

Chapter 17

Studying Digital Media in the Diasporic Transnationalism Context: The Case of International Migrants in Japan

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This chapter explores the complexity of migrant communities in Japan through the lens of digital media. It aims to illustrate how migrants' everyday diasporic experiences and their digital media usage are manifested in the Japanese context, so as to explore the intersection of digital connectivity and human mobility. The first section dissects the concept of "migrants in Japan," followed by an introduction to transnationalism as a theoretical toolkit for digital migration studies. This chapter is then concluded by a case study focusing on digital media appropriation among Chinese migrants in Japan, demonstrating migrants' indigenized application of digital media and transnational social engagement.

Introduction

With the rise of digital technologies, the time we are living in is marked by two interlocked phenomena, namely globalization and digitization. Globalization brings an easier means of transport together with evolving and transgressing technologies, leading to the increasing interaction, interpenetration and interdependence of economic, social and political activities across national boundaries. Meanwhile, digitization facilitates these transnational activities. Digital media, such as the internet and internet-based hardware (i.e., computers and smartphones) and software (i.e., social networking services, digital communication technologies and online streaming), have expedited the global process of interconnectivity and digitalized exchange, where flows of ideas and ideologies, languages and cultures contribute to the construction of a borderless world.

The increasingly interconnected and transnational media may also transform the meanings of being mobile and the logic of migration. Although transnational connections have always constituted an intrinsic element of human mobility, the instant communication and constant contact contemporary migrants enjoy differentiate them from their counterparts in other periods of history. Using digital media to mediate texts, images, sounds, discourses

and ideologies, migrants today are able to engage in continuous contact with the homeland and at the same time negotiate the local reality in their host society as well as while on the move. In the context where digital media turn mobile individuals into connected dots (Diminescu 2008) that together compose a transnational social formation (Vertovec 1999), digitally connected migrants are no longer just a group of displaced people. Instead, through their development of new modes of social organizations, group actions, as well as collectively interpreted diasporic experiences (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Wang 2020a), they are now designated as “transnational communities” (Anderson 1983; Retis and Tsagarousianou 2019; Ponzanesi 2020).

This concept of “transnational communities,” as Appadurai (1996) argues, is essential to understand the role of digital media and its culture in mediating and facilitating today’s complex ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, finanscapas and ideoscapas. In addition, it also helps scholars to narrate social and political mobilizations among various diasporic groups, particularly in the case of Japan. For instance, in contrast to other popular immigration countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia, Japan persistently refuses to identify itself as an immigration country, instead promoting a national identity that emphasizes the myth of ethnic homogeneity and cultural uniqueness (Liu-Farrer 2020). In a society where migrants are institutionally, culturally and socially considered foreign and alien (Liu-Farrer 2020), using “transnational communities” as a framework allows us to understand how migrants negotiate and adjust their self-positioning in the Japanese social context, and produce varying narratives of belonging as a response to their perceived marginality in Japanese society. Indeed, recent research indicates that for many migrant communities in Japan, such as the Chinese and the Brazilian, digital media have become a crucial tool to grapple with the distinction between themselves and an ethnonationalist Japanese society (Retis 2020; Liu-Farrer 2020).

Against this backdrop, this chapter explores the use of digital media among international migrants, particularly Chinese migrants living in Japan. It illustrates migrants’ negotiation between themselves and the Japanese social context from a digital and transnational perspective, to explore the intersection of digital connectivity, human mobilities, and social networks (Castells 2010). Before I discuss how and why digital media has emerged as a key space for migrants to interact with both local and global socio-cultural conditions, I first dissect the concept of “migrants in Japan.” What are the characteristics and variations among migrant groups in Japan? How is their media usage different from those of local citizens? After providing an overview of the migrant population in Japan, the following section introduces transnationalism as a theoretical toolkit for digital media and migration studies. I then conclude this chapter by sharing some findings from a recent study of digital media appropriation and transnationalism among Chinese migrants in Japan. I offer this case study, a combination of interview records together with complementary survey data, to demonstrate the indigenized application of transnational digital media, and how the interaction between everyday diasporic experiences and digital media usage is manifested in the context of Chinese migrants in Japan.

