their homes “float” with them. This suggests that Chinese migration is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Clifford (1997, 3). concluded that “Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes”.

The home of Chinese immigrants is constantly constructed in the process of mobility, and a certain compromise is reached through their daily lives and taking into account past and present conditions (Ahmed, 1999, 329-347.). This makes “dwelling” dynamic.

The dynamism of “dwelling” is manifested in the form of transnational travel of the Chinese, which keeps the Chinese as travelers stuck between the “place of emigration” and the “place of immigration.” In order to travel smoothly and continuously, Chinese migrants create “channels” between places of emigration and places of immigration. Such channels are not physically real spaces but are woven by underlying kinship networks (Li, 2009, 79.). One section of the channel connects the place of origin, and the other end connects the various places of migration. People in the place of origin are influenced by relatives working in other countries and have higher expectations of “earning money” and want to follow the example of the “successful” people around them to work abroad (Lin, 2002a, 9.). Migrants in the sending country have formed a network of migrants organized in the form of an “acquaintance society.” Through the migrant network, it is easy to borrow large sums of money to go abroad, and the migrant network can continue to assist the migrants to get employment and live in other countries after they

arrive (Myers et al., 1997, 93-134.). As Mr. Chen, who owns a merchandise store in Hungarian Chinatown, said: „*The Hometown Association has been of much help to me in settling here. When I first came here, I had a serious illness that almost killed me. My compatriots from my hometown association made donations to me in our hometown association’s WeChat group. I didn’t really know many people at that time, but everyone in my hometown association transferred money to me and donated to help me get better*” (Chen 2021).

The nostalgic feeling of being away from home makes it easy for migrants to integrate into migrant networks in the sending country. Migrant networks accelerate the exchange of people, money, and culture in the sending country, which makes more Chinese people choose to travel. As the respondents testify, once the migrant network is formed, young people who stay and work in their place of origin can easily be regarded as “unproductive” and discriminated against by other people in the same community. In this environment, some young people are forced to “travel.”

However, Chinese migrants traveling do not stay in one place all the time. Migration has actually become a way of life for migrants from the diaspora, with laborers moving through space in search of higher returns whenever conditions permit (Li, 2009, 80.). For example, in New Zealand’s census ethnic group classification, “Chinese” includes “Cambodian Chinese,” “Malaysian Chinese,” “Vietnamese Chinese,” “Singaporean Chinese” and other subcategories (Kang, 2015, 169-214.). The hyphenated features of these names reflect the continuous migration of Chinese. In addition to the economy as a driving force, environmental factors have also become the reason for the continuous travel of migrants. For example, due to the exclusionary policies for the Chinese of the Indian government in the 1960s, many Indian Chinese migrated to Canada, the United States, and Australia to seek development (Zhang, 2008, 13-17.).

The first batch of Chinese people who went abroad to “seek gold” after earning money, in addition to supporting their hometowns will also focus on the education of their children. Educational migrants have become an important group of Chinese overseas immigrants. Based on the Chinese family values – namely, “everything is for the children” – they change the purpose of emigration after the birth of their children to better education for their children. The desire for higher quality education and better opportunities for their children has prompted Chinese migrants to consider continuing to move to countries that offer a quality education system, and China remains the top source of international students in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, and Malaysia in the 2022/23 academic year (China News Service, 2024). As a result, their travel patterns are not simply transformed from “rootedness” to “returning home”; instead, it shows a transnational pattern between “rootedness” and “returning home” (Liu, 2003, 234.). As Clifford (1992, 101) claims, the traveler is not a “intercultural” or “native” cultural figure. Travelers do not intend to clarify their relationship between themselves and their place of residence (see Gaál-Szabó 2023, 132-133); they are simply stuck between the place from which they moved out and the place to which they moved in order to keep traveling for their own migratory purposes.

In the process of traveling, the migration of people is accompanied by a person’s active choice of the purpose of the migration. Just as Homi K. Bhabha answers how the formation of a home must be accompanied by one’s subjective will,

„People often use very distinct narratives, choices, and judgments to assess whether or not a particular place qualifies as a home, and then create a home in certain places. My hometown is in Mumbai, my work-related home is in the United States, and London used to be the 'in-between' space for a home, but all of that has changed. So I

think change is ongoing. It depends a lot on the decisions you make” (Chang and Shi, 2009, 16.).

