

Friendly Outsiders?

**Exploring the dynamics between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans in Derb
Omar, Casablanca**

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Introduction

A Moroccan friend of mine, who is a movie director, insisted that the story behind the making of Moroccan Mint Tea (in Moroccan Arabic *أنتاي*) would be the perfect opening to my thesis, once he knew that the purpose of my stay in Casablanca was to investigate the Chinese entrepreneurial community in Derb Omar and their interactions with local Moroccans. In fact, he has a point. A crucial ingredient to the Moroccan Mint Tea is Chinese Gunpowder green tea. It is widely believed that the tea was first brought into Morocco as a tribute from Queen Anne of England in return for the release of a number of English prisoners and became popular across the society when British merchants were left with an excessive amount of tea from China due to the closure of the Baltic ports during the Crimean War (1853-1856) and they managed to create new markets in Tangier and Essaouira.¹ Although it is not the result of direct interaction between China and Morocco, the beverage that is central to Moroccan food culture nowadays certainly indicates a symbolic connection between Morocco and China. Long before the modern states of the Kingdom of Morocco and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were established, there has already been a subtle Chinese presence in Moroccans' everyday life.

Relations between China and the MENA

While there has been historical trade relations between China and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) through the Silk Road, a more significant political tie between the two regions have not been built until the establishment of the People's Republic of China. One of the most remarkable events is the first Asia-Africa Conference, the Bandung Conference in 1955, where then Chinese premier Chou En-Lai promoted the PRC's foreign policy that includes "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity", "non-interference in each other's internal affairs", "equality and mutual benefit", and "peaceful coexistence". Also known as the non-alignment movement, the aforementioned principles of the Chinese foreign policy are an apparent attempt to set up an alliance amongst the MENA where most states just got independence from

¹ Jeff Koehler, "Tea in Morocco: 'It's in the blood'", *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/tea-in-morocco-its-in-the-blood/2014/10/20/8f7730c0-54b9-11e4-892e-602188e70e9c_story.html?utm_term=.7da9de26483a.

colonial powers. Over the period of late 1970s to 1990, the significance of Sino-Middle Eastern relations declined since the Chinese government prioritized its economic reform and repairing its ties with the West. Nonetheless, the relation between the two region regained its importance after economic sanctions was imposed by the West on China for the excessive violence it had used against student protestors in Tiananmen Square. In 1991, Algeria founded the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) along with some African countries. The cooperation involved the exchange between China's economic assistance, infrastructural projects, affordable goods and services, preferential loans and political support, and Africa's oil, natural gas, minerals, markets and political support. Similar cooperation frameworks were also set up, such as the China-Arab Countries Cooperation Forum and the China-Arab States Expo frameworks. These institutions not only initially undermine the embargo against the PRC, but also eventually fostering economic, political, social and cultural collaboration between China and the MENA. Since the new millennium begins, a new emphasis on trade relations and developmental cooperation, which is actually China investing in numerous development projects in reality, is observed. An example of the former would be the financial and monetary cooperation between China's major banks and a number of African Banks. The latter is exemplified by the Chinese pledged inauguration of the China-African Developmental Fund (CADF).²

Relations between China and Morocco

Although the tie between China and Morocco may not be as close as that of Egypt and Algeria historically, their relation is becoming more remarkable in the recent years, particularly since China has begun to expand its economic and cultural influence through the One Belt One Road (or the "New Silk Road") initiative. It can be evident by the visit of King Mohammed VI to China in 2016 and the founding of Confucius Institutes.³

² Muhamad S. Olimat, "China and North Africa: An Overview", *China and North Africa since World War II*, (Lexington Books, 2014).

³ Jeremy Luedi, "Under the Radar: What's behind China's love affair with Morocco?", *Global Risk Insights*, March 26, 2017, <http://globalriskinsights.com/2017/03/chinas-love-affair-with-morocco/>.

