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Xinyu (Promio) Wang
Waseda University

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Publisher: International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons
P.O. Box 17
1211 Geneva 19
Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 717 9111
Fax: +41 22 798 6150
Email: hq@iom.int
Website: www.iom.int

This publication has been issued without formal editing by IOM.

ISBN 978-92-9068-844-0 (PDF)
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Chinese migrants' sense of belonging in Japan: Between digital and physical spaces

Xinyu (Promio) Wang
Waseda University

Edited by Karl Muller

Introduction

The rise of digital technologies in recent years has become important in facilitating a sense of belonging among migrants, both in their home and their host countries. “Belonging” to a certain society or community at the cultural, social and/or political level refers to a spatially and relationally constructed feeling, framed by daily interactions within the social environment in which one lives (Coates, 2019:470). In the contemporary information era, this sense of belonging is shaped by individuals’ interactions within both physical and digital spaces, as the digital technologies that we employ mediate the construction of our everyday lives, experiences of identification, self-positioning and home-making, regardless of physical distance (Morley and Robbins, 2004). Broadly speaking, digital technologies represent infrastructures, incorporating physical devices as well as applications that are based on digital forms, such as the internet, smartphones, instant messaging and social networking services (SNSs) (Gere, 2008; Leurs and Smets, 2018). These technologies together create a digitized and mediated sphere, which is often understood as the digital space (Diminescu, 2008) for individuals to interact with each other. Migrants’ interaction in the digital space can be perceived as a form of co-presence. Apart from facilitating the compression of time and space (Tsagarousianou, 2019), digital technologies introduce the possibility of “being” in relation not just to the home and host countries, but also to digitally connected transnational communities.

Against this background, this paper considers digital technologies as a media environment that incorporates the online and the offline and represents a continuum of physical and digitized life experiences (van den Boomen et al., 2011). The accessibility of digital technologies and their embedment in social structures is blurring the distinctions between online and offline spaces (Castles, 2017:338; Miller and Slater, 2000:5), to the extent that the two are “not disengaged and separate but intertwined in daily practice and event” (Ponzanesi and Leurs, 2014:11).

While existing discussions often perceive migrants’ social lives as either online or offline (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018), this paper illustrates how the sense of belonging among migrants is constructed and modified by their interaction with both digital and physical spaces. Drawing on interviews with 55 Chinese migrants in Japan between 2017 and 2019, the paper demonstrates that their notion of belonging is not fixed, but can oscillate and fluctuate, sometimes in light of their ties with an imagined, transnational Chinese community. As the largest foreign resident group in Japan (MOJ, 2019a), the case of Chinese migrants in Japan provides a good illustration of the complexity of transnational historical and cultural affiliations, the multiple spatiality of belonging, and the merging of online and offline societal lives in the context of the contemporary digital era. Given this perspective, this paper first provides an overview of the existing literature on the topic before presenting the methodology employed and the analytical focus on Chinese migrants in Japan. It then analyses the process of construction of their sense of belonging and highlights some potential policy implications.

Literature review

The academic literature has extensively discussed the role of digital technologies, such as smartphones, social media platforms and apps, for migrants to remain in touch with their homeland and form new connections in destination countries (Leurs and Smets, 2018; Retis and Tsagarousianou, 2019). The use of digital technologies has indeed facilitated migrants' social interactions at the transnational level through increased "accessibility" on a "multilocality" plane (Georgiou, 2011). With the ease of digital communication (Levitt, 2004), "multilocality" refers to the increased engagement of migrants' social lives across national boundaries, which inextricably locates them within a transnational context (Castles, 2017; Vertovec, 1999). These transnational lives are in turn supported by the accessibility and appropriation of digital technologies that maintain and actualize migrants' transnational practices (Tsagarousianou, 2019:84). Digital technologies thus provide a sociocultural environment in which migrants live their everyday migratory experiences (Misa, 2014), allowing them to reconstruct, regroup, and transfer sets of social, economic, and political practices and meanings from specific geographical and historical points of their homeland to remote locations (Beck and Cronin, 2014). Migrants are endowed with "new possibilities of (digital) co-presence" (Tsagarousianou, 2019:88) in multiple localities, without the need to physically move between home and destination countries (Candidatu et al., 2019). Therefore, digital technologies are crucial in understanding the life trajectories of migrants on a transnational plane.

