

Research impact: making a difference

Recognising the evolving needs of Chinese migrants in London

LSE research helped in highlighting the difficulties faced by new Chinese migrants to London and exploding some comfortable myths

What was the problem?

Most recent Chinese migrants to Britain come from mainland China and not, as before, from Hong Kong and South-East Asia. Mandarin not Cantonese is their common language, and many have poor English language skills.

This language deficit and cultural misunderstandings have impeded their integration. Migrants' ideas about 'getting ahead', for instance, are based on assumptions acquired in China that have proved relatively unhelpful in the UK.

They are often poor and uneducated and live in overcrowded conditions. Many are undocumented, with London's Chinese population estimated to be double the official estimates.

Their needs therefore contrast with those of established Chinese migrants who are traditionally viewed as a 'model' community, requiring little or no external support.

In London in particular Chinese newcomers face considerable difficulties in accessing existing support mechanisms within the Chinese community. Their use of public services is negligible, especially housing, and their access to Chinese third-sector services often hampered by cultural and linguistic divisions.

On a methodological level, investigating the needs and concerns of these new migrants has been uniquely challenging. The language and cultural barriers render conventional research methods problematic, e.g. surveys and focus groups, while the undocumented status of many vulnerable individuals makes them difficult to access and engage.

What did we do?

When the Chinese in Britain Forum decided to investigate the lives of Chinese migrants in London, they commissioned the ethnographical market research agency, ESRO, who in turn sought the collaboration of two LSE Professors of Anthropology, Stephan Feuchtwang and Charles Stafford. Both had a proven track record of academic research into Chinese society and culture and, crucially, both had experience of long-term fieldwork in China.

Feuchtwang was consulted because of his expertise in social support mechanisms and leadership in Chinese communities. His research had revealed that members of disrupted families maintain links with their place of origin, if they can afford it, while simultaneously developing new aspirations and ways of operating to turn their new place into a 'home'. His earlier

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work had also shown that followers' loyalty depended on their leaders' capacity to get things done, which had a significant effect on community cohesion.

Stafford brought to the project his expertise in the social consequences of separation within families and wider communities. He showed the importance of what the Chinese call 'social capacity': the knowledge needed to maintain networks of relationships, both locally and across long distances. Equally relevant was his work on Chinese collective identity and the moral imperative for community members to look after each other. Stafford's research provided the baseline against which to measure the additional strain faced by new Chinese migrants in London.

Feuchtwang and Stafford served on ESRO's advisory group throughout the project, from designing and implementing new empirical research, through to data analysis, report writing and disseminating the findings. As experienced ethnographic researchers, they had also supervised many PhD students working in this area, among them ESRO's director, Robin Pharoah, and recruited several others to the project, including Zhang Hui, Eona Bell and I-chieh Fang.

What happened?

The Chinese in Britain Forum had been established in 1996 in response to a Home Affairs Committee Report, *The Chinese in Britain* (1985). Its mission was to identify, respond to and promote the interests of the Chinese community and to encourage the community's active participation in British society. By the 2000s, however, public- and third-sector attention had switched from race and ethnicity to faith-based issues, leaving the Forum relatively marginalised.

The Forum's research on new Chinese migrants essentially put the needs and involvement of the Chinese community back on the government's agenda. It revealed the full extent of the difficulties faced by these new economic migrants to London and demonstrated the significant divisions between said migrants and the settled Chinese population.

The project's report, *Migration, Integration, Cohesion: New Chinese Migrants in London* (2009), won the Market Research Society's prestigious first Virginia Valentine Award for Cultural Insight, earning praise

"This study ... challenged the received wisdom regarding the Chinese community in the UK, with the result being a new "official" understanding of the Chinese community and a seat at the top table of strategy making for the Chinese in Britain Forum trading".

Judges' comment on awarding the Market Research Society's Virginia Valentine Award for Cultural Insight in 2011 to *Migration, Integration, Cohesion: New Chinese Migrants in London*

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from the judges for having overcome “the huge linguistic and cultural barriers and the problems of accurately identifying communities and sub-communities”.

The report's launch in 2009 enabled the Chinese in Britain Forum to re-establish relations with the Department for Communities and Local Government and its then Minister for Social Cohesion, Shahid Malik MP, and with the social entrepreneur Nat Wei, British-born of Hong Kong parents, who went on to advise the subsequent Coalition government on the 'Big Society'.

At the Department's request, the Forum convened a workshop for top policy officials. Communities Minister Andrew Stunell also responded by convening a roundtable meeting with members of the Chinese community at which they explored matters of common concern.

At a local level, the report was distributed to over 200 local authorities. Westminster City Council shared the report's findings with the Office for National Statistics in order to push for more resources to engage more actively with the Chinese community and to tackle cultural and linguistic issues. As a result, the Office for National Statistics committed extra resources to interviewer training, and for the 2011 census gave one new census officer a specific remit for the Chinese community.

Extensive media coverage of the report in China and in Chinese-language media throughout Europe raised the profile of issues facing the Chinese community in London.

The report also focused the need for third-sector organisations within the Chinese community to provide better support for new migrants. The Chinese Information and Advice Centre and the Migrant Rights Network were just two of the grass-roots organisations that used the report's findings to highlight the needs of new Chinese migrants.

In recognition of the research's valuable contribution, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation invited the Chinese in Britain Forum to become advisory members of its Ethnicity and Poverty Programme, giving the Forum the opportunity to influence the programme's perspective on issues facing the Chinese Community in Britain.

Professor Charles Stafford is Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a specialist in the anthropology of China and Taiwan. His work has focused primarily on issues related to learning, emotion, morality and cognitive development. He is the author/editor of a number of publications including *The roads of Chinese childhood* (CUP), *Separation and reunion in modern China* (CUP), and *Ordinary ethics in China* (Bloomsbury).

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Stephan Feuchtwang is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics. His main area of research has been China. He has published books on Chinese popular religion, feng-shui, and (with Wang Mingming) a book on local leadership: *Grassroots*

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Charisma in southern Fujian and northern Taiwan. His research interests are the relations between politics and religion and the anthropology of history. This was extended into comparative research on the transmission of great events of state violence, in China, Taiwan and Germany, resulting in a book: *After the Event*. Another of his topics of research is place in urban and rural landscapes, on which he published as editor and contributor, *Making Place: State projects, globalisation and local responses in China*. He is currently engaged in coordinating six researchers in four cities in China studying officials and residents in inner and outer city areas on the subject of community development, the planning of urban spaces and the increasing segregation of housing types and tenures. This is part of a large EC-funded project 2011-2015 on sustainable urbanisation in China.

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