

BOOK REVIEWS

Mobility, Identity and the State: China's Approach of Internal and External Migration in the Light of two recent French publications

Chloé Froissart, *La Chine et ses migrants, La conquête d'une citoyenneté*
[China and its Migrants, the Conquest of a Citizenship], Rennes:
Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013

**Carine Pina-Guerassimoff, *La Chine et sa nouvelle diaspora, la mobilité au service de la
puissance*** [China and Its New Diaspora, Mobility in Service of Power]. Paris:
Ellipses, 2012

China is no stranger to migration, internal and external. However, under communist rule, both forms of mobility have been at best looked down upon, at worst strictly prohibited. While the reforms began in 1978 have marked a renewal of the freedom of movement, the issue remains in many ways problematic, as the authorities attempt to find an approach best combining stability and development. This evolution of the Chinese state's attitude towards migration and migrants has been the object of several recent books in the French language, focusing on the links between migration and state strategies, between individual choices on the one hand, and the interests of China's rulers on the other. Those works show the reactions to migration as both revealing of and playing an important role in the complex changes that the Chinese regime is undergoing. While they remain untranslated, they are in many respects worthy of attention—this paper is an attempt at presenting the main points of two such works.

The books chosen for this analysis can at first appear to have little in common. In *La Chine et sa nouvelle diaspora, la mobilité au service de la puissance* Carine Pina-Guerassimoff offers an exhaustive overview of Chinese international migrations, with a particular focus on the state's attitude towards them and their place in China's geopolitical strategies as well as its strategies of inner development. She gives both a detailed description of the different waves and types of migration out of China and of the state institutions that deal with them. Chloé Froissart's work—*La Chine et ses migrants, La conquête d'une citoyenneté*—concentrates on the category labeled as migrant workers, that is to say internal migrants from the countryside to the cities. It

gives a general overview of the question, but also focuses on examples from the city of Chengdu, where the author conducted fieldwork. It is a reflection on the definition of Chinese citizenship and on the notion of equal rights.

Different on the surface, those books do tackle a set of common questions and analyzing them together can give a fuller insight into the manner of proceeding of the Chinese authorities, as well as into the issues of identity and belonging in modern day China.

Firstly, both forms of migration described are in a sense a challenge to the Chinese state, build so far around an idea of strict control of its citizens, which married itself well with a limitation of the freedom of movement. The mobility of migrants forces the authorities to cope with potentially destabilizing situations, in some cases questions their power, and pushes them to seek new, more flexible means of maintaining control.

Secondly, the movement in space very often represents also a change of status—in social position, nationality, or culture. It poses anew the question of who belongs to the Chinese national community and on what terms. Terms such as citizenship, nationality and cultural identity are mobilized and redefined as migrants cross the boundaries of states and regions, but also of predefined social categories. The regime is faced with the question of what it means to be a Chinese citizen or a Chinese national. We will see that for the two kinds of migrants discussed in the books the answer is very different.

Mobility and Belonging from the Grassroots to National Policy— the State’s Use of and Reaction to Spontaneous Migrations

In general terms, China’s approach of migration, both inner and international, since the advent of communism has gone from overt hostility, to acceptance, and in some cases endorsement. The reforms of the late 1970s lead to the recognition of a certain right to mobility, both internal and international, but the treatment of those who chose to migrate is strictly linked to what the Central government perceives as the state’s interest and varies greatly for the two groups in question.

A. Migration as a Choice, Belonging as a Resource—Chinese International Migrants’ Strategies and Networks as an Asset for the State’s Foreign Policy

Although China has a long tradition of emigration, until 1978 the communist state attempted to prohibit its citizens from leaving the territory. This has changed with the reforms of 1978 and China is experiencing a “migration renewal” (Pina-Guerassimoff, p. 19). While in a first period following 1978 the state attempted to limit the outflow of its nationals by imposing strict and heavy procedures for exit, Carine Pina-Guerassimoff considers 1986 as the starting point of a real emigration policy in China (p. 22). From that moment on, migrating was considered a “private affair” (p. 22) and the major part of barriers prohibiting exits was lifted. The numbers of emigrants rose dramatically and a clear diversification of this population can be observed.

