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Research Article

# **Returnees and Transnationals: Evolving Identities of Chinese (PRC) Immigrants in New Zealand**

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## Abstract

The China-born cohort among New Zealand's ethnic Chinese constitutes 35% of the total of over 100,000 ethnic Chinese in the most recent census of 2001. It is the single largest group, out-stripping the local born and totally overshadowing the immigrant Chinese groups born in other diasporic centers.

In recent years, immigrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) have shown a strong tendency of return migration and transnationalism. This paper will explore the circulatory movements of this group, highlighting various social indicators as a pointer to their relative attachment to their sending country and host country respectively.

The paper uses the China-born specific data<sup>1</sup> of the latest New Zealand census as background. Primary research data is derived from a two-part field study, first in New Zealand (the settlement country) and then in China (the country of origin). One hundred respondents, drawn from the snowballing sampling method, were interviewed in Auckland. It was found that while the immigrants maintained close links with China, few of them remitted money back. While community links are reasonably strong, few relied on fellow Chinese for their first job.

Two rounds of in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out in China on ten respondents who returned from New Zealand. Questions were asked to ascertain their motivation for returning,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that 'country of birth' is the category used in the national census, while immigration data uses 'country of origin/citizenship'. A certain number of 'China-born' arrivals might hold passports from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or other Asian countries, although the overwhelming majority will also be PRC citizens.

their experience of re-entry, and what their future intentions might be. This article will look particularly at the returnees' sense of identity and affinity with both their countries of origin and adoption, and to find out about their self-perceived roles in an increasingly globalized world.

**Key Words: Return migration, Transnationalism, Hybrid identity, PRC Chinese migrants, New Zealand**

# 回流與跨國一族： 紐西蘭中國大陸移民的身份演化

葉宋曼瑛\*

## 中文摘要

紐西蘭 2001 年的人口普查顯示，該國的華人總人口已超過 100,000，而中國大陸出生的華人占紐西蘭華人總數的 35%。該華人群體超過了紐西蘭本地出生的華人人口數量，並且完全超越了世界上其他主要華人散居地的華人移民數量。

近年來，該華人群體顯示出強烈的回流移民和再度跨越國界傾向。本文將探究該華人群體的迴圈式的移民動向，並試圖探究其背後隱藏的對移民移出地和移入地的社會含義。

本文以紐西蘭最近一次（2001 年）人口普查有關中國大陸出生的華人移民資料為研究背景。主要資料則來自於兩部分的實地調查研究：在紐西蘭本地（移民移入地）和在中國大陸（移民移出地）進行的實地調查。使用滾雪球的取樣方式，一百名居住在奧克蘭地區的受訪個案接受了訪問。初步研究結果顯示在這些受訪的中國大陸移民當中，很多繼續維持著與中國大陸的聯繫，可是很少人會匯款回大陸。雖然該群體與華人社區聯繫甚為密切，卻很少有人依靠他們的華人同胞獲取在紐西蘭的第一份工作。

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研究人員也在中國實地訪問了 10 位由紐西蘭回流到中國的華人移民。他們被深入探訪了兩次。這些深入訪問目的是探知他們的回流動機，回流後的生活體驗，以及他們的未來目標打算。本研究將特別著重探究這群回流移民的歸屬感、自我身份認定，以及他們與移出地和移入地的親和關係。本研究志在查明當世界的全球化趨勢日益加劇時，這群華人移民的自我身份認知。

**關鍵字：**回歸移民、跨國移民、混合式身份、中國大陸移民、紐西蘭

## **PRC immigrants in New Zealand: An Overview**

Immigrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) are the most recent arrivals in New Zealand. They are also the least noticed and least studied among the 'new Chinese' groups.

Although the earliest Chinese immigrants had come to New Zealand from the China mainland from as early as the 1860s (Ng, 1993), the majority of the recent immigrants (who arrived since the late 1980s) from the People's Republic of China do not have any direct connections to the earlier historical group (Beal, 2001; Ip, 1995). While the former were mostly humble peasants from rural Southern China driven out by natural disasters and warfare in the mid-nineteenth century (similar to their counterparts migrating to Southeast Asia, America, and Australia), the recent cohort is made up of predominantly highly-educated city dwellers from China's mega-cities, like Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin and Guangzhou. The former came because they had no other choice (Ho, 2001), while the latter arrived in search of better opportunities (Henderson, 1998).

The new PRC immigrants came mainly as highly-skilled professionals who gained entry because of their educational and professional qualifications. They belong to a group that New Zealand's Immigration Service considered potentially useful migrants who could help with New Zealand's economy and social development. They were allowed in because they possessed personal capital which equipped them to be good contributing citizens. Such personal capital is not simply monetary. They possess the necessary cultural capital which could enhance the cultural diversity of New Zealand, and also the economic capital in terms of specialized skills which could be deployed to add to the country's economic strength.

The opening of New Zealand's doors to immigrants beyond the "traditional source countries" (i.e. the United Kingdom and Ireland) took place rather recently, in 1987. This immigration policy change went hand-in-hand with economic de-regulation, the lowering of tariffs and other trade barriers. This comparatively liberal and forward-looking immigration policy was part of the overall economic strategy of integrating New Zealand more closely with the part of the world the country is situated in. It represented a revolutionary step forward, because hitherto New Zealand had been extremely selective in its migrant source country, preferring Britain only (McKinnon, 1996). When the New Zealand government extended the selection of immigrants according to "...criteria of personal merit without discrimination on grounds of race, national or ethnic origin" (Burke, 1986), it marked a significant departure from traditional philosophy and was to usher in profound changes in New Zealand's migrant source countries, and by extension, the future racial mix of the country.

Initially, however, even the policy makers themselves were unaware of the social and wider racial implications that were to come. The government's primary aim was simply to reverse the brain-drain resulted from steady population loss due to strong out-migration of young educated New Zealanders (Kasper, 1990). Since the early 1970s, New Zealand had been steadily losing its people, usually the bright and young, through outward migration to the tune of about 18,000 persons every year. The tentative desire to link up with Asia, if only a little, was also pushed by the booming economic miracle exemplified by the Asian Little Dragons in those years (Poot *et al.*, 1988). To put it simply, this 1987 liberal immigration policy was the beginning of New Zealand's globalisation process. But the process started initially only on a rather modest footing, and it was embarked upon in a piecemeal and rather haphazard fashion, without much overall planning.