Understanding migrant populations and their use of digital media in Japan

The first question researchers often need to address when studying migrants' media use is how to do justice to their diversity and complexity. In the case of Japan, at the end of December 2020, statistics indicate that the country was hosting approximately 2.89 million mid- to long-term¹ migrants (including permanent residents and informal migrants) (MOJ 2020). About 76 per cent of this culturally and ethnically diversified population was constituted by migrants from China (778,112), Vietnam (448,053), South Korea (426,908), the Philippines (279,660), Brazil (208,538) and Taiwan (55,872). On the one hand, this highly diversified migrant population is attributed to changes in migration policy and economic conditions in both the sending and receiving countries. Le Bail (2013) indicates that Japan's significant migrant population is partially a result of its continuous effort² to attract (un)skilled migrant workers as a strategy to overcome labor shortages and increase global competitiveness. On the other hand, Japan's diasporic population profile is also a reflection of socio-cultural factors, subject to migrants' individual manifestations, and has its own historical roots. For example, in terms of the significant presence of Brazilian migrants in Japan, from the existing empirical evidence we understand that many of them are *nikkeijin* (ethnic Japanese), whose origins lie in more than 100 years of Japanese emigration to Brazil (Higuchi 2005). Their "return" to Japan is therefore often perceived as mutually supported by Japan's Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act in 1989 (Higuchi 2005),³ as well as the desire to find their ethnic and cultural roots and the imagination of affinity to Japan manifested by blood ties (Saenz and Murga 2011; Nishida 2018).

Many other diasporic groups in Japan, such as the Korean community, share a similar level of complexity. As the third largest diasporic population in Japan⁴ after the Chinese and Vietnamese (MOJ 2020), its complexity is not only represented by its population size, but also by the fact that about two thirds of this community are *zainichi* Koreans—Koreans who came (or were forcibly brought) to Japan before and during World War II as colonial subjects, or their descendants (Mizuno and Mun 2015). Despite the fact that over 80 per cent of *zainichi* Koreans were born in Japan and a significantly large proportion of this demographic is constituted by second, third and fourth generations, they remain institutionally and legally categorized as *gaikokujin* (foreigners) (Lee 2012). In this sense, Japan is considered a nation with fourth-generation immigrant issues derived from its exclusivist policies and fantasies of racial homogeneity in dealing with diasporic populations, particularly colonial subjects.

The cases of *nikkei* Brazilians and *zainichi* Koreans reflect the complexity and diversity of diasporic populations in Japan in their aggregate social form. On an individual level, we can also observe migrants' heterogeneity from their personal diasporic experiences, individual predispositions, expectations as well as motivations, which often lead to their diversified migratory patterns as well as post-migration life trajectories. For instance, some ethnographic studies on Chinese migrants in Japan reveal that their imaginations of Japan as a country full of educational and economic opportunities serve as a major pull factor that encourages their China-Japan emigration (Liu-Farrer 2012, 2020). For many of them, this China-Japan movement therefore represents their ideal of success and the hope of achieving a better life (Coates 2019). In contrast to their desired lifestyles, however, the post-migration reality faced by many is employment in the 3K industries. Since the implementation of the foreign

technical intern system in 1993, migrant workers have become an indispensable force in Japan's *kiken*, *kitsui*, and *kitanai* (respectively dangerous, demanding, and dirty) industries, such as agriculture, cattle breeding, textile manufacturing, and food processing, and are largely perceived as a source of low-wage labor for unskilled jobs. By the end of 2020, there were 73,000 Chinese technical interns, constituting 9.3 per cent of the Chinese population in Japan. The majority work in the 3K industries, facing various forms of social marginalization such as discrimination, language barriers, mental and physical abuses, as well as low-income levels (Ochiai 2010). In this context, some Chinese migrants perceive their diasporic experiences in Japan as a paradoxical sense of simultaneous accomplishment and failure (Ochiai, 488). While their mobility to Japan illustrates the constant effort made to achieve their object of desire, the post-migration reality serves as a reminder that they are still far away from reaching that goal.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the construction of national identity in China relies on positioning Japan as the ultimate “other” (He 2013). In this context, Chinese migrants’ awareness of the fact that they are living in the land of the ultimate “other” results in diversified diasporic experiences and self-identifications (Wang 2020b). Digital media influence these experiences and self-identifications in a couple of ways. Firstly, empirical evidence indicates that while Chinese migrants can enjoy instant contact with the homeland, this also means that their everyday life experiences are now mutually shaped by a compound set of spatial and social factors in both home and host societies (Coates 2019). Secondly, recent findings reveal that through the current global terrain that populates cross-border flows, Chinese migrants in Japan are capable of domesticating and internalizing the diasporic experiences of fellow overseas Chinese in other regions, which may result in different self-identifications not only between the homeland and the host society, but also in relation to the transnational Chinese community (Wang 2020b).