With an increased focus on migrants' transnational lives due to digital technologies, along with easier means of transport and globalization (Faist, 2000; Castles, 2017; Vertovec, 1999), the understanding of migrants' self-positioning between origin and destination countries has moved from a Nation-State-centric perspective of belonging, to one emphasizing transnational communities and cosmopolitanism (Diminescu, 2008; Faist, 2000; Lash, 2002; Portes, 2010). Migrants' sense of belonging is often perceived as fluctuating between the host and home country defined by common ethnicity (Ang, 2004; Vertovec, 2003), which has at times been understood as creating cultural boundaries for the integration of migrants in the host society (Beck, 2000; Georgiou, 2013; Urry, 2000).

Concerning Chinese migrants, empirical evidence highlights the impact of digital technology on their sense of belonging and their transnational and diasporic ties with those of the same ethnicity in their countries of origin and destination (Schneider, 2018; Sun, 2019; Wong, 2003). The cultivation of cross-border affiliations and social ties among migrants influences migrants' self-positioning and their conception of belonging to States such as the home and host countries. In this sense, as famously framed by Anderson (2006), the concept of "imagined community" is important and useful in understanding how a feeling of solidarity with a community, society or nation is made and sustained among individuals. While the concept has focused on the material and practical conditions for the production of community imagining, such as newspapers, maps and museums (Calhoun, 2016), the contemporary social and technological changes associated with globalization have reshaped the notion of an imagined community at a transnational plane. Therefore, this paper uses the notion of "transnational imagined community" to understand how Chinese migrants' feelings of belonging are constructed across their transnational and digitized lives.

The emphasis on the impact of digital technologies on the construction process of migrants' transnational sense of belonging has, however, led some to largely underplay the growing interdependence of digital and physical spaces (Willems, 2019:1193). Some scholars have posited that contemporary migrants live in a "transnational habitus" (Nedelcu, 2012), as consumers of a "media repertoire" (Hasebrink and Popp, 2006), or participants in a "polymedia environment" (Madianou and Miller, 2012), with a sense of belonging constructed throughout their connected (Diminescu, 2008), mediatized (Hepp et al., 2012) or digitized (Everett, 2009) daily experiences.

However, it is worth noting that such digitized daily experiences are an outcome of their integrated, rather than separated, online and offline lives. Hence, while the use of digital technologies contributes to migrants' sense of transnational belonging (Levitt, 2004), the physical/offline space is as important as the digital/online space in fostering one's sense of (transnational) belonging (Levitt and Schiller, 2006; Tsagarousianou, 2019).

Therefore, in this paper, the analytical focus is on the interdependence of the online and offline – digital and physical spaces – as well as the link between transnational digital practices and the sense of belonging signified by such practices. In other words, this study approaches digital technologies as a communicative environment, rather than as “a catalogue of ever proliferating but discrete technologies” (Madianou and Miller 2012:169).

Methodology

This paper reports the findings of face-to-face in-depth interviews with 55 Chinese migrants residing in Japan, conducted between June 2017 and August 2019. This individual-level analysis reveals the divergent subjectivities held by the individuals regarding their sense of belonging (Fauser, 2017). The interviewees were identified through personal networks, using snowball sampling. The group comprises 30 females and 25 males, reflecting the gender ratio of the Chinese migrant populations in Japan (MOJ, 2019b). As shown in Table 1, the interviewees reside in three prefectures of Japan, namely Tokyo, Kanagawa and Saitama. These areas were the focus of informant recruitment, as they are the most densely populated by Chinese migrants in Japan (ibid).

Table 1: Basic demographics of informants (N = 55)

	Female	Male	Total
Age group			
20–30	20	12	32
31–40	7	10	17
41–55	3	3	6
Residential area			
Tokyo	18	15	33
Kanagawa	6	5	11
Saitama	6	5	11
Length of residence in Japan			
3–5 years	11	6	17
5–7 years	12	16	28
8 years and above	7	3	10
Educational attainment			
Undergraduate degree	24	13	37
Master degree	5	9	14
Doctoral degree and above	1	3	4
Monthly income level (see footnote 1)			
200,000–300,000 JPY	8	6	14
300,000–500,000 JPY	20	13	33
Above 500,000 JPY	2	6	8

The interviews and their analysis aimed to collect insights from migrants with economic independence and a stable life condition in Japan, so that the use of digital technologies could be considered the only prominent variable in the research. Hence controls were placed on educational attainment (higher education and above), income¹ (fully independent), language skills (N1 level² certificate in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test), and length of residence in Japan (at least three years).