Among the ethnic Chinese immigrants, Hong Kongers were the earliest arrivals (Skeldon, 1994), closely followed by the Taiwanese (Boyer, 1996). Arrivals from the People's Republic of China made their presence felt only in the mid-1990s, but their numbers rapidly climbed to become the top contributing region, not only among the Chinese, but among all Asian groups. In terms of absolute numbers, only Britain has a higher number of their nationals accepted by New Zealand as residents since the new immigration policy of 1987.

The exodus of the Hong Kongers (late 1980s to mid 1990s), widely noticed in Canada and Australia as well as in New Zealand, was largely propelled by the fear and feelings of uncertainty towards the imminent takeover of the former British colony by the Chinese government. The change over date was 1 July 1997. Many middle class Hong Kong people, long used to over a century of British laissez-faire capitalist rule, harboured much fear of communist China (Ho, 2003; Skeldon, 1994). But most of them were also unwilling to give up their lifestyle and familiar surroundings, as well as their business opportunities for good. Many aimed at securing a foreign passport as some sort of security and then returning.

Taiwanese immigrants to New Zealand peaked in 1996, and declined thereafter. They were also partly haunted by the same fear of communist China, which intensified after the Tian'anmen Incident in 1989, and rose to a high pitch when Chinese missiles were launched across the Taiwan Strait. Many also wanted to find a less competitive educational environment for their children, and a more leisurely lifestyle in a less crowded environment (Boyer, 1996; Ip, 2003).



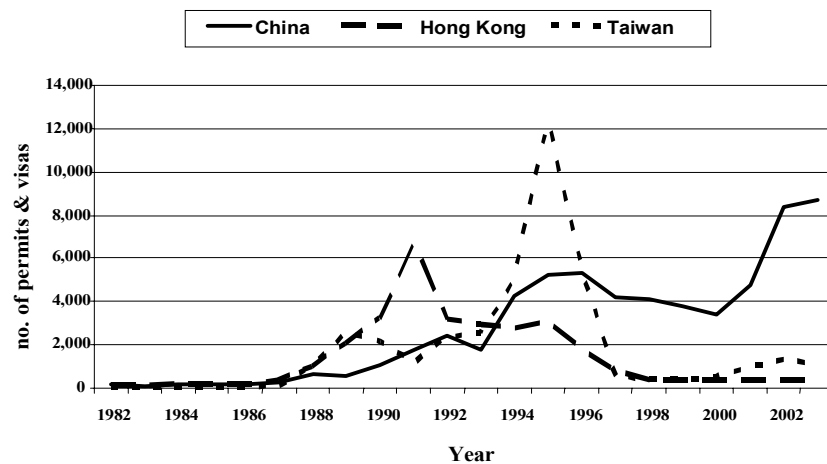


Fig. 1 Permanent residency permit or visa granted to selected Chinese regions. 1982-2001

### New Zealand's Attraction to PRC Migrants

In the most recent census of 2001, the "China born" population in New Zealand was 38,334, constituting 35% of the total ethnic Chinese population of the country, which stood at 105,057. It is by far the largest single group, greatly outnumbering the New Zealand born (25%), Taiwan born (12%) and Hong Kong born (10%), and other overseas born (17%).

It should be noted that the dramatic increase of the "China born" cohort was comparatively neglected both by the academics of migration studies and by public policy makers. Most of the attention on New Zealand's recent immigrants, in terms of serious studies (Beal, 2001; Bedford, 1998b; Forsyte, 1998; Ho, 2003; Ho and Bedford, 1998) and also in terms of media hype, has always concentrated on the arrivals from Hong Kong and Taiwan (Booth, 1993; Ho, 1995; Hunt, 1998; Jones, 1991, 1996). The Business Immigration Policy

(BIP) in particular, which these two groups tended to favour as a means to qualify for entry, has been the subject of a number of lengthy studies (Barber, 1997; Beal, 2001).

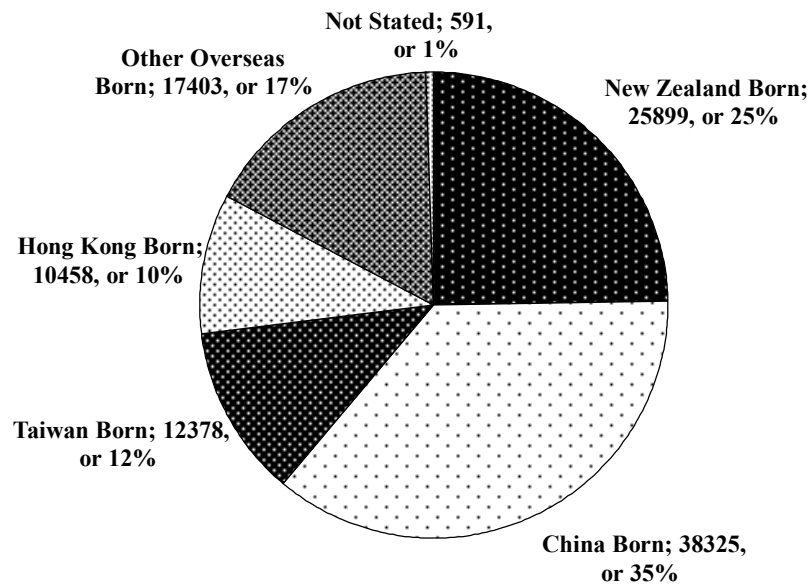


Fig. 2 Birthplaces of the Usually Resident Population Who Identify as Chinese (Total 105,057). New Zealand Census 2001 unpublished figures

New Zealand studies somehow neglect the PRC migrant cohort, and studies in China on foreign destinations similarly neglected New Zealand. China's attention is focused more on rich and prosperous destination countries and regions like the United States, Europe, and Japan. However, according to surveys conducted within China by the Population Studies Centre in Shanghai, New Zealand ranks fourth as the preferred migration destination country for PRC immigrants. The preferred countries ahead of New Zealand

are the United States, Canada, and Australia (Luo, 2002).

New Zealand's attraction is its comparatively lower threshold for settlement. PRC migrants, more than other ethnic Chinese immigrants from other regions, used the on-shore application process far more frequently when they applied for residence visas. While their Hong Kong and Taiwan counterparts usually would make the migration move only after they secured the residence visas, often with the professional help of immigration consultants, PRC migrants often made their applications while they were already in the country (Bedford, 1998a; Ligard, 1996). They tended to gain entry more on human capital (personal education qualifications, or comparative youth) rather than on financial capital. Given China's huge population and vast potential talent pool, there has been no shortage of people who could meet the strict immigration criteria of New Zealand harping on 'quality'.