In this regard, many scholars have been discussing migrants’ transnational networks in relation to digital media.⁵ For instance, Georgiou (2011) describes contemporary migrants’ lives as characterized by “multilocality” and “accessibility.” On the one hand, “multilocality” indicates that migrants increasingly find themselves engaging in social lives across national boundaries with the help of digital media, which inextricably locate them in a transnational context (Castles 2017; Vertovec 1999). On the other hand, “accessibility” suggests that migrants’ transnational practices are largely actualized by the availability of digital media (Tsagarousianou 2019). Although these studies reflect different digital media and migration studies paradigms depending on the scholarly positions informing them (Candidatu et al. 2019), they commonly conceptualize migration as a dynamic movement and as networked webs of information exchange and knowledge transfer through the lens of digital media (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010).

However, while we try to understand how digital media provide migrants with a mediated and connected network to re-construct, re-ground and transfer their diasporic experiences (Beck and Cronin 2014), it is equally important to acknowledge that such transnationality is largely subject to digital accessibility. Therefore, the migratory experiences of those who do not have access to digital media, as well as the differences in terms of media practices among different generations and migrant groups should be well recognized (Dhoest et al. 2013). For instance, in the case of Japan, a comparison in terms of the possession rate of smartphones as well as the usage rate of digital media⁶ between Japanese citizens and different migrant groups illustrates the importance of avoiding romanticizing and generalizing media usage

behavior across generations and populations (MIC 2016). A report released by the Ministry of International Affairs and Communications (2016) indicates that the younger generation (i.e., individuals between 20 and 29) of both migrant groups and Japanese citizens generally share a higher smartphone possession rate and digital media usage frequency. However, compared with Japanese citizens, US and UK migrants, Korean migrants⁷ and Mainland Chinese migrants demonstrate a significantly higher dependence on digital media. Specifically, for Korean migrants, the report points out that the highest usage rate of digital media is attributed to migrants aged 30 to 49. For Chinese migrants in Japan, although the 30-49-year-old population cohort has the highest smartphone possession rate, it is only 0.5 per cent higher than their younger counterparts (MIC 2016).

Furthermore, by comparing the smartphone possession rate between Japanese citizens and migrant populations, one finds that although all migrant groups demonstrate a significantly higher rate than local citizens, the difference is most visible among older generations. Compared to the fact that only 44.5 per cent of Japanese citizens who are aged 50 or above have smartphones, the rate among migrant populations is, on average, 33 per cent higher. Moreover, for Korean and Chinese migrants, smartphone possession rates are more than double that of Japanese citizens' (MIC 2016).

These data are indicative of migrants' dependence on distant interaction and sociability through digital connectivity. In addition, the data also imply that, compared to non-migrant populations, migrants most clearly exemplify broader evolutions brought by globalization and digitalization (Appadurai 1996), in the sense that they are globally and transnationally connected through the use of digital media.

As digital media are increasingly embedded within our social infrastructures (Miller and Slater 2003), observing migrants' use of digital media allows us to more clearly understand and conceptualize the role of such media in the processes of human mobility, both in a geographical and social sense. Geographically, migrants' media use exemplifies the way information from the "home" country flows to the "host" country, as well as how this information flow safeguards interpersonal connections, family ties, cultural heritages, social norms and practices transnationally. Various empirical studies (e.g., Adams and Ghose 2003; Pertierra 2012; Sofos and Tsagarousianou 2013) reveal that while information travels across national boundaries through digital media, it also helps with creating transnational networks among individuals, groups and organizations. Such transnational networks in turn serve the diffusion of awareness of better lifestyles, economic gain and wealth, leading to chain migration (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010). In this way, digital media permits the understanding of migration as a social product—an outcome that reflects the individual, economic and political parameters of both homeland and destination societies (boyd 2010).

Furthermore, some scholars describe migrants' participation in both home and host countries' social, economic and political activities through digital media as a process of "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" of the nation (Duara 1993; Dirlik 2004). It is deterritorializing because through digital media, migrants can actively participate in social, economic and political activities of not only their homelands, but also other remote regions (Duara 1993). Therefore, their transnational social practices and engagements challenge the traditional understanding of national boundaries, questioning the self-evidence of the national and the practice of using it as the default basis for migration studies.

Digital media-based transnational networks can also be interpreted as the reterritorialization of a nation. While migrants are able to construct codes of communication and cross

boundaries between “us” and “others” that were once defined by static physical demarcations (Diminescu 2008), empirical evidence indicate that migrants’ transnational communities are often defined by ethnic boundaries. For instance, in the case of Chinese migrants living in the US and Japan, it has been found that their senses of belonging to the transnational Chinese community are predominantly defined by Mainland Chinese ethnicity, membership to which is not accessible to ethnic others (Dirlik 2004; Wang 2020b). In this context, the transnational community can be perceived as the reconstruction of the ethnic nation on a transnational scale, which Ang (2004) describes as “transnational nationalism.”

