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## **Rethinking 'Chinese community' in the context of transnationalism: The case of Chinese economic immigrants in Canada**

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### **Abstract**

The current research on transnationalism has paid little attention to the impacts of immigrants' sustained ties to their homelands on their relationships with ethnic communities in the host countries. Drawing on data from a qualitative study of economic immigrants from China to Canada, this article explores the new generation of Chinese immigrants' definitions and perceptions of and experiences with the 'Chinese community' as both an ideational and an empirical entity. Having faced various barriers to settlement and integration in Canada, these individuals tend to see China as 'closer' to them than the established ethnic Chinese communities in Canada when it comes to fulfilling their needs for economic security, social support and, even, a sense of belonging. The findings suggest it is urgent to understand the relationship between the new waves of immigration, the ethnic community, and transnationalism, and to reflect on the mosaic multicultural approach to ethnicity and immigrant governance in the context of diversification of diversity.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism; ethnic community; economic immigrants; Canada; China

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## **Introduction**

According to Canada's 2011 National Household Survey, Chinese – a population of over 1.3 million – have become the second largest (after South Asians) visible minority (Statistics Canada 2013). The demographics of Chinese immigrants to Canada have changed dramatically in the past three decades. Since the 1990s the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become the premier source country of Canadian immigration. The majority of these immigrants are 'economic immigrants': primarily skilled immigrants with post-secondary education (Li 2005). Before the arrival of the massive new wave of Chinese immigrants, the established Chinese communities in Canada were composed of earlier generations of immigrants from diverse geographical (e.g., South China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), dialectal or linguistic (e.g., Cantonese and *Taishanese*), historical (e.g., the Second World War, Taiwan's economic boom, and Hong Kong's return to China) and socioeconomic (e.g., refugees, menial labourers, professionals, and entrepreneurs) backgrounds (Guo and Guo 2011; Li 2005; Wong and Lo 2005).

Research on the economic immigrants from the PRC to Canada has widely reported the settlement challenges faced by this group. These include language barriers, a lack of recognition of their foreign credentials, a lack of social networks (especially those that would be useful for accessing hiring information in their professions), and resultant difficulties in seeking professional employment and downward socioeconomic mobility (Guo 2009; Guo 2013; Li 2008; Man 2004; Salaff and Greve 2003; Shan 2013; Wong and Lo 2005). In recent years research attention has also been given to these immigrants' transnational ties – including employment and business connections – to the PRC, especially in the context of China's rapid economic growth (Guo 2013, 2016; Lin and Tao 2012). Despite academic acknowledgement that recent immigrants from the PRC have changed the face of Chinese immigration 'beyond recognition', the implications of such a change for the Chinese community in Canada, as well as for the relevant ethnic community organizations or services, are inadequately understood (Guo and DeVoretz, 2006; Pieke 2007: 86).

In the context of Canada's state multiculturalism, ethnic or ethno-cultural communities have played an important role in assisting newcomers – especially those belonging to ethnic minorities – to

settle in and adapt to the ‘new’ country through facilitating economic networking among its members and providing social support, linguistically or culturally sensitive services, and resources that are otherwise unavailable or hard to access in the mainstream society (Bloemraad 2005; Guo 2006; Guo and Guo 2011; Jurkova 2014). Yet this model of settlement is largely built on traditional notions of static, homogenous ethnic identity, which has been increasingly challenged by the further diversification – in terms of socioeconomic status, migration trajectories, ties to the homeland, cultures, and needs – of recent waves of immigrants (Esteban-Guitart and Vila 2015; Guo and Guo 2011). With the advances in communication and transportation technologies, it has become commonplace for immigrants to maintain strong connections with their homeland. This, in turn, leads to immigrants’ simultaneous engagement with both the host and home countries, formation of transnational identities, and dual, or multiple, senses of belonging that are not necessarily constrained by the territorial boundaries of nation states (Esteban-Guitart and Vila 2015; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Tsuda 2012).

Against the backgrounds of the proliferation of immigrant-driven differences and neoliberal welfare restructuring, the limitations of the mosaic (static, categorical, essentializing) multicultural approach to minority settlement, as well as to immigrant governance, have become clear (Fleras 2011: 17; Guo and Guo 2011). The ‘difference-blind’ approach to ethnicity is inadequate for comprehending and responding to the multiplicity of differences, because people ‘are no longer containable within a fixed and internally homogeneous category of “ethnic community”’, given the many generations of immigration history and ongoing global transmigration (Ang 2011: 29; Fleras 2011). In the context of public funding cuts, furthermore, the further constrained capacity of ethnic community organizations to support newcomers may also make the community the scapegoat for its members’ segmented integration and socioeconomic marginalization, and is even represented as a threat to national unity (Couton, 2014; Guo and Guo, 2011).