There are various pragmatic reasons for the PRC Chinese wanting to come to New Zealand. Compared to the Hong Kongers and Taiwanese who started moving overseas as students in the late 1960s, the PRC Chinese are relative newcomers to the migration arena. It should be remembered that China was a closed society up to the late 1980s, with strict control over even the internal movements of its citizens. All overseas travel, not to mention migration, was only possible if it was officially sanctioned. When international migration was allowed in the early 1990s, New Zealand was one of the many destination countries that the PRC Chinese would try their luck in. Broadly speaking, New Zealand is a safe, liberal, and easy-going open society where the Chinese could have a "Western experience" in a comfortable environment. It was also based on the desire to obtain New Zealand citizenship, which immigrants can usually get after three years' residency. Many looked upon the securing of the New Zealand citizenship as some sort of

guarantee for their future, and also as a stepping stone for climbing to new financial and social heights. They might attain their goals not exclusively in New Zealand, but possibly in a third country or back in Asia, where greater economic opportunities abound. The above points will be illustrated in the case studies that follow in the latter part of this article.

### **Migration Pattern of PRC Migrants**

Among all the overseas born Chinese cohorts, the China born one is clearly the most recent migrant group, with over 55% (21,171) of them having arrived in New Zealand in the last five years prior to the census of 2001. The comparable Taiwan and Hong Kong cohorts (immigrants of five or fewer years' history) stand at 42%, and 30% respectively. An additional 21% (7,926) of the China born have arrived since 1991. The PRC immigrants are therefore among New Zealand's newest faces in an increasingly multicultural society.

As mentioned above, the majority of the PRC arrivals gained residence visa approvals via the skilled category. Specifically, they used the points system, which gives points for personal merits, calculated according to the applicant's educational qualification, age, work experience, business track record, family and community support, as well as settlement funds. Since 1991, a science degree or an engineering degree earned as much as 15 points. Large numbers of young graduates from China seemed only too willing to try their luck in any "Western" country that would take them. When the floating passing point stood at 25, as it did in the mid 1990s, it was not hard for a young Chinese graduate to accumulate the necessary points by virtue of their work experience, and their youth (Henderson, 2002). In December 2003, a new 'Skilled Migrant Category' was introduced. It includes a scale stressing

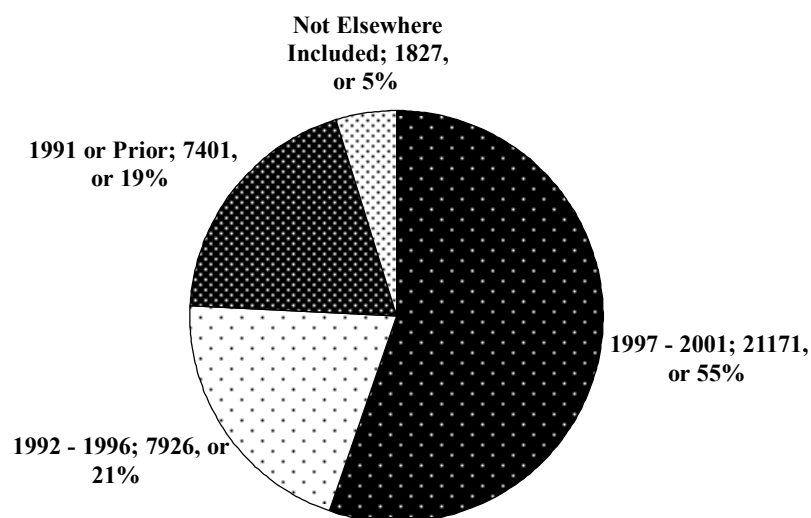


Fig. 3 Migration Status of Chinese Population born in China, showing period of arrival. Census 2001 unpublished figures

‘New Zealand work experience’, English ability, and potential job offer. The raised English skills level was widely seen as discriminatory towards all Asian migrants. But it did not deter PRC applicants for too long. While applicants from Hong Kong and Taiwan dwindled to a mere few hundreds per year, China remained among the top immigrant source countries (with Britain and India) for New Zealand.

Some PRC migrants, especially the elderly, gained entry via family reunification. This is a category that the Hong Kong and Taiwanese migrants used much more rarely. According to a previous study the author conducted amongst several immigrant Chinese groups in 1996-97 (to coincide with the previous census), when asked whether they would try to persuade family members or friends to migrate to New Zealand, the majority of the Taiwanese and Hong Kongers said, “No.” Instead, they would recommend that their

friends should be more circumspect because the New Zealand job opportunities were quite rare (Boyer, 1996; Friesen, 1997).

The PRC migrants, on the other hand, have shown some tendencies of classical chain migration, whereby family members, especially parents, would follow their children to the same host country (further evidence of this practice of using the family unification category will be discussed in the second part of this article detailing this author's field research results). An analysis of the China-born age-sex pyramid drawn from the New Zealand census shows that there is an 'echo bulge' in the 60 to 70-year-old age group, which represents the parents of the new skilled migrants. It should be noted that such a bulge is absent in the age pyramid of the Hong Kong-born and Taiwan-born cohorts.

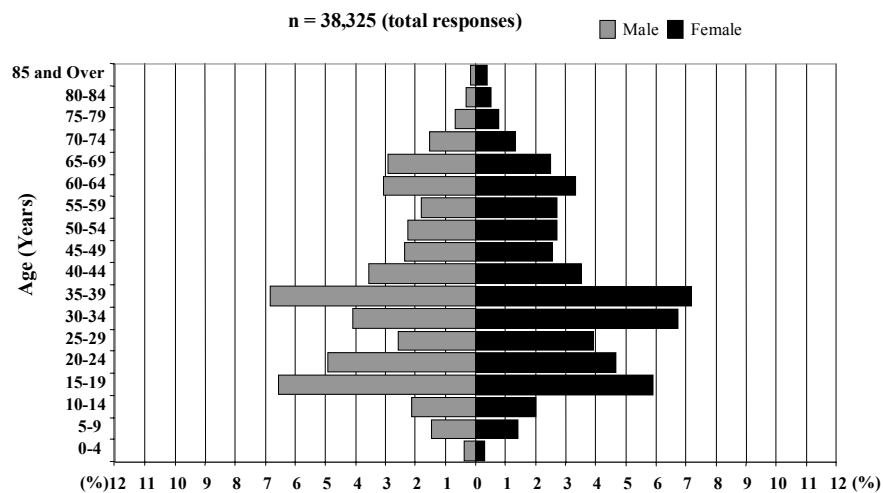


Fig. 4 Age-sex pyramid of China-born ethnic Chinese population. Unpublished data from 2001 census.