In official statements, China never encourages its citizens to migrate, nor endorses an emigration policy, and undocumented migration is sternly condemned. However, beyond the declarations, a “policy of *laissez-faire* in terms of departure, allied with a public recognition incarnated in the diffusion of a positive image seems more efficient in encouraging mobility” (Pina-Guerassimoff, p. 34). A similar process is described when it comes to migrant organizations (p. 99). Chinese migrants follow a rather well known pattern of relying on migrant networks (Massey, 1998) as a resource for organizing their migration and their life abroad. While the institutions and networks of the Chinese diaspora are often based on local communities and self-organized, and the authorities rarely intervene in their creation and functioning, the state maintains links with them and encourage their existence. In a sense, it attempts to transform a cultural form of belonging into a more political one, fostering ties with the diaspora through its organizations.

In this sense it can be said that the Chinese authorities follow what Carine Pina-Guerassimoff refers to as a “policy of ties” (*politique du lien*) understood as maintaining close contacts with the diaspora. This policy also includes a particular definition of national community—one based on culture rather than formal citizenship. The issue of nationality has been a thorny one for China, since its international partners have long been anxious of the presence of Chinese diaspora. In an attempt to reassure, Chinese authorities have tended to renounce their claims to this population and consistently refused to recognize double nationality (Pina-Guerassimoff, p. 126). However, since the 1980s they have been progressively adopting a position where the emigrants are invited to and valued for maintaining their links with their homeland whatever their formal nationality. This policy is intimately linked to a vision of China as a community of language and culture, rather than a political one. This allows for extending what appears as legitimate interests of China way beyond its borders.¹ Indeed, in the recent years, China has been increasingly vocal in defending the interests of its nationals abroad, proving its position as an increasingly important international player.

This approach of the diaspora is also linked to its role as an instrument of China’s rise to power. This concerns firstly the economic interests of both the Chinese state and the emigrants. Indeed, “based on spontaneous economic actions of migrants the authorities seek to obtain their capital, their knowledge and their know-how for the benefit on Chinese economy” (Pina-Guerassimoff, p. 155). Secondly, the presence of people of Chinese origin abroad is also a non-negligible asset in a subtle foreign policy strategy based on soft-power. Emigrants can in a sense act as China’s ambassadors in other countries, influencing politicians as potential voters, pleading for the adoption of policies favorable to China, spreading a positive image of their home country and contributing to the popularity of their language and culture. As Carine Pina-Guerassimoff reminds her readers, China’s “sympathy capital [...] can easily be transformed into social, economic and political capital” (p. 122).

¹ Including not only the diaspora, but also such sensitive questions as Taiwan (Pina-Guerassimoff, p. 173–186).

Thus, it can be said that while on the surface the Chinese state merely permits emigration, on a deeper level the authorities tend to encourage it. This policy goes hand in hand with a definition of who is to be considered Chinese and how are overseas Chinese to be perceived at home, linked in turn to the potential the diaspora represents for the authorities. The “soft” policy towards migration, linking permissive exit rules with informal encouragement and public incentives is a part and a reflection of the soft-power approach to international relations that has been characteristic of China in the last couple of decades. This situation is diametrically opposed to the position of the Chinese state toward those who migrate inside its territory, and in particular the rural migrants moving to the cities.

**B. Forced Belonging as Means of Control, Freedom of Movement
as a Source of Exploitation—Evolution of the *hukou* System and Migration Towards the Cities**

To understand the phenomenon of migration from the countryside to the cities in contemporary China, it is necessary to understand a very specific Chinese institution—the *hukou*, a complex system of registration ascribing people to their place of residence. More than just a means of keeping track of people, the *hukou* defines a person’s rights and obligations according to their place of birth. During the Maoist period, not only did it make all travel within China virtually impossible, but also created important differences of status between the urban and the rural population, imposing harsher conditions in the rural regions and leading to a stigmatization of rural inhabitants, thus turning the self-declared egalitarian regime into an extremely stratified one. Froissart puts this into perspective with the very definition of citizenship as universal equality of status,² showing the inner contradictions of the Chinese regime’s reference to conceptions of statehood and citizenship.