Studies of Chinese immigration to the West have documented the importance of the ethnic community – in such forms as ethnic enclaves (e.g., Chinatown), ‘ethnoburbs’ (e.g., ethnic concentrations in middle-class or wealthy suburban areas), civic organizations, and ethno-cultural social and health

services – for facilitating Chinese immigrants’ settlement and integration in host societies (e.g., Ang 2014; Guo and Guo, 2011; Zhou and Lee 2013; Zhou and Lin 2005; Zhou and Logan 1991, 1989). As historical products of racial discrimination, ethnic enclaves like old Chinatowns in many metropolitan cities in the USA were ‘a function of both ethnic solidarity and social exclusion’ (Zhou and Lee 2013: 31). Despite their limited access to financial and human capital, for example, earlier generations of Chinese immigrants’ membership in and strong ties to the ethnic community – or ‘ethnic capital’, to use Zhou and Lin’s (2005) term – often led to job and business opportunities and, in turn, economic stability or mobility (Zhou 2005; Zhou and Lin 2005). In addition to its agency in generating tangible material resources, ethnic capital – in such symbolic forms as shared Confucian values – was also found helpful for facilitating immigrant children’s social mobility into the mainstream society through educational achievement (Zhou 2014).

Throughout the 1970s, however, in the USA the influence of ethnic community in Chinese immigrants’ lives weakened, and in Canada ethnic Chinese associations experienced declining memberships (Guo and Guo 2011; Zhou and Lee, 2013). The causes were multiple, including the gradual removal of explicit discriminatory immigration restrictions, more opportunities for mobility in the host society, and the arrival of a new wave of Chinese immigrants, whose socioeconomic backgrounds and needs for integration did not always resonate with ‘the traditionalist clan and locality association of Chinatown’ (Ang 2014; Guo and Guo 2011; Willmott 1970: 50; Zhou and Lee, 2013). Instead of participating in the traditional ethnic enclaves, professional or highly educated Chinese immigrants are more likely to settle in more affluent, middle-class, dispersive suburban areas that are referred to as ‘ethnoburbs’ (Zhou and Lin 2005: 270). The ethnic community is not thereby rendered less significant in immigrants’ lives, however; rather, it is transformed from a site with solid physical infrastructure to a symbolic space in which the relationship between immigrants and the community has become more dynamic and less tangible (Ang 2011; Zhou and Lee 2013).

Since the 1990s the ethnic Chinese communities in many Western countries (e.g., Canada, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand) have been re-shaped by the arrival of highly selected economic

immigrants, as well as international students, from the PRC (Ang 2014; Guo and Guo 2011; Li 2009; Zhou and Lee 2013). Although immigrants' transnational ties with the homeland at both individual and familial levels are nothing new, this wave of Chinese immigration has particularly made China, as an emerging superpower and one of the biggest global markets, integral to the lives of immigrant individuals and of the ethnic community in the host society. In Australia, for example, Sydney's Chinatown – its infrastructure, businesses, pattern of social relations, and norms – was transformed by the newest Chinese diaspora, by Chinese real estate capital and buyers, as well as by the physical presence of the branches of some China-based banks (Wong 2017; Wong and Ang 2017). Despite the increasing research on the effects of transnationalism on these Chinese immigrants and their families in Canada, however, so far the exploration of the impacts of transnationalism on the ethnic Chinese community in the host cities, including on the relationship between newcomers and the community, has remained limited.

Drawing on data from a larger qualitative study of Chinese economic immigrants in Canada, this article explores the new generation of Chinese immigrants' perceptions of, and experiences with, the 'Chinese community' from their own perspectives. Situating the findings in the context of transnationalism, we explore the changing dynamics of economic immigration, the 'Chinese community', and immigrant integration in Canada. Critically attending to the notion of the Chinese community may also help reveal the constraints, disjuncture, and possibilities embedded in the relationship between immigrant integration and the ethnic community in the context of changing migration flow and patterns of diversity.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The term 'transnationalism' refers to immigrants' sustained connections with their societies of origin and settlement, an old phenomenon that is further facilitated and intensified by the advances in communication and transportation technologies in the processes of contemporary globalization (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Portes et al., 1999). Through a transnational lens, international migration is not simply a movement from point A to point B; rather, it is a lifelong process involving immigrants'

simultaneous engagement with both home and host countries (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Tsuda 2012). This process generates a linkage or a network of relationships – material, cognitive, emotional, and symbolic – and immigrants’ multiple identities and senses of belonging, across national borders (Fleras 2011; Lunt 2009).