Most of the skilled migrants from China's big cities are from "one-child families"<sup>2</sup>. Their parents will therefore easily qualify for family reunification under New Zealand's immigration legislation<sup>3</sup>.

### **Social Indicators: Employment Status**

There are some obvious social indicators that one should examine when trying to determine how "settled" or otherwise a migrant community is. The single most important one is arguably the labour force status profile. If a significantly large percentage of the community is gainfully employed, especially when the new migrants are employed in the professions that they are trained for, it is one of the indicators that the community is fully integrated, and ready to sink roots in the adopted society.

In 2004, Statistics New Zealand published *Degrees of Difference, a report on the employment of university-qualified immigrants in New Zealand* (Statistics New Zealand, 2004). It was found that the PRC cohort is the best-educated group among the Chinese, with 24.4% degree holders, while their counterparts among the Taiwan group and Hong Kong group stand at 16.9% and 16.8% respectively. Unfortunately, the recent immigrant ethnic Chinese group as a whole has a rather poor labour force status indicator. Their unemployment rate was the second worst-off among all immigrant groups. Only the North African-born and Middle Eastern born had a higher unemployment rate.

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<sup>2</sup> To combat over-population, the Chinese government introduced a strict 'one-child policy' in the 1980s which decrees that couples should only have a single child. A second child would bring about various penalties and severe social censure.

<sup>3</sup> New Zealand family reunification policy pertaining to parents allows the parents to come to New Zealand if the number of children in New Zealand is higher than the number of children in the country of origin.

Among Chinese groups, the PRC-born cohort has 27% (9,576 persons) of their total population listed as “employed full-time”, and another 8% (2,716 persons) listed as “employed part-time”. While these figures are somewhat lower than that of the national “New Zealand average”, they are by far the best among the three major Chinese groups, i.e. China-born, Taiwan-born, and Hong Kong-born.

However, since the group is also very highly qualified and comparatively young, the mediocre labour force status profile must represent serious wastage of human capital as well as great personal frustration for the new PRC immigrants (Henderson, 2003).



Fig. 5 Labour Force Status by Birthplace: Overseas-born Chinese Population. Census 2001, Statistics New Zealand unpublished figures



In the media, there have been accusations that some PRC immigrants abused the welfare system. Probably one of the welfare areas that PRC immigrants have been availing themselves to is taking full advantage of the education system, often obtaining student loans and benefits in the process. Many undertook studying for a New Zealand degree as a means of getting a better chance for future jobs. There is a definite preference for re-training and obtaining a New Zealand degree, even if they are thinking of eventual return to China (Henderson, 2002; Ho, 2000).

### **Return Migration and Transnationalism**

Migration study scholars in the mid 1990s adopted the term “astronauting” to describe the strategy of having the breadwinner (usually the father) commuting back and forth between his country of origin and the adopted country, (thus airborne most of the time) supporting his family with overseas funds (Castles and Davidson, 2000; Ho, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996; Skeldon, 1994). That way, the “astronauts” reap the advantage of the higher salaries and lucrative markets of Asia, while their families enjoy the advantages of the superior natural environment as well as a more liberal and advanced education system in New Zealand. The price to pay is considerable family stress and a disrupted life-style (Ho, 2001). When the new immigrants from the PRC failed to find suitable jobs at their skill level after a prolonged period, or when the China market and professional work environment were seen to be far superior to those of New Zealand, some also left New Zealand and became “returnees” to China (Castles and Davidson, 2000). However, evidence (to be discussed in detail below) suggests that many adopted the longer-term transnational strategy, as opposed to the shorter-term astronauting favored more by their Hong Kong and Taiwanese counterparts.

The return movements of migrants can be conceptualized very differently. Neoclassical economists assume that people move permanently abroad to maximize lifetime earnings while new economic theorists see migrants' movements as temporary measures to overcome market deficiencies at home (Constant and Massey, 2002). Transnationalism as a term used in international migration can be variously examined "as a social morphology, as a type of consciousness, as a mode of cultural reproduction, as an avenue of capital, as a site of political engagement, and as a reconstruction of place or locality" (Vertovec, 1999). It is also a concept vigorously examined by scholars of different disciplines. Cultural anthropologists like Nina Glick Schiller and Linda Basch are among the first to point out that today's migrant networks, social relations and cultural ties encompass both their host and home societies. The national boundaries of home and receiving countries 'are brought together into a single social field' (Glick-Schiller *et al.*, 1995). Sociologist Alejandro Portes posits that migrants with higher levels of social capital would be most likely to forge transnational linkages (Portes, 1999). He further suggests that various factors shape the migrants' choices to adopt transnationalism as a strategy. They would be affected by considerations of whether homeland issues remain salient and whether the host population is hostile, as well as most importantly, whether homeland governments encourage ongoing connections with expatriate communities (Portes, 1999).

Thomas Faist sees transnationalism as a phenomenon which could be dated back to at least a century ago, although he agrees with Portes that modern day jet travel and technological advancement have improved communication so that transnationalism has now achieved the critical mass that makes it highly significant (Faist, 2000). He examines transnational social spaces and defines them as 'combinations of social and symbolic ties, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations that can be found

in at least two geographically and internationally distinct places' (Faist, 2000).

The subsequent sections of this paper are based on the author's ongoing research project "China-New Zealand Migration Studies", one object of which is to chart the situation of the returnees from New Zealand to China. The theories outlined in the literature review above will be used as framework for the analysis of the empirical data collected in this project.

As noted in previous sections, the majority of the General Skills Category immigrants from the PRC are highly educated, and a sizeable number underwent retraining in New Zealand in order to obtain the essential New Zealand qualification. After a few years in this country, they also had the chances to improve on their professional experience as well as English language oral skills, thereby making them sought-after employees for international companies and joint-ventures in booming China. This author posits that when these migrants made the move back to China, many did so not because of their failure to settle down in New Zealand, but because better opportunities presented themselves in China. In other words, the old theory that only 'failed migrants' would return to the sending country does not apply here. Many of the PRC migrants made the homeward move precisely because they had the high qualities needed to be successful.

### **Characteristics of Chinese Migrants Compared**

Throughout the 1990s, the emigration from China to New Zealand remained steady and high. The Chinese government opened its doors for emigration slowly and comparatively late. The two major categories through which Chinese nationals could gain permission to leave China were "privately-funded studies", and "visiting relatives." New Zealand was a popular destina-

tion. According to the internal studies of Chinese migration scholars, the movement of Chinese people to New Zealand has been even higher than the comparable figure of moving to the United States (in terms of percentage according to host country population) (Luo, 2002).