It can be seen that despite the fact that the home keeps transforming with different situations, the home can be differentiated into the center and the periphery. However, the individual has always played a major role in this process, which is attributed to the individual’s active choice. The Chinese migrants’ choice of travel destination in this process also determines where the “home-making” takes place. In addition to traveling for economic and educational reasons, a small number of people are traveling for a variety of purposes. The continued growth of Chinese immigration can be attributed to a confluence of factors, including skilled migration, family reunification, and others. Skilled migrants usually emigrate after living in a place for a period of time in search of a country that offers better treatment. For example, two-thirds of Chinese immigrants in Germany are skilled migrants, leading all countries. These people tend to work in technical jobs such as information technology, engineering, mathematics and natural sciences (Peng, 2019, 201.). Often detached from the traditional Chinese network of vernacular migrants, they work on their own in order to realize their careers. Migration for family reunification purposes occurs on the basis of migration networks, where one person in a family goes out to work and picks up his or her own family after stabilizing. Or when one’s family has stabilized, one picks up one’s close relatives to work as a group. So, it often happens that in a Chinatown, the stores next to each other are probably owned by their own relatives. As Mr. Yeh, the owner of a curtain store in Hungary’s Chinatown, said.

„My sister and I have our stores together, so often my daughter and my sister’s daughter go to school together, and my sister and I pick up and drop off the kids from whoever has the time. That’s how we all helped each other get by. When our daughters grow up we agreed to send our children to study in England together” (Ye 2023).

The example of Mr. Ye is just a microcosm of the lives of millions of Chinese living in expatriate communities. When they arrive in a place, they don't stay there forever; they change their place of dwelling depending on the purpose of their migration. The continuity of the corridors between places of emigration and places of immigration ensures that the Chinese are not confined to one place. But they don't always move to countries with better economic conditions; in a twist of angle, they choose to move in the opposite direction. Chen (2006,14-21) Rushing's research on "Little Ameri-cans" born in the United States, who have U.S. citizenship and are sent back to their hometown of Fuzhou to be raised shortly after birth. He suggests that transnational fostering in the diaspora is in fact the formation and extension of an international migration network. They essentially do not travel anywhere they want to go and will choose to travel in the reverse direction of some members of their families when they felt that the conditions for travel were not met. But each act of migration creates migration incentives for later migrants by accumulating migration capital (Massey and Espinosa, 1997, 939-999.). So once migration has started it is difficult to stop it, and even if it returns there is a tendency to migrate again (Amelie F. Constant, Klaus and F. Zimmermann 2011, 495-515).

Conclusion

Chinese immigrants are a diasporic group, and their attachment and loyalty to their homeland is deeply rooted in the group's consciousness. The Chinese migrants' view of the "ties with hometown" and the idea of "honoring the ancestors" have made their connection with home even stronger. The concept of diaspora is shifting to talk about "home."

Mobility has become the main form of continuous contact with different spaces at different

geographical scales in the process of migration, which has a unique role in the construction and reconstruction of "home." From this perspective, migration can be seen as the process of constructing and reconstructing home through mobility. Home is the most basic place of social practice, which is expressed by mobility or embedded in mobility through daily life (Nowicka, 2007, 71.).

Earlier studies of home are often associated with staticity, boundaries, identity, and immutability. In this study, however, we argue that "home" can actually inhabit more than just one place. Transnational families are completely separated geospatially. Faced with a divided family, individual family members try to reconfigure their "home" life. Various efforts or adjustments are made to maintain their "home." As Blunt et al. remind us: "Home is not a simple existence, but a made one" (Blunt and Aowing, 2006, 23.).

This study borrows from Clifford's concept of "dwelling in travel" (Clifford, 1992, 108.). It talks about the relationship between home and travel and residence. It is argued that the family is not only the unit of accounting for international migration decisions, but also the point of destination for their migration decisions. And they are actively integrated into the diaspora community under the influence of home ties. The diaspora community network also provides various supports for those who want to "travel" from hometown. But Chinese migrants do not stop traveling once they arrive in a place. The reasons for traveling include economic opportunities, educational pursuits, skilled migration in search of a better salary, family reunion, etc. For Chinese migrants, the purpose of travel does not remain unchanged. As the purpose of migration changes, migrants may continue to travel.

However, traveling does not always remain a migration to other countries but is also accompanied by the phenomenon of return. This is because, with the role of family ties, migrants cannot just go away and never return, but remain

inextricably linked to the place of export after they have moved out.

“Home” signifies more than a geographic location in the transnational context; it is an embodiment of cultural identity and emotional anchorage. The findings show that traveling is not merely a physical movement but also facilitates the flow of cultural elements, allowing Chinese immigrants in diaspora to find their “home” within a multi-cultural context.

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