Transnationalism has also exposed the limitations of conceiving of ‘the Chinese’ as a singular and fixed ethnic group in the context of immigrant settlement and integration. Despite the use of the ethnic label, for example, the meanings attached to one’s Chinese identities may ‘fluctuate wildly’ (Ang 2014: 1188). The proliferation of ethnicities, or ‘diversification of diversity’, also means that immigrants’ experiences, opportunities, constraints, and trajectories – as well as the wider set of social and economic relations in which they reside – are shaped by the complex, dynamic interplays of various factors, such as country of origin, access to social capital and opportunities, locality (e.g., material conditions, services, and ethnic minority presence), and transnational connections (Ang 2011: 27; Vertovec 2007: 1025). In other words, a mosaic model of multicultural governance ‘that insists on slotting newcomers into their ethnicity or ancestry fails to recognize the growing fragmentation of differences along multidimensional lines and multiple vectors’ (Fleras 2011: 30).

Directing our attention to the contributions of transnationalism to community building, Zhou and Lee (2013) argue that the ethnic community – especially modern Chinese immigrant organizations established in recent decades – has embraced, and should embrace, transnationalism as an opportunity to strengthen the inter-ethnic interactions across class lines or the ties among ethnic enclaves and ethnoburbs. They argue that the expansion of an ethnic community beyond geographic boundaries can increase its capacity to generate resources (both material and symbolic) beneficial for immigrant incorporation. In their study of Chinese ethnic organizations in Canada, Guo and Guo (2011) also observed that those organizations have renewed their relevance to the new waves of Chinese newcomers from the PRC through transforming their service delivery and service priorities. In these cases, ethnicity represents a social relational process of ‘constant negotiation and construction of immigrant’s adjustment

and integration to a new environment', rather than a pre-existing category in which to box people (Guo and Guo 2011: 78).

## **Methods**

The core purpose of the larger qualitative study (2011-2016) from which the data reported here were drawn was to understand the impacts of transnationalism on the sexual health risks faced by Chinese immigrants to Canada and on the related health governance. Purposive sampling was used to select informants. Eligible research participants were adult individuals who were from the PRC and who had lived in Canada for at least one year; who have self-identified as having close connections with China while living in Canada; who were willing to talk about the subject under study; who resided in either Toronto or Vancouver, or who had returned to China; and who, if among the latter at the time of the study, resided in either Beijing or Shanghai.

The data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 66 Chinese adult immigrants in Canada and China. Written informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and demographic information was also collected. Apart from one participant who was interviewed in English at his request, all participants were interviewed in Mandarin by the researchers or by trained research associates of this project at a location of each participant's choice. The length of the interviews ranged from one to two hours. With the interviewees' permission, all interviews were audiotaped. Interview questions include participants' experiences of immigration from China to Canada; relationships with the Chinese communities in Canada, and with China as the home country; and experiences of using related social and health care services.

Participants comprised 31 women and 35 men, and their ages ranged from 21 to 58 years, with an average age of 36.7 years. Except for three unknowns, the year of their first arrival in Canada from China ranged from 1989 to 2013, although the majority (48/63) arrived during the period of 2000-2010. Immigration status in Canada at the time of the recruitment was as follows: (naturalized) citizens (22/66), permanent residents (34/66), international students (7/66), a 10-year visitor visa holder (1/66), and

unknown (2/66). All participants had post-secondary education: the majority (58/66) at the university level, with eight at the college level. Regarding relationship status, 18 were single, 30 were married, five were living common-law, 12 were separated or divorced, and one was unknown.

To ensure the data's accessibility to all researchers in the project, interview transcripts were translated into English. All transcripts were imported into NVivo (9.2), a computer software program for qualitative data analysis. Initially, a tentative coding scheme, consisting of a set of major coding categories (e.g., "relationship with Chinese community in Canada" and "relationship with China") and sub-categories (e.g., "definitions of Chinese community", "experiences with Chinese community", and "use of community services") and their defining criteria, was developed by the research team based on their reading of selected transcripts. At the stage of writing, individual researchers were able to develop a comprehensive synthesis of the themes relating to their paper's focus while attending to the bigger context in which the selected data are situated. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities.