What enabled the PRC nationals to emigrate was the relaxation of government policy after repercussions of the Tian'anmen Incident of 1989 died down. China's economic reforms took off spectacularly in the 1990s, but PRC would-be emigrants generally did not have the extensive world knowledge which their Hong Kong and Taiwanese counterparts possessed. It took a few years for the increased use of modern communication technology (which provided immigration information among other knowledge) and the word of mouth spread by the new pioneering emigrants to make New Zealand known as a viable destination country.

Compared to immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan many of whom entered New Zealand on their strength as business investors, PRC immigrants mostly come under the skilled migrant category. They depend on personal human capital as opposed to financial capital. Many of them are highly-educated professionals from the mega cities of China, and have little connection or cultural affinity with the Chinese emigrants of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their average age is about five years younger than the arrivals from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Many of them have young families, with their children in primary school (as compared to the adolescent children of the Hong Kong and Taiwan migrant families) (Friesen and Ip, 2001).

### **Field Research Findings in Auckland**

The first part of my field research consists of interviews in New Zealand

using a detailed questionnaire based on the model used by the Migration Studies Research Team of Shanghai<sup>4</sup>. In 2002 (from March to June) the author collected data on 100 Chinese originating from the PRC who settled in Auckland, New Zealand. The second part of the research was carried out in June-July 2002 in China. Ten Chinese migrants who had returned from New Zealand were interviewed in Shanghai. A follow-up round of interviews was conducted in Shanghai in November 2004.

The questionnaires were distributed by the 'snowballing method' in Auckland the initial target groups were PRC student associations, church groups, and community groups known to be heavily used by mainland Chinese nationals. A sizeable proportion of the respondents were the elderly parents of PRC professional migrants, because many of them had the time during the day to meet the interviewer and fill in the questionnaires. On the other hand, the ten persons who participated in the in-depth interviews in Shanghai were young and successful working-age professionals based in China's biggest city. The questionnaire respondents represent a broader and more eclectic group, while the in-depth interviewees have a more uniform profile.

Among the questionnaire respondents, 44% are male while 56% are female. The mean age is 48, with the youngest aged 20 and the oldest aged 72. The biggest age group is 30-35, followed by the 36-40 group. The 3<sup>rd</sup> largest group is aged 60-65. The provincial origin of the cohort is mainly from Shanghai, and from the neighbouring Jiangsu-Zhejiang provinces. There are also respondents who originated from Guangdong, Fujian, and the northern provinces of Shandong and Liaoning. The majority came from the

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<sup>4</sup> The Team has used the same questionnaire for charting the profile of PRC returnees from three major regions: the United States, the European Union and Japan. (Ford Foundation supported project: "Return Migration and Social Transformation")

big cities of China.<sup>5</sup>

As for their family connections with New Zealand, a high percentage (49%) of the respondents replied that they already had “relatives and friends overseas”(including New Zealand) at the time of their own migration, although 35% replied that they were pioneer migrants themselves, and had no chain migration network to rely on, even as information suppliers. This is hardly surprising as New Zealand used to have an unwritten white policy giving preference to ‘traditional source countries’ (a code term for Britain and western European countries) right up to the early 1980s. This meant that only a very small number of ethnic Chinese had migrated to New Zealand before the recent decades. Among the respondents, those who had previous overseas connections had relatives and friends in Australia, Canada, or the United States, besides having connections in New Zealand.

The nationality and citizenship question yielded some very pertinent results. Among all the ‘white settler nations’, New Zealand’s citizenship requirements are comparatively lenient. The residency requirement is only three years’ residency, which is comparatively short. When asked about their current nationality status, just fewer than 55% of the respondents indicated that they were Chinese nationals, while 43% indicated that they had taken up New Zealand nationality. It should be noted here that China does not allow dual nationality while New Zealand is flexible about the issue. Various migration studies scholars have examined the nationality and citizenship issue, noting that dual or even multiple citizenship indicate an erosion of the

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that at mid-stage the snowballing reached a Shanghai retired couple who enthusiastically helped to distribute the questionnaires to old people’s centres and community groups, and this might have somewhat biased the sample, both in terms of the provincial origin, the age-group, and the dialect group.

authority of the nation-state, even undermining the nation-state's ability to claim absolute loyalty from its subjects (Appadurai, 1996; Castles and Davidson, 2000). However, the Chinese returnees' views of citizenship might be more utilitarian and driven by practical concerns. On further questioning during the in-depth interviews, it emerged that many would like to apply for New Zealand citizenship after the qualifying period of three years' residency, but the consideration of returning to China and working there deters some from giving up Chinese citizenship. Furthermore, New Zealand is rather generous towards its permanent residents. In terms of property ownership, medical and social welfare entitlement, and even the right to vote, a permanent resident enjoys the same rights as a citizen. It is no surprise, therefore, that many new Chinese immigrants decide to keep Chinese citizenship and New Zealand permanent residency, thereby enjoying the benefits of both.

Since the majority of the respondents indicated that they still wish to return to China, for visits or for long-term work, they were also asked about their resident status in China. Without resident status, they might not have the right to hold legitimate work. Forty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that they could "stay permanently" in China if necessary, while 37% indicated that they only had "temporary resident" status in the country of their origin (the rest declined to answer this question).

Statistics obtained through the Shanghai Security Bureau indicate that the Chinese citizens applying to obtain exit visas in order to go to New Zealand (including both long-term and short-term visitors) are very well-educated. From 1977 to 2000, among this group of PRC citizens wanting to visit or settle in New Zealand, 24% of them held a bachelor degree, with another 1% holding higher degrees; another 16% had a tertiary education, and only 6% had primary education or lower (Luo, 2002). Again, this high educational

attainment of emigrants from China is borne out by the New Zealand census returns.

The author's observation is that the education level and employment level are both high among the respondents. In fact they are much better educated than the local New Zealanders, and their employment level is also higher than those of their Hong Kong and Taiwan counterparts, as discussed in the section on employment profile.

### **Adaptation and Support Network in New Zealand**

To understand the PRC immigrants' pattern of settlement and adaptation, and to explore their sense of identity, a series of multiple choice questions were asked specifically to gauge the scope of their support network, in particular to see whether it was family-based or wider. Respondents were asked with whom they would talk about their daily challenges, setbacks and difficulties. They were also asked from whom they would seek practical help when they looked for their first job. Here the answers were rather unexpected. While most respondents (47%) indicated that they would confide in their family members, many would also talk to friends and work mates when they encountered difficulties that needed support. This might be partly due to the comparatively short history of the PRC community in New Zealand, a fact noted at the beginning of this article. When most of the cohort is made up of new arrivals, friends are just as dependable and knowledgeable as family.