Although the studies mentioned above focus on different migrant communities and groups, they commonly illustrate that with digital media, migrants’ identity and self-identification are not a matter of essence but positioning, constantly changing in correspondence to different contexts and in response to different events (Gillespie, 2007, 285). To a certain extent, these works portray digital media as a medium that surpasses the assumed disjuncture between migrants and their homelands, allowing them to renegotiate their identities and senses of belonging. This approach, which emphasizes transnationalism and migrants’ transnational networks, has become a substantial body of theoretical consideration and empirical research in the field of media and migrant studies. Transnationalism theories contribute to a shift from a more essentialist notion of homeland, nation, locality, race, and ethnicity to a focus on transnationality, imagination, hybridity and heterogeneity that takes shape and is activated through diasporic mobility and connectivity (Tsagarousianou 2019).

Studying digital media and its impact on migrants in Japan

Although studies that focus on the digital media usage among migrants in Japan are not abundant, recent scholarship has begun to illustrate how certain migrant communities (i.e. (*zainichi*) Korean, *nikkei* Brazilian, and Mainland Chinese) transfer and reground practices and meanings derived from specific geographical locations and cultural and historical contexts in the host society (Hyun 2011; Retis 2020; Wang 2020b). With an eye to Japan’s multiple history- (and exclusivist policy-) derived issues in dealing with its diasporic populations, many of these studies indicate that to a certain extent, migrants’ extensive use of digital media can be seen as a reactive outcome to the historical context as well as the liminality they experience in Japanese society. For instance, against the background of Japan’s colonization of the Korean Peninsula, which led to the forced migration of more than three million Koreans in the 20th century (Hyun 2011, 33–34), Hyun (2011) explores the media consumption of the Korean diasporic community in Japan, arguing that Korean ethnic media serve a crucial role in unifying those dispersed Korean populations, including Korean migrants, *zainichi* Koreans as well as Chinese Koreans.⁸ In this regard, the transnational community for Korean migrants in Japan is similar to its Chinese counterpart, with ethnicity becoming a colloquial referent (Ang, 2004) for a collectively interpreted sense of belonging through the use of digital media.

For *nikkei* Brazilians in Japan, Retis (2020) argues that with the rise of digital media, the self-identification of contemporary *nisei* (second generation) and *sansei* (third generation) is largely based on their distinctive cultural identities. Upon their return to Japan, many *nikkei* Brazilians face discrimination due to lack of fluency in spoken Japanese (Watanabe 1995) as well as cultural differences (Tsuda 2004). Empirical evidence indicates that this perceived

discrimination in turn leads to a series of reactive initiatives to further broaden the cultural distinction between themselves and the local citizens through the consumption of ethnic media (Retis 2020). In doing so, they can “sustain a cultural continuity and distinct identities while keeping links with what they identify as their original homeland: Brazil” (Retis 2020, 302).

Similarly, Chinese migrants’ transnational connectivity is largely actualized through digital media. Digital forms of communication not only allow them to live transnationally, but also to negotiate their senses of belonging transnationally. For instance, through a 4-year ethnographic research project on this diasporic group, I found that digital media played an important role in making sense of their everyday diasporic experiences so they could engage in a constant imagining of being Chinese (Wang 2020b). This not only involves using digital media to maintain social ties with left-behind contacts in the homeland, but also using it to validate their overseas lives, making their diasporic experiences meaningful and referable to their lives and memories pre-migration. For example, some of my interviewees, including those who had become naturalized Japanese citizens, indicated that their daily consumption of ethnic media contents as well as communication with families and friends back in China serve as a self-fulfilment process that enables them to reconfirm their Chinese identity. These activities evoke memories and a sense of familiarity between their life experiences pre-immigration and their ongoing, everyday experiences post-immigration (Wang 2020b). However, it is worth noting that while this “(re)confirmed” Chinese identity represents migrants’ desire to remain culturally and socially related to China, it also illustrates their wishes to be de-linked from China politically. For instance, when conflicts occurred between Japan and China, such as the heated territorial dispute over a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea,⁹ many of my informants elaborated on how they would rely on different information sources, from Mainland China, Japan and other Chinese-speaking regions and countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, in order to obtain a politically unbiased perspective. For some of my informants, the ability to freely access various information via digital media gives them the opportunity to challenge “historical facts and truth” that are subject to national regime and political ideologies of the Chinese government. Given the fact that information that is considered politically sensitive or subversive to the Chinese Communist Party’s ruling regime is often restricted from dissemination within Mainland China (Schneider 2016), many informants perceive their ability to access such information as something that differentiates them from their left-behind counterparts. In this sense, I argue that digital media provide Chinese migrants with not only a transnational public space for them to maintain their cultural identity of being Chinese, but also an alternative for remaking a Chinese identity that may diverge from the Chinese state’s political ideologies.