The North African country recognized China in 1958 and is one of the first African countries did so. Their relation is mainly built on strategic partnership in terms of trade and security cooperation, as well as mutually non-interventionist policies, even though Morocco is a major non-NATO ally of the US.⁴ Despite the fact that the term “One Belt One Road” may often appear on the media, its content seems to be vague. Inferring from the website on which the state council of the PRC outlined the action plan on the initiative, the essence of this initiative is to call for socio-economic cooperation that includes improvement of infrastructural connectivity between locations, unimpeded trade, financial integration and cultural exchanges “for the betterment of the world”.⁵

The followings are some of the solid examples in which the somewhat abstract grand strategy of the Chinese current foreign policy comes down to the reality in the context of Moroccan. Apart from conventional exports to China like phosphates, there is a massive influx of Chinese investment in a number of sectors in Morocco. It saw a 195 per cent increase in Chinese Foreign Direct Investment between year 2011 and 2015 and a 93 per cent increase from year 2014 to 2015. Chinese corporations are also involved in constructions of big scale infrastructure such as bridges, railway and solar plant in Morocco. In addition, the rising global power also begins to invest big projects that involve major industries like renewable energy and telecoms.⁶ Yet, the most dramatic growth is in tourism. Driven by the decision of Moroccan government to remove visa requirements for Chinese nationals who stay in the country for less than 90 days⁷ and the promotion of the major travel website in China, a six-fold rise

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative”, The State Council of The People’s Republic of China, last modified March 30, 2015, http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm.

⁶ Ahmed Charai, “On the Rising Continent of Africa, Morocco and China Eye Heightened Partnership”, *Huffington Post*, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ahmed-charai/on-the-rising-continent-o_b_9929306.html.

⁷ “Morocco Exempts Chinese Nationals From Visa Requirements”, *Morocco World News*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/05/186284/morocco-exempts-chinese-nationals-from-visa-requirements/>.

in Chinese tourists was observed by the end of 2016.⁸ In fact, the abolishment of visa requirements for Chinese nationals not only boosts the number of tourists from China, but also attracts Chinese entrepreneurs who have small amount of capital to try out their businesses during the three-month visa-free stay since the cost of doing so is much lower than before. In other words, there will be a proliferating presence of Chinese nationals as a result of Moroccan government's more open approach towards Chinese investment and visitors.

Significance of the research

Against the backdrop of the rapidly tightening economic co-operations between China and Morocco, it is anticipated that the number of Chinese nationals residing in Morocco will be growing in the near future. However, there is a lack of literature written on Chinese migrants in Morocco in general. Little information regarding the number of them or their purpose of stay can be found. The "Overseas Chinese Economy Year Book Editorial Committee" or the "Overseas Chinese Affairs Council", the sources of a recent study on overseas Chinese across the, did not provide the number of overseas Chinese in Morocco.⁹ According to the limited information gathered, it is believed that the size of Chinese nationals in Morocco has been relatively small. A news report in 2004 estimated that there were around 1,200 Chinese businessmen living in Casablanca.¹⁰ Apparently, the number is subjected to significant increase given the recent developments in the Sino-Moroccan trade relations. Hence, it is a critical moment to look into this community amidst this volatile period. It is interesting to see how the locals receive the growing presence of Chinese nationals and what kind of implication the growing trend of potential Chinese migrants will bring to the original social dynamics in the country.

⁸ Jeremy Luedi, "Under the Radar: What's behind China's love affair with Morocco?", *Global Risk Insights*, March 26, 2017, <http://globalriskinsights.com/2017/03/chinas-love-affair-with-morocco/>.

⁹ Dudley L Poston Jr and Juyin Helen Wong, "The Chinese diaspora: The current distribution of the overseas Chinese population", *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 2, no. 3, (July 2016): 348-373.

¹⁰ "Chinese Traders shake up Moroccan vendors", *Taipei Times*, September 24, 2004, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/worldbiz/archives/2004/09/24/2003204178>.