The questionnaire goes into details of whether the confidant was from the same dialect group and provincial origin. While about 12% indicated that their confidants were from similar Chinese origins, surprisingly an equal percentage indicated that their closest friends were "from New Zealand". A



clearer picture emerges when it comes to the answers to the open-ended question of where the respondents met their good friends. The venues of socializing turned out to be extremely varied. These include: through the church, through local Chinese associations, through student associations, through children's schools, through public gatherings, through 'language corners', and rather significantly, through being neighbours.

The wider social network of the new PRC migrants is testimony to the relative openness and fluidity of New Zealand society. Being a young immigrant country, New Zealand does not have highly stratified social classes and is comparatively egalitarian. Unlike other white settler countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia, racial segregation was never introduced in New Zealand schools, even in the most xenophobic era. For example, the indigenous Maori and the immigrant Chinese were discriminated against in the early twentieth century, but they were never officially excluded or segregated. Among the legacy of this comparative inclusiveness would be a more open social climate which enabled the contemporary new Chinese immigrants to interact with locals in many different ways. The interviewees' responses show that there are no fixed channels for new immigrants to go through in order to meet specific groups. When asked whether they have "New Zealander friends", 56.9% indicated that they do, while a much smaller percentage (only 13.7%) indicated that they don't have New Zealand friends. However, it should be noted here that there is no definition of "friends", and most probably the term is taken to mean someone that the new immigrants have some social interactions with, rather than closer or deeper relationships.

The answer to the question of "whom did you ask for help to find your first job in New Zealand" is again surprising, and clearly not what the designing researcher had anticipated. About 6% indicated that they had help

from family, and another 6% said they had help from friends. But a high 25.4% indicated that they only “depended on themselves” in securing their first job. Most typically, they got it through advertisements in the newspaper, or government job search agencies. As one interviewee replied when asked to elaborate on his job-seeking experience, “In New Zealand, personal introductions don’t count for much, not like China where connections are so important.”

### **China Links: Remittances and Visits**

The PRC immigrants were also asked about their tangible linkages with China. The sets of generic questions posed to all respondents were: do they have an income surplus every month? If so, would they remit money home to China? And finally, how often did they return to China for visits?

Many of the New Zealand respondents do seem to have monthly income surpluses (55.9% indicated that they had surplus, while 44.1% said no). But the reply to remitting money back to China was overwhelmingly negative. A full 90% indicated that they never remitted money back, and only 10% replied the affirmative. This result corresponds with that of the in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in China, where only one (out of ten) interviewee indicated that he remitted money back to China while he was in New Zealand.

However, the New Zealand data is not aligned with international studies which argue that a reliable pointer of homeland linkages is the size and frequency of regular remittances. During the in-depth qualitative interviews, I asked my interviewees to elaborate on the remittance issue in particular. Their usual reply was that their China-based extended families were rather comfortably off, and would not need their remittances. This conforms to the

middle-class status of many of the new PRC migrants, and also testifies to the economic take-off of China in the last decade. While overseas remittances supported the backbone of the economy of many coastal home villages in the early twentieth century, by the twenty-first century, China no longer looked for monetary remittances from its departing nationals. The communities back home might appreciate linkages of network for advice and future opportunities of migration, but providing money in the form of remittances is no longer the primary expectation that the emigrants have to meet.

When asked about the frequency of their home visits, the time gap ranged from twice a year to once every five years. But the biggest group--31.6% of the respondents--indicated that their home visits occurred once every three years, which is considerably less frequent than the home-visiting rate of their Hong Kong and Taiwan counterparts, which averaged 1.5 times every year (Beal, 1999; Ho, 2001).

The profile of the PRC migrant 'stayers' in New Zealand therefore reveals them to be a distinctive cohort with strong personal qualities: they are well-educated, self-reliant, and mostly gainfully employed. While many feel that they could be employed at higher levels more befitting their qualifications, they also admitted that they were earning much better money in New Zealand than in China.

### **The Returnees: 'Reversed Brain Drain'**

During the first part of the field research in New Zealand, the hundred respondents were asked about their future intention of settlement, in particular whether they had "desires to return to China to re-settle". A third of the respondents replied positively while 35.3% replied "no". The remainder

could not make up their minds or declined to answer. Whether they decide to stay or to leave New Zealand is not just an economic consideration, as many of them already have reasonable job opportunities. The author therefore decided to pursue the research in Shanghai where many overseas returnees congregate.

The second part of the field research consisted of qualitative in-depth interviews lasting from 90 to 120 minutes. The 10 interviewees were all returnees recruited through the New Zealand Consulate-General's office in Shanghai. A helpful staff member went through the name list of the "Kiwi Club"--whose membership is made up of Chinese New Zealanders in Shanghai. Ten persons were selected. The interviews were structured along a similar scope to that of the questionnaire used in New Zealand. Special stress was placed on finding out why and how they returned to China, their present nationality status, what the New Zealand experience meant to them, and where they saw their future.

Since the in-depth interviews were conducted in Shanghai, all the interviewees were "returnees", although one commutes to New Zealand frequently and regularly.

The average age of the group is 39.3, with a range from 35 to 53. The majority of them, all except one, held a bachelor's degree prior to migration to New Zealand.

Their arrival time in New Zealand ranges between 1988 and 1994. At the time of the first round of interviews in June-July 2002, most of them had returned and settled back in China for three to four years, and held high-paying managerial or professional jobs.

All ten interviewees did some studies in New Zealand, and eight went on to postgraduate studies.

Some of them undertook language training on their arrival and then went on to formal studies. Among the interviewees who went on to higher degrees, one attained an MBA, others attained Masters degrees in various disciplines like architecture, engineering, commerce and sociology. Their profile fits those proposed by transnational theorists like Kivisto and Vertovec, who posited that modern returnees do not leave the host country because they are unsuccessful, but because they are high achievers capable of greater success.

Their desire to return to China was motivated by complex factors far beyond economic considerations. The strength of the Chinese economy and the potential of the huge Chinese market were undoubtedly important factors. These were always mentioned by the interviewees. In two cases, the returnees had already made up their minds to return to China prior to their graduation. Both had high-paying jobs at their professional level lined up for them in China. The pull factors exerted by the bigger China market were significant in drawing back PRC emigrants from the United States, Canada, Australia and the European Union, and this phenomenon is currently under research by the “Return Migration and Social Transformation Project” partly funded by the Ford Foundation (Guo, 2001).