## **Findings**

### ***Definitions of 'Chinese community': geographical, ethno-cultural, and virtual notions***

Asked about their conceptions of 'Chinese community', most participants defined it as a geographical location, such as traditional 'Chinatown', where people reside, work, shop, and participate in various social activities. Viewing it as a place where Chinese immigrants can live with few cultural or linguistic barriers, Mrs Chuang and Mr Qian shared their observations about the Chinese communities in Toronto and Vancouver, respectively:

[...] especially in Chinatown that you mentioned earlier and in Mississauga too, there were lots of manufactories [in which] Chinese people work. So people who live there can communicate with each other in Chinese; [they] wear China-made clothes, and eat Chinese food. Everything is in Chinese. (Mrs Chuang, 39 years)

Vancouver is a place with a large population of Chinese people in North America. There are many services aimed at Chinese people. If you stay in the Chinese circles, like working in a Chinese supermarket or a company owned by Chinese people, for sure you would not be affected by language. (Mr Qiang, 39 years)

In a locale with a concentration of Chinese population, various organizations, groups or sub-communities – such as hometown associations, alumni associations, merchant associations, and Chinese churches – were also perceived as active and important in ‘socializing [and] providing opportunities for people to know each other’ (Mr Ming, 24 years). For example, Chinese churches were referenced as places of congregation, although Chinese immigrants’ participation was not always driven by their religious belief but, often times, by their need to meet people and to adjust to their new life in Canada.

In addition, a few participants also considered the Chinese community as ‘a relational concept’ (Ms Yue, 29 years), in which the Chinese – as a collective ethno-cultural identity, distinct from other ethnic-cultural groups – came into existence in Canada as their adopted country. Mr. Guang, a 48-year-old married male permanent resident of Canada who was currently living in Shanghai alone for work purposes, commented that the Chinese community is primarily defined by the shared culture, in such forms as the same (written) language and similar lifestyles and cultural activities. Participating in cultural holiday celebrations, for example, encourages one’s senses of connection with, and closeness to, other Chinese people and with the Chinese community. Mr Guang explained:

There are huge differences when it comes to the communication between cultures and the differences between ethnic groups. So if you live in a Chinese community, if you participate in activities in the Chinese community, you would naturally feel close, for example, [through] celebrating the Spring Festival together.

For him, the geographical and ethno-cultural aspects of the Chinese community are not only inseparable, but also mutually constitutive.

During the interviews, however, the phrase ‘Chinese community’ was usually used in reference to Chinese-language virtual on-line communities, which are not constrained by the geographical boundaries of the traditional Chinese community or of Canada as their host country. All participants reported experiences, to one degree or another, with a virtual Chinese community on a daily basis, as described by Mr Yi:

I did not have very much connection with [the traditional Chinese community here]. But I will go on the Internet, and see the [Chinese] advertisements and BBS [bulletin board system]. I keep an eye on those websites every day, like *Jiaoguo Wuyou* [a Chinese-language website popular among immigrants from the PRC in Canada]. (Mr Yi, 41 years)

***Perceptions of the Chinese community: diversity, marginality, and transnationality***

Although the Chinese community is often portrayed by mainstream society as unified, most participants saw Chinese people in Canada as a highly diverse group, given their different origins and times of immigration, migration trajectories, socio-economic status, settlement patterns, and even linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Such perceptions are illustrated by the quotes below:

[The Chinese community] includes people from Hong Kong at an earlier time, and we are different from them. They have been here for a long time, and their language, their life style, are different from ours. Also, although some Chinese people speak Chinese, they are from Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia; and there are people from mainland China. (Mrs Shi, 42 years)

The [earlier generations of] Chinese immigrants who had lived there for many decades were [primarily] composed of so-called *Kuli* [menial labour]. [...] As for our generation, however, you should understand that we had either to be academically brilliant or have access to resources. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to go abroad in the 1980s.

Most of these people would have already reached the tops of the pyramids [i.e., the socioeconomic hierarchy] had they stayed in China. (Mr Di, 50 years)

In Vancouver, [economic] immigrants or entrepreneurs from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are the richest. Generally speaking, only [wives and children] live there. In contrast, there are lots of ‘skilled immigrants’ in Toronto, and often people immigrate there with their whole family. No matter whether they are middle-class or average people, they appear more pragmatic because they have to work, to rent or buy houses, and to send children to school. In Vancouver, [...] the majority of Chinese immigrants are wealthy, so that they are confronted with few difficulties in their lives. (Mr Di)

The heterogeneity of Chinese immigrants is also evident in their interpretation of the established Chinese communities in Canada, and their expectations about settlement there. While the ethnic community may offer newcomers feelings of familiarity, comfort, and belonging, some participants also viewed it as a barrier to integration. Mr Shang, a 35-year-old, university-educated man who was currently working in Shanghai, was frank about his little contact with the Chinese community since immigrating to Canada in the early 2010s, in part because of its perceived distance from the mainstream society. He said:

The Chinese immigrants there are not trying to integrate into the mainstream society, and they aggregate in a certain area, such as the Richmond area in Vancouver, where 90% of the population are Chinese immigrants. [...] I think this kind of life is like still living in China, and they are looking for a lifestyle that is exactly the same as in China. [...] But I think one of the healthy ways to adapt to the new environment is being open minded to new things, and keeping a positive attitude, and making an effort to integrate.