Since the late 1970s the *hukou* system was partially liberalized, making travel inside China effectively possible. The category of migrant workers was born, when peasants massively migrated to the fast-developing cities in search of work. As in the case of emigrants, the authorities now permit migration, but leave it to the migrant’s initiative. However, while the *hukou* no longer limited movement, it still defined people’s rights—contrarily to the urban population, migrants have no form of social protection. Moreover, as Froissart explains, in the face of what was perceived by the authorities as a disorganized and destabilizing flood of people referred to as “blind migration” (p. 158), the first reflex was to impose a form of control. This has firstly been attempted through a system of temporary residence permits, complemented by special permits, that give a number of actors the right and the responsibility to exert surveillance over this population in every sphere of life. While introducing extremely discriminatory practices, this system has failed to effectively keep the migrant population in check. In an act of what Froissart calls “silent resistance” (p. 116), the migrants do not register their stay, thus exposing themselves to repression—those residing ille-

² Froissart draws for this part of her analyzes on the works of Marshall (1950, 1976). She compares the political and social development of China to that witnessed in the West and reflects on whether and to what extent it is possible to transpose those conceptions.

gally outside of the place of their *hukou* can be arrested for deportation, in conditions that have been often denounced as bordering on the inhuman. More reforms have been undertaken in the late 1990s and early 2000s, making it possible to acquire an urban *hukou*. However, its obtainment is conditioned on attaining a certain financial stability—hence, the reforms only further accentuate inequalities.

Froissart describes in details the marginalization that results from such an evolution of the *hukou* system: working without contracts or insurance, underpaid, overtaxed and often victims of abuse, the migrant workers cannot count on the state to protect them. Driven primarily by a desire to assure stability those policies also have the effect of producing the conditions of an organized form of exploitation and transforming migrants into a disposable workforce. The existence of such a vulnerable category of workers in fact participates in China's spectacular economic rise, providing the cheap work-force that drives it. Subject to repressions and devoid of the rights linked to belonging to the nation, the migrants become effectively foreigners in their own country. Their situation is similar to what Sayad (1999) calls the “double absence”—neither fully rural nor urban, they are stuck in a precarious in-between.

Thus, in quite a paradoxical way, the definition of the Chinese nation is extended to a wide array of people, including emigrants and their descendants, some of whom are not Chinese citizens. At the same time, the practices of the state suggest a definition of citizenship that does not include a community of status. In a sense, it is possible for a foreign citizen to be considered Chinese, while some of Chinese nationals are not treated like full-fledged citizens. One of the reasons of such a situation can be seen in the authorities' desire to allow for movement while controlling its outcomes, permitting only those aspects of it that further the interests of the state. One is entitled to ask to what extent that strategy is successful and is it possible to entirely control the consequences of such important movements of population.

Mobility as a Factor of Change?

Movement usually means change and a mobile population is more likely to put in question the existing order. Both the discussed categories of migrants have to some extent been the cause of such questioning, albeit with different outcomes.

A. Evolution from Without—What Does the Diaspora Bring into China?

The Chinese authorities are keen to see emigrants bring back knowledge and ideas from abroad, but also conscious of the dangers this implies. The regime remains authoritarian in nature and attempts to curb all criticism. This means that the exposure to ideas and information that stand in contradiction to the official discourse makes the emigrants a potentially threatening group. Moreover, the diaspora is also partly composed of those who left China because of their disagreement with the Party's rule of the country.

Carine Pina-Guerassimoff names in particular two categories of diaspora members who are perceived as a potential threat (pp. 140–142). The first one consists of dissidents inspired by the 1989 student movement bloodily repressed in the Tian’anmen square, who denounce the methods of the government and criticize the harsh social realities by means of new media, putting into question the officially promoted consensual vision of a harmonious Chinese society and attempting to pressure foreign powers into adopting a sterner attitude towards China. The second category are Falungong followers.³ Facing persecution on Chinese territory, many of them took refuge abroad, where they seek to gain support for their cause.