Transnational media practice among Chinese migrants in Japan

In response to the need to address transnationalism among migrants in Japan through the lens of digital media, I now use Chinese migrants as a case study to further elaborate the complex dynamics between digital media practices and their senses of belonging. Factors that contribute to this complexity include the cultural and political relations between Japan and China that are deeply characterized by the wounds of previous wars, especially the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945) (Schneider 2016). They also include the conflict in

national identity building strategies between Japan and China—while the Japanese government has repeatedly promoted a national identity that emphasizes historical revisionism and democracy, China constructs itself on the basis of national reinvigoration, socialist values and the resolve to defend its core interests (He 2017). In this context, focusing on Chinese migrants’ digital practices in Japan provides us with an entry point to investigate migrants’ identity building, their cultural and heritage beliefs, as well as political agency “from below” (Leurs and Smets 2018). This bottom-up approach allows us to observe closely how they are placed in the center of the Sino-Japanese power geometry (Castles 2017), and re-emphasizes the importance of understanding diasporic belonging and identity as something that is actively produced by migrants, instead of merely the product of Japan-China power relations.

The analysis reported in this chapter is based on empirical research, including 415 online surveys and 61 in-depth interviews¹⁰ I conducted with Chinese migrants in Japan between June 2017 to April 2020. The online survey aimed to understand how Chinese migrants consume and appropriate digital media in their diasporic lives, including the forms of digital media they use, usage frequency and with whom they are building connections. The interviews focus on the divergent subjectivities of Chinese migrants’ notions of belonging and illustrate digital media’s role in shaping these notions and mediating their daily interactions with their homeland and host society. My informants comprised entrepreneurs (13), business investors (7), skilled workers (39) and spouses of Japanese citizens (2). They were recruited according to the following criteria: length of residence in Japan, educational attainment, income and Japanese language skills.¹¹ These control measures ensured that only the insights from migrants who were economically independent and had stable living conditions in Japan were collected, so the use of digital media was the only prominent variable in the research. Finally, in order to protect my informants’ privacy and ensure their anonymity, no identifiable information, such as their real name and residential address, was collected. All names mentioned in this paper are therefore aliases proactively provided by the interviewees.

Digital media as the basis for migrants’ social engagement

It is worth mentioning that while no control measures regarding digital media usage behavior (i.e., hours spent on digital media per day) were introduced during the participant recruitment stage of both the qualitative and quantitative researches, all participants indicated that they at least hold one form of digital media device (such as a smartphone, laptop or tablet PC). In fact, the majority (47.3 per cent) of online survey participants stated that they have four to five digital media devices, while those who only possess one device for digital media engagement comprised the smallest proportion (9 per cent) among the surveyed population. In addition, when participants were asked about hours spent on digital media consumption and its purposes, it is revealed that 36.4 per cent of participants (151), the largest group within the dataset, spend on average 2-3 hours per day on digital media. In terms of the purpose of their digital media appropriation, participants reported that they rely on digital media for tasks such as banking and investment related activities (23.5 per cent), household maintenance tasks such as paying bills and online shopping (70.4 per cent), recreational activities such as watching videos and playing games (44.6 per cent), communicating with friends and families (65.6 per cent), as well as obtaining news and information (66.3 per cent). These descriptive data indicate that divergent forms of digital media serving various purposes have created a comprehensive media environment within which Chinese

migrants are highly engaged. More importantly, the fact that more than 70 per cent actively use digital media in their daily household maintenance tasks illustrates that to a certain degree, digital media has become part of the social infrastructure in Japanese society, and serves as an important, supportive role to Chinese migrants' diasporic experiences. Indeed, as 28-year-old entrepreneur Yuxuan explained, "I can definitely feel that the world today is totally digitalized...I honestly can't imagine how anyone could live without digital media. That would be so scary as basically you are blind with no source to obtain any information". It is clear that for migrants such as Yuxuan, making use of and consuming a range of digital media has become a significant channel to connect to the social environment and carry out social interactions. In this sense, Chinese migrants' use of digital media is not a peculiarity, but a fairly common part of a continuous integration and engagement of online and offline elements in their mediated lives.