As well, Mr Guang observed that some Chinese newcomers would intentionally choose to live in a non-Chinese community neighbourhood right after their arrival, because this was perceived as advantageous for their children's language learning and future opportunities.

Most participants also perceived that the Chinese community as a whole was not cohesive nor influential, and even marginal in Canadian society. Despite his overall positive impression of the Chinese community in Toronto, 48-year-old Mr Shuang commented: 'Generally speaking, I don't think it can have any impact on the society.' Mr Ju, a 45-year-old man in Vancouver, attributed this weakness to the constrained political participation of Chinese-Canadians, who are often preoccupied with various settlement challenges:

I attended a few conventions organized by the NDP [New Democratic Party] in Vancouver, and very few Chinese-Canadians were there. It's mainly local Canadians there, and they are willing to voice their opinions as well. My observation is that most Chinese-Canadians are preoccupied with the job search, and they don't pay much attention to anything else.

Chinese immigrants' economic survival may also constrain their ability to provide support to their peers in the community. Mr Tou, a gay man living in Toronto, viewed the relationships among Chinese immigrants in Canada as 'superficial', in that they are not yet meaningful or supportive enough for those who need help during difficulties. He explained:

The friends you have in China are real friends, and you help each other. But in Canada, I do not think that people really help each other here. I think the friends in China are real friends, because in that culture, it's frowned upon if you do not offer help to your friends. In the Chinese community here, most people are busy with their own lives, and the friendship is quite shallow. People would not go to great lengths to help you if you are in need. At most, we just see each other once in a while and have a chat.

For this reason, Mr Tou perceived that his relationship with the Chinese community in Canada is not as close as with his friends in China. Since arriving in Canada in the early 2000s, he has maintained close contact with his family and friends in China via phone calls, email, and international travel.

***Interactions with the Chinese communities: Emotional belonging, pragmatic strategies, and service use in the context of settlement***

All participants reported interaction with the Chinese community, although the manner and extent of their involvement varied. Some indicated a clear preference for close contact, because they felt more at ease communicating with others with whom they shared language, culture, and way of thinking. Ms Wang, a divorcee in her 50s, declined her then-boyfriend's invitation to live with him in a small town, in part because she wanted to stay close to the Chinese community in Toronto: 'It's like I am a fish, and the Chinese culture is water. If you throw the fish onto dry land, it cannot survive'.

Some who reported less interaction with the community attributed it to their own lack of information about, and lack of time for, participating in community activities. This decision results from their busy daily schedule to survive, or to their strategic decision to minimize interaction with the Chinese community as a way to accelerate their integration into mainstream society. Ms Yue and Ms Di, two women who used to be international students in Canada and were currently living in China, said that they preferred to interact more with local Canadians than with Chinese communities in order to learn more about Canada and Western cultures. Seeing her preference as a matter of shared interests rather than of shared ethnicity, Ms Di explained that the social circles of local Canadians are 'more interesting, more attractive' than those of their Chinese counterparts. '[If] people I have contact with are all Chinese, it's just like I am in China.' Ms Yue simply commented: 'If it is like that, I might as well stay in China.'

A few participants were also frank about the disadvantages of staying close to Chinese communities, given the latter's perceived lesser linguistic, social, and cultural capital. Instead, they saw socializing with members of the so-called mainstream society – in particular, Caucasian Canadians – as helpful in improving language skills and accessing social networks, power and, even, a sense of

achievement, all of which are key to their settlement and integration. This sentiment is echoed in the following quotes:

I did not get involved in the Chinese community because I do not think they will help me improve my English skills. So most of my friends are local people, because they can help me improve my English speaking skills. (Mr Si, 43 years)

Chinese immigrants' social status is very low in Canada, just like the lagging-behind students in a class. I don't see anything promising in mingling with the lagging-behind. But Westerners are different: they don't face any language barrier; they are better networked in this society, and they still constitute the majority of the Canadian population. (Mr Shuang, 48 years)

I would have a sense of achievement if I could be integrated into the White people's circle [...] because many people would admire you. [...] For Chinese international students or newcomers, even if your English is good enough, there is still a gap between you and them. It's not a problem with English, but a problem with your background. (Ms Gu, 25 years)