### **Complex Factors Motivating Return**

However, the Chinese government’s proactive program to entice “overseas talents” is not the only factor motivating the return of the PRC migrants from New Zealand. Some subtle cultural factors are also in favor of the migrants’ return. A study on Australian returnees to Taiwan, for example,

listed four major reasons why some Taiwanese would make it back to their place of origin. They are returning for better work opportunities, to take up their parents' businesses, for chances to 'match up' with Chinese spouses, and to go back to an old comfort zone of familiar surroundings (Chiang, 2004). Another study on Canadian returnees to Hong Kong asserts that while economic motives for return are overwhelmingly strong, the desire for 'energetic pursuit of career development' is the main reason propelling Hong Kong migrants homeward (Ley and Kobayashi, 2005).

This author has found that the situations with PRC migrants are close parallels to those facing Taiwanese and Hong Kong migrants. Among the respondents, some non-economic factors were highly significant in prompting their homeward journey. To them, the cultural milieu of China was comfortable, familiar and therefore highly reassuring, offering a familiar language, familiar social environment, and the closeness to family and friends. In three significant cases which this researcher worked on, the interviewees decided to return because they felt 'a cultural divide' in New Zealand society which they had found themselves powerless to traverse.

All three were in their mid-30s when they emigrated from China, and already had bachelor's degrees from eminent universities. While they have a reasonably high degree of English proficiency and have no difficulty conducting social conversations, they mentioned the sense of alienation in trying to communicate in a foreign language, and their sense of frustration in not being able to convey the finer and subtler thoughts that came to them on a daily basis. A highly successful engineer said, "Language difficulties were very daunting. I felt so stumped because I couldn't express myself adequately. I often felt that other people were looking down on me, maybe I was just diffident...I often felt the formidable cultural gap, and it was

unpleasant.”

On top of the feeling of inability to adequately communicate, there followed a sense that one could not really get into the “Kiwi circle”. One said this about himself and his wife, “...we had friendly colleagues, and my boss was very appreciative of me...but somehow I felt that we could never become social friends. Our topics of conversation were different, and my English was limited. I wasn’t fulfilled spiritually, and I wasn’t happy in New Zealand. ...If we had studied longer in New Zealand, like my friend who completed a proper postgraduate degree there, then things might have been different for us. We would have made real friends, and formed a real network. But as matters turned out, we could never sink roots properly and never quite fit into New Zealand society.” He gave up his “decent salary” of NZ\$55,000 and said good-bye to his “very supportive boss” to return to China.

The top salesperson of Motorola also expressed similar sentiments of “not quite belonging”. While his English was obviously good enough to make him a top salesperson, and to make him a popular person in social circles, he felt loneliness on a more profound level. “On Fridays, during those ‘happy hours’, my workmates all sat around drinking, talking about rugby and sailing. I felt that’s a waste of time but I joined in anyway.” As an artist and a literary person, he has been used to talking about poetry and literature with his counterparts, in Chinese. The crunch came when his wife became pregnant with twin girls. He felt he had to return to China because he “couldn’t bear the thought that my baby girls would grow up to be un-Chinese, just like any other Kiwi girl.” The fear of weakening parental authority in the transnational experience is explored in migration studies literature (Portes and Ruben, 2001), but what this young father expresses here is more the fear of losing his culture and the fear of seeing the dilution of Chinese heritage

values if he did not make the move of returning to China.

Still other returnees talked about the higher professional satisfaction of working in China. One, a health-engineering researcher who had considerable work experience in New Zealand, Singapore and then the United States, decided that Shanghai was the best place to offer him professional advancement. “I worked for different medical engineering companies: three years in Singapore and four years in Boston,” he said candidly, “My desire to remain in China is not so much patriotism, but rather that I can design my own medical electrical equipment, and then I’d patent them, and I’d sell them in the United States. It is more creative, and therefore more satisfying. I can’t sell them in China, because such equipment is very expensive, and China doesn’t much respect patent rights, not at the moment.” He has permanent residency status in both Singapore and New Zealand, but holds a Chinese passport. He is one of China’s growing cohort of new-age transnationals.

Four of the returnees, however, were in fact working for international businesses whose headquarters happened to be in China. In that sense, they were not working for either New Zealand or China, but were employees of transnational companies. One CEO stated confidently, “I would go wherever my company sends me...I am in China now, and it gives me the space for career development. And therefore job satisfaction. I don’t think I’d move in the next two to four years.” On my 2004 return visit, he was indeed still in Shanghai, but he became the “Regional Vice President of Greater China” of an international auditing company.

Eight of the interviewees have received New Zealand citizenship, and their resident status in China was guaranteed by a “long-term residence card”



(the Chinese actually called it the “Green Card”<sup>6</sup>),) which gives them many of the Chinese citizens’ privileges. The Shanghai municipal government is the pioneer in offering this to returnee Chinese experts. The Chinese ‘Green card holders’ also enjoy expatriate expert status in terms of salary and related benefits. For example, they are entitled to state health care and their children can go into ‘key state schools’. The remaining two interviewees kept their Chinese nationality, but also maintained their New Zealand permanent resident status. The reason they gave was that they worked for smaller companies, or were self-employed. Those “Chinese Green Cards” of the Shanghai municipal government are much coveted, but these two private employees felt such a privilege would never be extended to them.

### **New Zealand or China? Fluctuating Choices**

All the interviewees feel a strong link to New Zealand. Again, similar emotional links are reported in parallel studies on the Canadian returnees to Hong Kong: ‘the thought of Canada generally arouses positive memories’ (Ley and Kobayashi, 2005). The majority of my respondents were full of praise for New Zealand’s many attractions. In the words of the father of the twin girls who returned to China mainly for cultural reasons, “...everything is good: New Zealand is safe, stable, and predictable. The air is so fresh, there is no chaotic traffic, and people are so friendly...” Among the respondents, the influence of New Zealand seems even stronger possibly because they were younger when they emigrated. Having spent a few of their crucial formative years in a country so different from China, several of them spoke of the profound ways that they had been influenced by the New Zealand experience. They attributed various aspects of their professional life as well as personal

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<sup>6</sup> This is a label which they borrow from the United States ‘Green Card’ for permanent residents.

outlook to the subtle influence of ‘New Zealand values’.