Digital media and the negotiated belonging

While Chinese migrants use digital media to sustain their transnational lifestyles in ways that are similar to other diasporic groups, they more importantly present a paradigmatic example of how such media may pose a significant influence on migrants' sense of belonging, which in this case, is still characterized by complex Sino-Japanese dynamics. For instance, my informant Tangyue, who migrated to Japan in 2011 to pursue higher education, serves as a good example to illustrate how digital media, together with the conflicts of the national identity construction strategies between Japan and China, pose an influence on her sense of belonging. When I interviewed her in 2018, Tangyue states that with her language skills in both Japanese and English, her world value and political perspectives have changed drastically during the first few years living in Japan. Because, unlike China, where information that is considered sensitive or threatening to the Chinese Communist Party's ruling regime is filtered from its media ecology (Schneider 2018), Japan for her is a "liberal land" (自由的国度) where she can freely access media content produced by non-Chinese agents. Tangyue indicates that accessing this information allows her to compare and contrast how a particular international affair may be narrated differently by different media agents representing different state ideologies:

When I read news written by foreign media, sometimes I can't help but wonder what the (Chinese Communist) Party is trying to hide from us...I do understand that for many international controversies, it is often your words against mine, and no states really have a solid and unbiased standpoint...but the fact that such information is filtered out in China has made me suspicious of our national regimes of truth. (Tangyue, 2019)

For Tangyue, transnational media contents not only contribute to the forming of a Chinese subjectivity (Ong and Nonini 1997) that is increasingly independent of the Party-state agenda and political ideologies, but also provide her with an alternative to Chinese ideals for remaking her identity. She elaborates that:

The difference in public opinion between China and Japan shocks me. I remember back in 2011 when some Chinese news reported on the Tōhoku earthquake,

I saw so many horrible comments on Weibo [...] like “this is the karma for what they have done to us” [...] and when I finally got the chance to learn how Japanese audiences reacted to our national tragedy, like the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, I was astounded over the empathy expressed by them, and this kind of information is screened out in China [...] Ever since I came here [Japan], I feel they [Japanese] are actually quite friendly to us [Chinese]...contrarily, I feel our public opinions are always driven by hatred towards them and I’m not proud of it. While our government always talks about “remembering the history,” I’d rather remember the good part [of the history], like our cultural richness, and get rid of thoughts that always see Japan as an enemy. I mean, it’s the year 9102 already.¹² (Tangyue, 2019)

From Tangyue’s narratives, we can clearly see how media contents help her to navigate between national ideologies promoted by Japan and China respectively. As He (2017) argues, through the constant reminiscence of a particular period of modern Chinese history, the Chinese national identity has become, for the most part, defined by the collective memory of suffering, as well as struggle, in resisting foreign aggressions. In this context, the Second Sino-Japanese War provides the crucial soil for the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) to cultivate its vision of a nationalism that is parallel to the Party-state agenda (He 2017), and Japan has become the ideal object for the CCP to establish the boundary between in- and out-groups (the “us versus them” narratives observed by Callahan (2010)), linking the Chinese national identity with anti-Japanese sentiments. However, it is clear that for Tangyue, access to variant narratives and national ideologies transmitted online, combined with her diasporic experiences, have offered her new ground to (re)negotiate the way she understands her Chinese identity. Consequently, she not only holds a suspicious attitude towards “(the Chinese) national regimes of truth,” but also proposes a Chinese identity that is defined by “cultural richness,” instead of a politically motivated patriotism that “always see(s) Japan as an enemy.”

Similarly, some of the other interviewees, such as 44-year-old Ningjing, a mechanical engineer, point out that emotions and ideologies transmitted through digital media have encouraged him to rethink his Chinese identity:

Last year, when my friends in China asked me what I would do on 13th December,¹³ I said I’d go to work just like any other ordinary day...I mean, what would they expect me to say? I know I’m a Chinese living in Japan, but this doesn’t mean that my life should be defined by the history...and although I do think what they did in Nanjing is vicious and immoral, when a certain piece of history is constantly used as a political tool, it loses its sentimental value to me. (Ningjing, 2019)

Ningjing’s statement not only indicates how Chinese migrants in Japan are constantly positioned at the center of the Sino-Japanese power negotiations, but also reveals that China’s propaganda strategies may serve as a double-edged sword to the CCP. On the one hand, the question proposed by Ningjing’s left-behind friends indicates that such anti-Japanese ideology helps to construct a sense of national unity (Schneider 2018). On the other hand, it is clear that digital media endows Chinese migrants such as Ningjin with opportunities to

negotiate the perceived conflict between China's political ideologies and their actual daily experiences in Japan, thereby redefining the meaning of being Chinese in ways that do not necessarily legitimize the ruling regime.