The Chinese Christian church communities were also cited by some participants as an example of a community with both social capital and material resources. Various resources (e.g., social networks and actual assistance) offered by the churches and fellow churchgoers – especially earlier generations of immigrants from Hong Kong or Taiwan – have facilitated newcomers' settlement in the new environment, as illustrated below:

I was very lucky, my church friends are very nice. They are all immigrants from Hong Kong, came here more than 30 years ago. They told me what I should do [to get settled

here], how to live a life [in Canada], how to report taxes. They gave me many ideas. So it was a big help for me to get to know Canada quickly. (Mrs Li, 46 years)

[People in the churches] introduce you to jobs. In the summer, they help you take care of your kids, to have extracurricular classes. If your family has hardships – for example, if your husband is not around, if you have some things [that you need help with] – they always do things [to help you]. The churches, in fact, are places for social connections. To some extent, many people go to churches for reasons beyond religion; it is more about mutual help [among church-goers]. (Mr Yuan, 57 years)

Although most participants had experiences of accessing services in various Chinese community organizations, they perceived those services as more useful for addressing newcomers' initial needs (e.g., Chinese-speaking services for health card application and tax return, and basic English learning programs) than for meeting skilled immigrants' substantial needs for employment, as well as complex issues like housing and mental health. Mr Tou, a 44-year-old gay man who was a successful lawyer back in China, commented that Chinese community services tended to funnel Chinese immigrants into low status jobs. These jobs were not useful for him in pursuing a high level of English proficiency or a professional job. Several participants also commented on the services provided by community agencies as 'perfunctory, very superficial' (Mrs Li), or as inadequate, or as less resourceful than mainstream service organizations. Feeling deeply unsatisfied with the services she received from a Chinese community agency after a domestic violence incident, Ms Xiang, a 41-year-old single mother, said that she now preferred to seek help from English-speaking mainstream services. She explained:

If you make a phone call to an organization that provides services in English, the problem very quickly gets solved. If you make a call to an organization that provides services in Chinese, they can only solve a small problem. I discovered that they do not have very strong services.

### *Living beyond the 'Chinese community': Struggles between Canada and China*

The virtual community – including both Chinese language websites in Canada and some popular social media networks, as well as mobile chat apps in China – was commonly accessed by participants as a form of social support and an avenue to keep informed on events in China. It is worth mentioning that participants also sought information from the virtual community to help their settlement before leaving China for Canada. Mr Qian, a married male permanent resident of Canada who currently resides in Beijing alone, shared how his wife in Canada used the QQ, an instant messaging software service popular in China, to network with other Chinese immigrants for potential employment opportunities in Canada:

When Chinese people go [to Canada], they have already had their own ways [of networking]. For my wife, her way is a QQ group. [In that group], some people have arrived in Canada already, some people are still waiting for [their immigration papers]. [...] Last month someone sent her an email from China, telling her that their company [in Canada] needs an accountant, and that she can apply if she is interested.

In this study, all participants maintained frequent contacts with China through international air travel and the Internet: in particular, Internet phone, social media (e.g., WeChat), and China-based instant messaging services (e.g., QQ and *weixin*). Mrs Cao, a 53-year-old university-educated, married woman living with her daughter in Vancouver, indicated that she often contacted her family in China via phone calls and email. She also had travelled between the two countries five times in the past two years to visit her husband, who was running a successful business in China. She also observed that most of her classmates in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program were frequent travellers between Canada and China.

For some participants, China is not only the homeland where their extended family and friends live, but also a place where the other half of their nuclear family is located, or where opportunities are more accessible. Mrs Chuang, a 39-year-old, naturalized Canadian citizen who immigrated to Canada in

the early 2000s, was currently living with her two young, Canadian-born, children in Shanghai, because her husband had secured a professional job there. Describing her family as ‘living a life of two places’, she said:

I think many [Chinese] immigrants in Canada or North America are living a life of two places. They are so-called ‘astronauts’ (*tai kong ren*), especially those living in Vancouver, where there are lots of so-called “wife villages” (*da nai cun*) and ‘mistress villages’ (*er nai cun*). Many people live a life in this way, in which husbands continue pursuing careers in China, and wives live in Canada to keep company with their children.

Also living in an ‘astronaut’ family, Mrs Cao feels similarly torn by her transnational life of living simultaneously in two places. Her frustration is twofold. First, she felt very isolated in Canada, because her unemployment prevented her interacting with anyone except newcomers in the ESL program. Second, she perceived unprecedented inequity in her conjugal relationship, because she was now financially relying on her husband and had no control over his life – including his sexual life – in China. Feeling ‘tangled’, however, she was hesitant about giving up her permanent resident status and returning to China. She explained:

I feel that I don’t have a place in [Vancouver]. [...] My biggest pain is that my credentials are not recognized; also, the job market here is not good. So as a person who speaks poor English, I can’t find my value ... I can’t stay here. [...] But when I went back to China, many friends said to me: ‘Now we are unable to immigrate [to Canada], even if we are willing to spend three million [for the Immigrant Investor program]’. [...] When hearing things like this, I feel I have to stay here.