Interviewees were asked to sign a consent form before the interview. Identifiable information such as real names, company names and accurate addresses were not collected during the interviews to ensure privacy. Instead, all interviewees were invited to choose a pseudonym for themselves. Therefore, all names appearing in this paper are aliases.

The interviews were semi-structured and guided by the literature review. Discussions during the interview were focused on:

- (1) how Chinese migrants used digital technologies in their daily lives (i.e. the purpose of their digital technology appropriation and their usage frequency);
- (2) how such technologies shaped their daily interactions with homeland/host societies, both digitally and physically; and
- (3) whether there had been any changes in their perceptions of their homeland/host societies due to their use of digital technologies.

Although fully consistent with the theoretical framework and existing research, the empirical evidence collected from the interview is based on a small sample (N = 55) of Chinese migrants in Japan. It is thus difficult to deal adequately with unobserved heterogeneity. While the qualitative, individual-level analysis provides insights on the way digital and physical spaces shape Chinese migrants' sense of belonging, one should be careful not to draw generalized and definitive conclusions from the findings presented in this paper.

Findings and discussions

The digital space: Fostering a transnational sense of belonging

Chinese migrants in Japan present a paradigmatic example of how diverse digital technologies can be comprehensively utilized to create and sustain a sense of belonging to the receiving and origin countries, as well as to a transnational imagined community. Connections are not only made between home and host societies, but also between the local and the global, as Chinese migrants actively seek to be linked with those of the same ethnicity, both in their local communities and elsewhere in the world. In this way, Chinese migrants cultivate both short- and long-distance relationships that are valuable for the identification process and the formation of a transnational “imagined community” subject to shared emotions and co-ethnicity.

For instance, 40-year-old Qinhui, who has been living in Japan since the 1990s and works as a banker, was one of many to indicate that his daily use of digital technologies is highly multidimensional. While Qinhui uses email for business communication, WeChat to stay in touch with his contacts in China and LINE for “everyday chitchat” with his Japanese friends, he also reads the news on his iPad and uses online banking and Google Translate on his iPhone for business. Moreover, he employs a remote surveillance system on his computer to ensure that his house is secure when he travels.

¹ The lowest income bar is calculated based on the 2018 average monthly earning level of Tokyo, Kanagawa and Saitama, published by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Available from www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/youran/roudou-nenpou/03.html.

² See Japan Foundation (2012) for explanation.

Qinhui's case provides an illustration of a Chinese migrant making use of a range of digital technologies in his daily practices in different social and emotional contexts (Madianou and Miller, 2012). His experience greatly echoes that of other interviewees, such as 28-year-old entrepreneur Yuxuan, who explained, "I can definitely feel that the world today is totally digitalized. I use varied (digital) tools seamlessly and simultaneously, like emails, video calls and news feeds... what cannot be achieved by one app can always be accomplished by other apps, and there's almost nothing that can't be done online."

All the interviewees indicated that they made daily use of digital technologies for various purposes, including communication and sending/receiving remittances, which is unsurprising given that 78.4 per cent of Chinese migrants in Japan utilize digital technologies on a daily basis (KDDI Research Institute, 2005; MIC, 2016). What is more notable is that their migrant life experiences are rearticulated into a broader, global context based on the recognition of fellow Chinese migrant communities in other remote locations. The life stories of Chinese migrants living in other locations, for instance in East Asian regions – including the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China, – is often internalized into the narratives of those interviewed, leading to the construction of an "imagined Chinese community" that does not only extend to the homeland and destination country, but goes beyond to cover multiple territories. For example, Xuefen, a 47-year-old businesswoman who has been living in Japan for 26 years, discussed her use of various social media platforms, such as Weibo and Instagram, to follow the news and lives of fellow Chinese nationals, sympathizing with their experiences.

Xuefen's testimony not only reveals the impact of digital technologies on Chinese migrants' sense of space, but also illustrates how such technologies allow Chinese migrants in Japan to internalize and integrate within their own narratives the experiences of Chinese migrants in other regions. As a result, she manifested a sense of belonging to an imagined Chinese community through feelings of empathy and solidarity with other Chinese migrants. She thus identified herself both as a Chinese migrant in Japan and as an "overseas Chinese from the mainland just like them".

Similarly, Peng, a 42-year-old technical director, referred to the Chinese migrants in the United States who experienced the 2018 Alaska earthquake: "It reminds me about what I have experienced during the 2011 Tohoku earthquake", while 25-year-old Yuanjie also felt empathy for those Chinese migrants in France, as other migrants, who have at times been the who became collateral victims of the 2018 yellow vest movement, in their quest for a more equitable social welfare system.