The international executive said, “New Zealand had only a small technological and industrial base. But their sense of service is very high. Its natural environment and the quality of its people are both superb. The New Zealand experience marked the watershed of my life and provided my career with a launching pad.” He attributed his personnel management style and work ethics to what he learnt in New Zealand.

The architect said, “New Zealand influenced me a lot: both my way of thinking and my style of working. New Zealand was a very relaxed country, and also very idealistic. At the University of Auckland, in our designs, we only needed to consider their implications for society, and for the community. Commercial implications for the developers and the local government policies were hardly taken into account...Later on, in Harvard, I found out that every project’s formation involved economic and political implications, and I had to make considerable compromise.”

Even the engineer who felt that he could never fit in the ‘Kiwi circle’ had this to say of New Zealand. “How can I not like New Zealand? I suppose if you ask ten Chinese who’ve been there (in New Zealand), all ten will say they like the country. It is so beautiful, so relaxing, and the people are so friendly. In New Zealand, I learnt to start on new pathways. ...I do admire the Kiwi’s ability to enjoy life; we Chinese have much to learn from them in this aspect. They are also very fair-minded and treat people as equals.”

While the interviewees feel different degrees of attachment to New Zealand and China respectively, they are also quite clear about what specific values their New Zealand experience had given them on top of their English

language skills and professional skills.

“In New Zealand I learnt to survive. Job seeking made me change my personality. In China, everyone had a sort of charted path: you go to a key university, then you are guaranteed a lifetime job. In New Zealand you have the chance and the necessity to chart your own path...What we gained most from New Zealand was the sense of respect for other human beings. ...Now I apply it in the personnel management of my own company. It is important to make our employees feel that they are being valued. When we chose new staff, we had a vigorous process: we don't look for particularly skilled people because skill can always be acquired. ...Everyone can learn on the job. We look for the correct work attitude, and a sense of pride in one's profession... That's the value I learnt in New Zealand.”

Another said, “I have been very lucky, to pass my intellectual-formative years in New Zealand. China now is at a ‘progressive stage’. But people don't realize that this period of economic takeoff was preceded by the Cultural Revolution and the nation suffered for years of lagging behind. Many people now feel that they really deserve to be rich and successful...that is very arrogant. Kiwis might look easy going, but when they work...they have already established an effective system of reporting and management.”

The high-achieving medical engineer was deeply reflective on how the “New Zealand egalitarian values” influenced him. He said, “When I first arrived from China, I felt that anyone who held different ideas from mine must be wrong. After a few years in New Zealand, I learnt what the Kiwis often say, ‘Well, they might have a point!’ Now I can accept other people as they are, and I realize that is a more civilized way.”

The young architect spoke of her ultimate dream of retiring to a New Zealand resort where she could pursue her artwork and do water-colour painting for six months a year. Having energized herself in New Zealand, she could then spend the other six months in China, designing luxury houses for international expatriates in the Pudong commercial district of Shanghai.

## **Discussion**

To New Zealand, the PRC immigrants will continue to be the most significant group of Chinese immigrants in the near future, given their sheer number, and their tendency to stay put for longer periods than the Hong Kong and Taiwan groups. A similar pattern is emerging in other new settler countries like Canada and Australia. The author posits that the trend is more noticeable in New Zealand because of the smaller size of the host population, and the closeness of the Chinese community.

Their comparative youth also means that they will have a better chance of successfully adapting to New Zealand society. Their high education and their willingness to take on active employment (instead of living a leisurely lifestyle in semi-retirement, fishing and golfing) also mean that they have much greater chances of interacting with New Zealand mainstream society (Beal, 2001). All these will ensure that they become more quickly integrated than the other Chinese groups.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government's proactive search for "overseas talents" is exerting a strong pull, enticing them to retrace their steps back to China. The current Chinese policy is designed to reverse the brain-drain, and it has been compared to what the Taiwanese government did very successfully from the late 1970s onwards: to attract overseas-trained highly-skilled people

to “return to the motherland.” A number of “Science Parks”, “Special Development Zones” or “Hi-Tech Zones” have been set up in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen (Guo, 2001). Returnees enjoyed simplified application and registration procedures for setting up new business ventures, and they also enjoyed “tax-breaks”, access to research funding, low interest loans, tax-free equipment, and even tax-free goods for personal use. But in the long term, it is the potential scope, the chances for further professional advancement, and the opportunity to “play a bigger role” that China can give to its talented returning migrants that would be considered the most important factors for attracting returnees. The factor of patriotic pride in China should not be underestimated. In the words of one respondent, “China’s transformation is unprecedented; the last ten years exceeded the sum total of the previous fifty years. I feel I should return and play a part.”

Finally, the returnees’ goodwill and appreciation towards their country of adoption are strong. My field research shows that there is a tendency to keep in close touch with former friends through the email and internet. Several of my interviewees mentioned that their unexpected disappointment as returnees was the “unsatisfactory inter-personal relationship with work mates and colleagues in China”. While they anticipated the crowdedness and competitiveness, they were shocked by the “different work ethics, and the different mode of communication with colleagues”. One said, “It took me a long process of readjustment to get used to the Chinese work environment again. Now my good friends are mostly returnees from New Zealand, or from Canada and the United States; our overseas experiences give us similar values. I am much more comfortable communicating via emails to my friends in New Zealand than talking to my colleagues at work here.” Return visits to New Zealand are common.

Furthermore, some interviewees mentioned their desire to have their children educated in New Zealand once they have completed a Chinese primary education. The former Motorola salesperson who decided to return for cultural reasons said, “My children are born in China, as I wanted them to be. But now I am not sure that they should stay in China when they’re older...I want them to be educated with New Zealand values. In New Zealand I learnt that one of the goals in life should be to live happily, not just fulfilling duties and making money.”

Under such circumstances, the returnees will no doubt continue to play a significant role in the linkages between the two countries. If it is not yet significant in the realm of direct trade, then it has already become very significant in terms of overseas students studying in New Zealand, and also in the realm of tourism.

A hybrid identity is emerging amongst this group that identify themselves as both New Zealanders and Chinese. The potential for further and stronger linkages are there, and will no doubt blossom into something concrete in future years. If the present migration trend is maintained, PRC migrants will continue to be the biggest ethnic Chinese group in New Zealand. Their experience as transmigrants as a group will no doubt grow, and they will find greater roles to play, both in host and receiving countries, economically and socially.

In the current on-going search for a re-definition of “migration” amongst scholars, the pattern of PRC migrant re-location, their cyclical behavior of returning, and their fluctuating sense of identity all serve as useful case studies in understanding new migrant aspirations and behaviour.

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