Transnationalism in what sense?

The cases of Tangyue and Ningjing provide us with an insight into how digital media allow Chinese migrants in Japan to renegotiate their self-positioning and identification within the Sino-Japanese dynamics. Throughout the interview, I also found that such media help with the construction of a transnational Chinese community, where Chinese migrants in Japan can internalize and domesticate the narratives of other globally dispersed Chinese communities and make sense of other co-ethnics' experiences of grievance and injustice. For instance, Pingzong, a 29-year-old winemaker who migrated to Japan seven years ago, expressed a feeling of connection with Chinese migrants in remote locations when facing hardships:

My friends and I started to call Trump and the Hakone restaurant owner¹⁴ "Jian-guo" [literally translates as nation-building] after we came across their hatred of Chinese on WeChat... The harder they discriminate against China and overseas Chinese, the more we will show our solidarity... as this is something we can all relate to as overseas Chinese. This pandemic has made me realize that you can only expect help from your own people. (Pingzong, 2020)

During the interviews, many informants resonated with Pingzong and talked about how some recognisable and interchangeable negative diasporic experiences have contributed to a collective interpretation of Chinese identity. For instance, when 33-year-old accountant Hening elaborated on her use of different social media platforms in obtaining first-hand information on the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, she also expressed sympathy for Chinese migrants living in other territories, such as the United States and Italy:

I can only imagine how scared and confounded they become when all flights get cancelled, the city is in lockdown, having no access to medical supplies, and are nowhere near their families [...] Because I'm also an overseas Chinese, I know how much our families weigh on our hearts, so I could empathize with their feelings. (Hening, 2020)

The compassion expressed by many interviewees indicates the formation of a collectively interpreted Chinese diasporic identity that is characterized by recognisable and interchangeable experiences of injustice and hardship, as well as traits that reflect Chinese ideologies and virtues, such as family-oriented values. In this way, the membership of this Chinese identity is expanded into a broader, global context that includes not only the homeland and the host society, but also other territories based on the recognition of fellow Chinese communities living further afield.

However, it is also clear that this membership is largely based on, and defined by, Chinese ethnicity. Through the digital mediation of emotions, diasporic experiences and life stories, Chinese migrants in Japan are able to construct an inclusive but equally exclusive sense of

transnational connectedness, in a way that focuses less on self-identification based on physical localities and demarcations, but places more emphasis on ethnic boundaries. This finding in turn indicates that we should be aware of the difference between the transnationalism that defines the transnational community (Anderson 1983) and the transnationalism that shapes migrants' transnational consciousness (Castles 2017). With regards to the former, Chinese migrants' transnationalism can be understood as their engagement in a digitally mediated social field that exceeds nation-states and territorial boundaries. Whereas for the latter, it is evident that although the transnational community is characterized by its interconnectivity, "being Chinese" has become the crucial identifiable and connecting quality that enables this connectivity, hence representing a form of revalorization of exclusionary ethnic identity that Ang (2004) describes as "transnational nationalism."

More research needs to be undertaken to clarify to what extent this "transnational nationalism" is representative of diasporic communities. Indeed, some may argue that the way my informants sympathize with their fellow co-ethnics can be seen as exceptional cases as my observations were collected during the global pandemic of COVID-19. However, as I have suggested elsewhere, instead of trying to draw definitive conclusions from the above analysis, which may risk glossing over migrant individuals' heterogeneity and the dynamics of a constantly changing social context, it is more important to acknowledge that the self-identification and positioning among Chinese migrants in Japan can be indeed context- or situation-based, and that it is fluid, hybrid and constantly changing direction in a way that suits the unique set of socio-political contingencies they engage with. Furthermore, these findings also conceptually illustrate how power dynamics, connectivity and mobility shape diasporic identity and community formations. Understanding Chinese transnationalism as something that is both inclusive (as it involves multiple territories) and exclusive (in terms of ethnicity) gives us the opportunity to understand how positionalities are created through migrants' engagement with transnationalism and online-offline continuity, hence contributing to the reconceptualization of migration as part of imaginaries on the move (Appadurai 1996).