The compassion expressed by the interviewees reveals that, despite their diverse backgrounds such as age, gender, occupation and years of residence in Japan, they were able to internalize the narratives and experiences of other Chinese groups in remote locations. They do share a common identity with "overseas Chinese from the mainland".

Although the aim of this paper is not to investigate what a "Chinese" identity means and entails, it is worth noting that, for those interviewed, their transnational consciousness is largely based on the emphasis of an exclusionary ethnic identity. Only with their co-ethnic counterparts in other regions do Chinese migrants in Japan form a sense of belonging to an imagined transnational community and feel solidarity with a shared identity as overseas Chinese. In this sense, Chinese migrants' transnational sense of belonging is essentially ethnic. While such an imagined community does not have a clear territorial bound, due to digital technologies' capacity to de-territorialize the physical boundaries between home, host and third countries, it certainly has a clear ethnic distinctiveness: that only one certain group, namely overseas Chinese people, can belong to such community. In addition, for this transnational community, its distinctively defined ethnic boundary is further consolidated through its members' acknowledgement of certain shared negative overseas experiences. In this sense, for Chinese migrants in Japan, their sense of belonging to a transnational community has deep emotional and cultural roots, and is defined by an exclusionary ethnic identity.

The continuum between digital and physical spaces: Negotiating a multidimensional sense of belonging

While the digital space enables a transnational sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan, it is insufficient alone to explain the construction process of their sense of belonging, as their digitized everyday lives are not simply empowered by technologies, but also by “an ongoing material reality” (Ponzanesi and Leurs, 2014:11). Indeed, the interviews in this study highlight the importance of a continuum between digital and physical spaces, where both mutually contribute to the formation of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan. For example, the importance of both digital and physical spaces is quite clearly reflected in the testimony of 52-year-old Jiayong, who migrated to Japan 20 years ago and works as a real estate broker:

I have this part of my soul that keeps reminding me about my Chinese roots every time I chat with my families and friends back in China...I feel chatting [with] them is like a self-fulfilment process of me enabling myself to still be a Chinese. [However] I also constantly realize the difference between those who are left behind and me...like when I'm walking on the street and seeing all these “welcome Chinese visitors” and “discount for Alipay [a Chinese smartphone-based payment app] payment” signs, I know I'm no longer part of the country [China].

When inquiring further into Jiayong's feeling of being “separated” from China due to these signs, he elaborated:

Because [those signs are] hard evidence. Apparently I'm not a Chinese visitor, since all my life is here [in Tokyo], nor do I use Alipay...I even wasn't able to register an account, because I don't have a Chinese phone number nor a Chinese bank account... it's hard to tell which side I belong to, China or Japan.

Jiayong's case illustrates that, while the daily communication with those left-behind contacts via digital technologies provides a space in which he can “engage in regular imagining of being Chinese” (Sun, 2019:170), the physical space around him acts as a constant reminder that the fulcrum of his daily life leans to the host society. In other words, where he is physically located constitutes the material basis for negotiating his digitized diasporic experiences.

Furthermore, Jiayong finds it “hard to tell” which Nation-State dominates his sense of belonging. This experience suggests that, depending on how he engages with the continuum of online and offline environments in a particular moment or setting, his sense of belonging may extend to multiple spatial poles. Therefore, selective engagement with the continuum of online and offline environments by Chinese migrants in Japan demonstrates how their sense of belonging can be context- or situation-based, and is shaped by the contact and situation in which they are involved at a particular time.

This is confirmed by many of the interviewees. For instance, 22-year-old Nanxing, currently a university student who migrated to Japan with her parents in 2003, elaborated on the key role of online/offline engagement:

I was born in Beijing...now every time I go back, I need to use the navigation app, otherwise I will be lost...And it's funny that sometimes when my Japanese friends ask me about the city, I turn to my left-behind Chinese friends...And yes, in terms of [my] passport I'm still Chinese, but it's very hard to be related to places that you barely know about.

On one hand, Nanxing's use of a map application to navigate her hometown indicates an interdependence between digital technologies and spaces – with this particular online–offline intersection serving as a validation of her lack of acquaintance with her homeland and thereby undermining any sense of belonging thereto. On the other hand, it also reveals that her digital engagement in transnational activities, such as chatting with both Japanese and Chinese contacts, does not necessarily lead to the construction of a transnational sense of belonging, depending on the context of that communication. Combining the stories of Jiayong and Nanxing, it is evident that, for them, the use of digital technologies and the formation of an affirmed attachment to a particular Nation-State or transnational social network is not linear nor sequential, but is informed by the physical space in which they engage with a particular context. Therefore, their senses of belonging are highly situation and context based, with the pivot point of their sense of belonging oscillating between the home and host countries.

