Chinese Migrants in Switzerland: From Mutual Assistance to Promoting Economic Interests

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Introduction

The various types of Chinese migration to Europe have by and large been well studied, but we know very little about the case in Switzerland. This piece of research aims at filling the gap in our knowledge. Chinese migration to Switzerland appears to take a very different form from that in other European countries. Here, one does not find the so-called ‘chain migration,’ in which the migrants are concentrated in ethnic sectors of the economy, or live in enclaves in cities, as in England, France or Italy. In Switzerland, on the contrary, one sees rather recent, individual migrants who are mostly highly skilled professionals, students or white-collar workers in various sectors of the economy. They seem to be well integrated in Swiss society, most of them mastering at least one of the official languages or English. Their networks are very international and their Chinese acquaintances are mostly of the same socio-professional category. This report takes a look at the important changes in this particular population in Switzerland over the last 50 years and some areas of the transformation in their social organization.

Chinese migrants to Europe usually originate in traditional emigration areas such as Guangdong, southern Zhejiang and Fujian provinces. The origin
of the majority of Chinese in France and Italy, for example, is southern Zhejiang, while the conspicuous Cantonese community in Great Britain has now been outnumbered by Fujianese immigrants (Beck 2006). Since the mid-1980s, mainland China has changed its position gradually on emigration and allowed its citizens, usually called “new migrants,” to go abroad (Xiang 2003; Nyiri 2004). As of the late 1990s, Chinese migration to Europe has seen a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese migrants with strong intra-European mobility (Benton and Pieke 1998). Moreover, the migration flows have become diverse and complex, both in terms of the regional origins and social profiles of the migrants, as well as their choice of the countries of destination (Béja 2001; Ma Mung 2002). While there is a greater influx of illegal migrants, there are also more highly qualified workers entering Europe, such as students, employees of local companies and representatives of Chinese enterprises abroad (Beltran 2004; Guérassimoff 2005; Zhang 2003).

Studies on this topic have tended to distinguish between the old communities which settled before World War II, and the new migrants, who emigrated after the policy of “Reform and Opening.” These new Chinese migrants are considered to be different from the old established communities in terms of educational, regional and social background, and many studies have analyzed the impact of such differences on the relations among the Chinese overseas (Beck 2006; Lévy and Lieber 2008; Nyiri 2004), which have also impacted on “Chineseness,” i.e. what it means “to be Chinese” or “to feel Chinese.” While common sense would usually lead one to take ethnic or racial categories as natural identities, research has long shown that identity is the non-natural, non-stable result of social processes that involve very broad dimensions (Bauermann 1998; Brubaker et al. 2004; Brubaker 2004). Thus, instead of focusing on the meaning or the effects of a type of “cultural identity” or “ethnic identity,” which varies among people and across time and social contexts, it is important to consider ethnic boundary-making as a process.

The Swiss case in this respect appears interesting, as there were very few Chinese (about 200) in Switzerland before the 1980s, while as of 2008 official Swiss statistics show a total of 7,612 from the People’s Republic of China. This number appears to be quite small in comparison with those in other European countries, but in the Swiss context it reveals important changes that are occurring within this migrant population. Based on more than 80 in-depth interviews2 with people who consider themselves to be (and are considered to be)

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2 The interviews aimed at presenting a panoramic view of the Chinese in Switzerland and how they relate to each other. We interviewed people who had been living in Switzerland for more than 50 years, as well as students who had arrived only a year ago, and included both PRC