Several participants also shared Mrs Cao’s struggle, they had to decide between whether to stay in Canada or to return to China for better opportunities, in view of the booming economy and their higher socioeconomic status back home.

The superior career opportunities, along with ‘homesickness’, also drove some participants to consider moving back to China, whether temporarily or permanently. Despite their desire and efforts to integrate, they reported a feeling that they did not belong in ‘mainstream society’, and of being a perpetual outsider, in part because of racial inequality in Canada. Mr Sui, a 30-year-old married man who arrived at Canada in 2000, and has become a naturalized Canadian citizen, commented:

In Canada, after all, you are immigrants, you are a visible minority. Even if you are very capable or something, you can’t fully merge into the mainstream society. This is for sure. [...] Even if you are very, very, young, it’s still unlikely. For example, I have a few cousins in Canada, they were Canadian-born children, but I feel that their social status is still not the same. ... I don’t know how to say this, [but] compared to white Canadians, there are still some differences.

At the time of the interview, he, along with his wife and a new-born baby, had moved back to Shanghai. Despite his well-paid job, however, he said that their decision to move back to China might not be permanent. As well, Ms Yung, a naturalized Canadian citizen who self-identified as a lesbian, had returned to China with her young child in order to be close to her extended family, but also planned to return to Canada in a few years for the child’s schooling.

## **Discussion**

This paper focuses on the relationship between Chinese economic immigrants and the Chinese community in Canada from the perspectives of economic immigrants from the PRC to Canada. It represents a small, exploratory step toward understanding the impacts of transnationalism on the ethnic community in the context of immigrant settlement. The findings have refuted the notion of an ethnic community as a ‘never-changing, socially bounded [entity]’ (Vertovec 2010: 85), and revealed its constraints in facilitating the integration of the new generations of Chinese immigrants in Canada. The aim of our discussion is not to negate the role of the established Chinese communities; rather, we attend to the limitations of the conceptual and structural underpinnings of ‘ethnic community’ as both an

ideational and an empirical entity that merits critical reflection in the context of these economic immigrants' segmented or, even, failed integration. Taking into account transnationalism helps to re-conceptualize the study of migration and integration as 'a complex, dynamic, and multidirectional process beyond the locus of a single society': one not yet considered by the mosaic multicultural approach to immigrant governance (Fleras, 2011: 27).

Despite the continuing tendency of public policy discourses to essentialize 'the Chinese' as a singular ethnic group, the 'diversification of diversity' of recent immigrants from the PRC has challenged the imagined or assumed homogeneity, stability, and 'bounded solidarity' of the Chinese community (Vertovec 2007: 1025; Zhou and Lin 2005). The economic immigrants under study appeared to resonate, emotionally and symbolically, with the collective ethnic identity represented by diasporic Chinese communities. However, they also emphasized their differences from other co-ethnics in the community in terms of country of origin, linguistic and cultural background, access to human and economic capital, immigration trajectory, relationship with the PRC and, even, lifestyle. Unlike earlier generations of Chinese immigrants to Canada, the group of economic immigrants from the PRC is composed of those who held higher socio-economic status – for example, better access to academic, social, and economic capital – in China, and their immigration to Canada is largely a result of their autonomous choice, rather than of a lack of choice (Guo and Guo 2011; Li 2005; Wong and Lo 2005). As a result, their expectations about settlement in Canada were rarely about basic survival or integration into a perceived 'marginalized' ethnic community; instead, they aimed to resume their socioeconomic privilege or, at least, to prevent their downward social mobility through, for example, pursuing professional employment in Canada.

While ethnic communities and organizations were perceived as helpful at the early stages of their settlement, the gaps between economic immigrants' aspirations to integration and the resources available in the community quickly became apparent. Such gaps, however, should be considered in the contexts of the disjuncture between immigration policy and settlement policy, and of the inadequacy of a mosaic multicultural model in 'a *transnational* world of movement and connections' (Fleras 2011: 33, *italic is original*). Although Canada's immigration policies in the past decades have been driven by neoliberalism

that values human and financial capital, ethnic difference has remained a key axis of organizing and delivering settlement services at a local level (Ferrer, Picot, and Riddell 2014; Hyman, Meinhard, and Shields 2011; Sakamoto, Wei, and Truong 2008). The proliferation of immigrants' differences, as illustrated by this study, problematizes the ethnic-centric approach to immigrant settlement. What is perpetuated in their settlement narratives is not their ethnic label, nor their membership in the ethnic community, but their common struggles as newcomers and their shared goal to succeed in Canada, as well as their sustained ties to the homeland. The findings suggest the importance of discarding the old approach that '[takes] discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life', and of taking into consideration 'the coalescence of factors' that collectively condition immigrants' lives in a transnational context (Ang 2014: 1185; Vertovec 2007: 1026).