Conclusion

By focusing on the interaction between digital and physical spaces, this paper situates Chinese migrants in Japan in a transnational context, and reveals the important role of both online and offline engagement in the construction and shaping of Chinese migrants' sense of belonging.

First, qualitative evidence drawn from interviews with 55 Chinese migrants in Japan indicates that daily use of digital technologies allows individuals to engage with an “imagined community” on a transnational plane, including both the Chinese community at home and in the host countries, and also those in third countries and regions. In this sense, the digital space allows Chinese migrants in Japan to situate themselves in an ethnically defined transnational community and to maintain more or less direct transnational ties with other globally dispersed Chinese communities through shared emotions and experiences. The sense of belonging to this transnational Chinese community is the result of collectively interpreted experiences between Chinese migrants in Japan and elsewhere, taking the form of the construction of a “shared imagination” of “we” (Tsagarousianou, 2019: 91). In effect, as underlined by interviewees, “We are all overseas Chinese from the mainland.”

Second, by focusing on the influence of physical spaces, this paper argues that for Chinese migrants in Japan, their sense of belonging from a transnational perspective can extend to multiple spatial poles due to their selective engagement with the continuum of online and offline environments. Empirical evidence collected for this research indicates that, for those interviewed, digital technologies frame their sense of belonging as rooted in the homeland, host society or indeed within an ethnically defined transnational community. However, what determines and guides the pivot point of their sense of belonging is what they see, where they are, and with whom they interact in physical space at a particular time. Therefore, Chinese migrants' sense of belonging can fluctuate based on their constantly changing dynamics of online/offline engagements.

Therefore, the excerpts presented in this paper do not indicate “patterns” or “directions” of how digital technologies, in combination with the physical environment, push a sense of belonging among Chinese migrants toward a particular Nation-State or community. Rather, these examples support the argument that, for Chinese migrants in Japan, the sense of belonging is multidimensional and context based. Specifically, their online participation, together with the ongoing physical realities, mean that their sense of belonging is relationally constituted across various platforms, territories and spaces. This feeling of belonging is mutually influenced by both digital and physical spaces, and can fluctuate among the homeland, host society and an imagined transnational community.

The above findings indicate the importance of factoring into migration policy frameworks migrants' increasing involvement in transnational practices and their multidimensional feelings of belonging. The experiences of Chinese migrants in Japan illustrate that, from a transnational perspective, host country engagement and the maintenance of ties with one's homeland are not incompatible (Levitt, 2004). However, migrants' multiple affiliations and sense of belonging still need to be more fully recognized in Asian countries, including Japan and China (Castles, 2017). Citizenships are continuously acknowledged in a relatively static, Nation-State-based manner, and citizens are clearly identified based on common cultural characteristics, ethnic homogeneity and shared heritage. In these countries, migrants are expected to go through a process of adaptation or assimilation (Castles and Davidson, 2000), which contradicts the reality of their transnational and multidimensional lives, as demonstrated in this paper. Legally recognizing dual citizenship, for example, would give migrants more freedom and autonomy to negotiate their transnational social ties.

This conclusion also goes beyond the particular cases of Japan or China. The use of digital technologies in relation to physical spaces is not a peculiarity or culturally/socially unique behaviour of Chinese migrants, but is rather a common part of the digitized life shared by many migrant and non-migrant populations. Hence, the examples presented in this research have the potential to yield more general implications. This research sheds light on how migrants, as transnational actors, actively make connections, form networks, and set down roots, through their engagement with daily digitized life in an increasingly globalized society.

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Xinyu (Promio) Wang is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the Graduate School of Asian–Pacific Studies, Waseda University. His research critically analyses the identity performance of international migrants, especially Chinese migrants in Japan and the United Kingdom. His main research interest lies in the analysis of migrants' transnational sociocultural practices.

Xin was awarded his BEng with Honours from University of Liverpool, a MSc in Development Studies from the London School of Economics, a PGCert in Business Administration from St Mary's University (London), a MSc in migration studies from the London School of Economics, and worked as an assistant lecturer in Economics at the Hunan Institute of Engineering before arriving at Waseda University to pursue his PhD degree.



International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 717 9111 • Fax: +41 22 798 6150
Email: hq@iom.int • Website: www.iom.int