In face of those challenges to their position, the authorities monitor closely all of the diaspora’s activities. Carine Pina-Guerassimoff also discusses (p. 143) the harassment of expatriates by government representatives, including cases of espionage, threats, but the repercussion most often faced by those with subversive ideas is simply the refusal to grant travel documents and prohibiting their entry to China.

However, the very place this topic occupies in Carine Pina-Guerassimoff’s work—a few pages long sub-section of a chapter—is revealing of the little impact those dissidents have had. It would seem that, if political or social change occurs in China, it is very unlikely it should come from without. The struggles of those remaining on its territory are a much more probable factor in the regime’s potential evolution.

B. A Struggle for Citizenship and Equal Rights— Migrant Workers as Agents of Limited Change

The reforms began in 1978, that made mobility possible for Chinese citizens, also introduced a shift in public discourse towards a more legalistic one, promoting “government through law” (Froissart, p. 317). While the Party refuses firmly Western style democracy and does not hesitate to use surveillance and coercion to counter any potential threat to its power, it now officially recognizes that citizens have a certain number of rights that the state is supposed to protect. This discourse, while its primary aim is to “enhance the capacity to govern” (Froissart, p. 317), has been a weapon some citizens use to effectively defend their rights without directly opposing the Party. A growing number of people call the government out on its engagements when an injustice is observed, demanding that it defend the rights it has itself proclaimed. The situation of migrant workers is one such example.

This has been linked with a slow recognition of their role in China’s economic boom—an evolution driven by intellectuals and academic circles, and by an increasing number of popular protests and violent outbreaks. The turning point has been what has come to be known as the “Sun Zhigang affair” (Froissart, pp. 321–336)—a young migrant dead as a result of ill-treatment while arrested for deportation in 2003, Sun became a catalyst for empathy toward migrant workers, leading the urban population to demand the protection of rights for all Chinese citizens. This event was the birth of what Froissart refers to as a “new contestation paradigm” (p. 321), which she further

³ A self-declared spiritual movement including elements of physical exercise, that has become a political issue when its members immolated themselves in reaction to the state banning it as a cult.

defines as a “struggle for the recognition of rights through the use of rights” (p. 328)—drawing on the authorities’ own legalistic discourse, citizens have claimed a voice for themselves in public affairs.

The results of this movement, however, have been mitigated. On the one hand, the state adopted a less repressive policy towards migrants. On the other hand, it has not led to a change of the legal system. The central government’s reaction to protests tends to be based on a delegation of responsibility. When citizens call upon the government to protect their rights, the central government intervenes locally, punishing those responsible and making limited changes. The blame is put on those most directly concerned, and not on the system as a whole. Hence, it does not bring any evolution of the political system or power structure in China. The change that migrant workers managed to obtain is one of discourse and of perception—no longer seen as second-class citizens, they are now presented as equal in dignity and valued for their contribution to the economy. Although this does not have a direct impact on their material situation, it constitutes a basis for further potential demands.

Hence, those two types of migration: inner and international are intimately linked to the definition of what a Chinese citizen and a Chinese national is. Those definitions prove to be very dependent on how the authorities perceive a given category: as a potential or as a threat. Thus, in reference to the diaspora, the tendency was towards more inclusiveness and a belonging based on culture rather than formal citizenship. On the contrary, when it comes to migrant workers, the recognition of a common citizenship did not until recently imply equality of status and the attitude towards them is everything but inclusive. The outcomes of those approaches have been very different as well. While China has managed to maintain or restore ties with its diaspora and make it an important asset for its foreign policy, the repressive and exclusive policies adopted toward migrant workers proved ineffective, leading the population to adopt a law-based form of protest that forced change on the government, albeit a limited one.

Despite those differences, these forms of mobility reveal a general tendency in the Chinese authorities’ strategy. In both cases, the government opted for a soft-power approach. The evolution of formal rules, if it occurred, was slow and limited, while the government sought to further its interests and control social phenomena by means of an official discourse encouraging certain attitudes and discouraging others. The aim also seems similar in both cases: to further China’s development and strengthen its position, while maintaining the Party’s grip on society and preserving stability.

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