Chinese economic immigrants' higher expectations about their settlement also make visible Chinese ethnic communities' shortage of the symbolic capital (social, cultural, and racial) that is perceived by these participants as crucial to their integration in Canada. In her study of the hiring practices of Chinese immigrant engineers in Canada, Shan (2013) found that these immigrants were often relegated to the end of the hiring queue, in part because of their 'capital' disadvantages, such as a dearth of soft skills and of network-dependent resources. They want that capital because it will enable them to connect with the resources (e.g., English proficiency, familiarity with 'Western' culture, and information and networks relating to professional employment) in 'mainstream' society, which in this study tends to be referred to as the 'white Canadian' society. In the context of racial inequalities, their reported strategies to foster symbolic capital – including some participants' conscious efforts to interact with 'white Canadians', and to keep their distance from the ethnic enclave – reflect their autonomy, in spite of its own limits, to create and accumulate social capital to overcome the perceived barriers to their and their children's integration in Canada.

Facing the barriers to integration in Canada, participants commonly resorted to transnational resources through, for example, keeping in close contact with China, participating in China-based virtual

communities, and even maintaining a (nuclear) family across borders. With easier access to international travel, the Internet, and information and communication technologies, China was indeed viewed by many participants as ‘closer’, or more accessible, than the Chinese community in Canada when it comes to their needs for economic security, social support and, even, sense of belonging. In their study of Polish immigrants in the UK, similarly, Ryan and colleagues (2008) also found that these migrants relied on the social networks in their home country – instead of the connections in the local communities in the host country – for support and advice. In a sense, Chinese immigrants’ connections with the homeland, especially in the context of ‘rising China’, can be viewed as a form of social capital that is integral to their settlement in Canada (Portes 1998). Yet the costs of sustaining such connections – such as geographically split households, ruptures in relationships, involuntary cross-border mobility, and self-exploitation – should not be neglected. Although ‘belonging, loyalty and sense of attachment are not parts of a zero-sum game based on a single place’ (Vertovec 2010: 90), Chinese immigrants’ reliance on their transnational ties in the process of settlement appears to have diluted their identification with the established Chinese communities in Canada. Such reliance has also reinforced these individuals’ own struggle – such as ‘double diaspora’ or dual worldviews, as well as subsequent conflicts – of living between two countries or worlds (Guo 2016; Zhang 2017). In the contexts of transnationalism and social-economic inequality, therefore, urgent questions confronting the ethnic community include how to build, or rebuild, its capacity and community in order to renew its relationship with newcomers; how to tap the resources in the community into the larger society (national and transnational) in order to diversify the paths to immigrants’ social mobility (Zhou and Lee 2013), and how to mobilize the ethnic and beyond to transform the political, social, and economic conditions that disadvantage minority newcomers.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese skilled immigrants’ definitions and perceptions of, and experiences with, the Chinese community in Canada have exposed the inadequacy of an ethno-centric approach to minority immigrant settlement and integration. The gaps between these individuals’ strong expectations of integration and the perceived

shortage of the relevant resources in the ethnic community have driven them to resort to China as a reliable source of economic security, social support and, even, sense of belonging. We contend that in the context of transnationalism, researchers and policy makers should pay close attention to the heterogeneity of immigrants' trajectories, aspirations, opportunities, constraints, and cross-border connections, as well as transnationalism's implications for their settlement and integration. The findings indicate the urgency of better understanding the relationship between the new waves of immigration, ethnic community, and transnationalism, and of reflecting on the mosaic multicultural approach to ethnicity and immigrant governance in the context of diversification of diversity.

The purposive sample in this qualitative study, however, means the findings presented here may not be generalisable for Chinese immigrants' relationship with the Chinese communities in Canada as a whole. As well, 'Chinese community' was not the focus of the study, but rather emerged as a theme at the stage of data analysis; and the absence of a more systematic exploration may have prevented us from fully understanding the relationship among transnationalism, the ethnic community, and immigrant integration. Despite these limitations, this article does shed light on Chinese immigrants' own perspectives on 'Chinese community' and their relevance to immigrant settlement and integration: an area that merits further, in-depth, examination in future research.

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