Conclusion: Some reflections on Chinese migrants' transnationalism and digital practices: Rethinking the role of digital media in diasporic lives in Japan

As the case study on Chinese migrants in Japan has demonstrated, if we are to speak of migrants' self-identification and sense of belonging, it is important to acknowledge this as essentially context- and situation-based, shaped by the intersections of various power negotiations, and under the influence of circulations of identifiable traits and emotions through digital media. On the one hand, for some Chinese migrants, different ideologies transmitted through digital media provide them with alternatives to renegotiate their self-identity. Such identity is in large part culturally defined, characterized by a Chinese subjectivity that is increasingly independent of the party-state agenda, and conscious of the national regimes of truth. On the other hand, it is also clear that while digital media endow Chinese migrants in Japan with a transnational consciousness, such Chinese transnationalism is largely based on an exclusionary Chinese ethnic identity, which calls for caution when we attempt to understand and conceptualize Chinese migrants' transnationalism. In addition, as the discussion

detailed above indicates, in order to better understand how migrants position themselves between the homeland, the host society and the transnational community through their daily practices of digital media, it is crucial for researchers to perceive the positioning process as essentially a socio-political one, which involves migrants' constant imagination and reimagining of the nation, and thereby the ongoing negotiation of "who we are" in relation to concurrent cultural, social and political changes. In this sense, through the lens of digital media, we can better understand migrants' sense of belonging as something that is actively constructed and produced by diasporic individuals in accordance with the context they are situated in, instead of as a nostalgic effort to maintain or preserve their identity.

Focusing on diasporic populations enables us to see digital media as fundamentally transnational and capable of transmitting variant cultural, social and political traits, as well as emotions. Digital media allows migrants to become connected with and engaged in a transnational social field, a site where they become aware of fellow migrants' diasporic experiences and are capable of domesticating and internalizing these experiences for the construction of a collectively interpreted identity. In an increasingly globalized world, studying digital media together with migration inspires us to think about how dispersed individuals are turning into transnational actors, and to challenge the conventional state-centered logic that emphasizes national borders and the static geography of the locality.

Notes

¹ See (<http://www.moj.go.jp/content/001234018.pdf>) for a definition.

² See (Hamaguchi 2019) for details.

³ The 1989 Act opened a side-door to second- and third-generation *nikkeijin* to enter Japan to live and work. See Higuchi (2005) for more details.

⁴ The Korean community had been the second largest migrant population in Japan from 2010 until June 2020 (MOJ, 2020). It was the largest migrant population in Japan between 1920 and 2009 (MIC 2010).

⁵ For example, see Diminescu (2008), Madianou and Miller (2012), and Retis and Tsgarousianou (2019).

⁶ In the source file, digital media consist of 13 categories: social media, net shopping, information search, news, online videos, music and audio, maps and navigation, e-books, online banking, ticket reservations, cloud storage services, social games and online games.

⁷ There is no clarification in the source file as to whether *zainichi* Koreans are included in the sample.

⁸ Contemporary Chinese Koreans are mainly the offspring of emigrants from the Korean Peninsula to China after the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty in 1910. From 1910 to 1945, about two million Koreans settled in China, either to escape from Japan's rule or were forcibly brought to China as labor forces due to Japan's occupation of Northeast China and consequently the establishment of Manchukuo in 1931. About half of them repatriated to the Korean Peninsula by 1949 before the establishment of the PRC. Those who remained were later officially recognized as Chinese Koreans (中国朝鲜族) by the PRC and are categorized as one of the 56 ethnic groups in China. See (Ri, Funahashi and Nitta 2001, 281–84) for details.

⁹ This island group is located east of China, west of Okinawa (Japan), northeast of Taiwan, and known as Diaoyu Islands in China, Senkaku Islands in Japan, and Tiaoyutai Islands in Taiwan.

¹⁰ The group comprised 35 women and 26 men, corresponding to the gender ratio of the Chinese migrant populations in Japan (MOJ 2019). 55 out of 61 participants were interviewed in person, and the remaining 6 participants were interviewed during online video calls due to the COVID-19 crisis.

¹¹ All participants had at least three years of residence in Japan, an educational attainment level of higher education and above, 200,000 JPY monthly income before tax and had passed the highest (N1) level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test.

¹² 9102 is the year 2019 spelt backwards. Spelling a year backward was initially introduced by the internet buzzword ‘7102’ in year 2017, and this expression is often used to ridicule or sarcastically comment on conservative and outdated thoughts.

¹³ The anniversary of the Nanjing-Massacre, a national memorial day in China.

¹⁴ Pingzong was referring to an incident on 21st January 2020, when a dessert shop owner in Hakone city posted a statement announcing that “Chinese are corona virus and are not allowed to enter this shop. This statement does not apply to Taiwanese from the Republic of China,” which caused outrage on China’s social media sites such as Weibo and WeChat.

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