Choosing Derb Omar as the field site of this research was somewhat a coincidence, and yet it is not. In the process of searching for a specific field site for the Chinese presence in Morocco, two articles amongst the search results caught my attention. They reported that there are a number of Chinese merchants who owned small shops in Derb Omar, a well-known mercantile district in Casablanca, and that they hired Moroccans to facilitate the communication with local customers.^{11 12} These articles showed that these small shop traders are the group of Chinese that would interact with Moroccans the most given that their staff and clients are locals. Such pattern contrasted significantly with their fellow nationals who work for Chinese mega companies tend to stay in dormitories provided by their employers and have little opportunity to meet locals.¹³ This inspired me picking Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar as my subjects. Through interviewing these Chinese entrepreneurs, one would gain deeper insights not only into the way they settled in the host society, but also their relations with local Moroccans. Furthermore, it could provide a micro-perspective towards the Sino-Moroccan relations. While bilateral ties between the two governments have always been the focus of mainstream media, this research will shed light on the Chinese-Moroccan relations on the ground that is much neglected. In addition, while Casablanca is known as the commercial and financial hub of Morocco, the city is the major arena for significant commercial cooperation between the two countries. For instance, the China-Morocco Trade Week will be held in December 2017 and the Bank of China opened an office in Casablanca in March 2016 under the framework of Morocco's Casablanca Finance City Initiative.¹⁴ In light of this, studying the social dynamics in the metropolitan city between Chinese and Moroccans would be a good indicator of how Moroccans feel about China and its policy towards Morocco.

¹¹ John Thorne, "We're better off in Morocco", *The National*, July 20, 2009, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/africa/were-better-off-in-morocco>.

¹² "Chinese Traders shake up Moroccan vendors", *Taipei Times*, September 24, 2004, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/worldbiz/archives/2004/09/24/2003204178>.

¹³ Giles Mohan, Ben Lampert, May Tan-Mullins and Daphne Chang, "The Chinese in Africa: Migration and Development Beyond the West", *Chinese Migrants and Africa's Development*, (Zed Book Ltd., 2014).

¹⁴ Jeremy Luedi, "Under the Radar: What's behind China's love affair with Morocco?", *Global Risk Insights*, March 26, 2017, <http://globalriskinsights.com/2017/03/chinas-love-affair-with-morocco/>.

Introducing the field site: Derb Omar

Morocco is a country with diverse natural landscape and social composition across regions. Even within Casablanca, one neighborhood can be very different from another, which is a common feature among metropolitan cities. It is therefore crucial to introduce the physical environment of Derb Omar, where the Chinese entrepreneurs of concern situate, in order to have a better grasp of ‘which’ Morocco they are referring to.

Derb Omar is a mercantile district where winding streets and alleys are extended in all directions from the Victory Square like a spider web. One will find hundreds of small shops, often not more than 20 square meters, along the two sides of these streets. There are shops and vendors of all kind, selling affordable products. Most of them are shops that sell items related to textile, including fabrics, clothes, home decorations such as curtains, cushions, shoes, schoolbags, blankets, bed sheets. Others sell lamps, painting frames, kitchenware, tableware, sweets and nuts, fruits, and even books.

Apparently, urban planning is not something one would associate with Derb Omar. The several stories tall buildings that dominate the landscape of Derb Omar appear to be old and lack of maintenance. Massive trucks that are supposed to transport goods to other parts, usually rural area, of Morocco are parked everywhere on the road. Pavements are narrow with the shops on the one side and street vendors on the other. The floor is worn with broken street bricks everywhere. Large section of them is exposed to the rough concrete underneath the bricks. One would notice rubbish such as plastics packaging and food residue on the street due to the absence of trash bin. Nonetheless, Derb Omar has its own character amidst what seems to be chaos. Its vigor is evident in workers always managing to keep loading goods onto these overloaded trucks indefinitely, the crowd of potential customers that keep the area busy throughout the day from Monday to Saturday, the street vendors that help each other, and the “ritual” where workers gather in circles on the floor and have couscous every Friday afternoon. The trade hub for affordable goods is busy all year long and only takes a long break during Eid al-Adha. Most shops are closed two days before Eid al-Adha for more than a week.

Amidst the complex street formation of Derb Omar, it is less difficult than expected to locate the Chinese entrepreneurs. I had already run into a few East Asian faces on the first day I arrived the district. After wondering around Derb Omar for a few days, I figured out most of the Chinese shops concentrate in an alley to the North West of the Victory Square and a street to the South East of the square. In the alley, there are four individual shops and one mini-shopping complex. The products they sell are rather homogeneous, including blankets, bed sheets, shoes for children, schoolbags and tableware. The street to South East of the square consists of a few shops that sell aforementioned items, a travel agency that targets Chinese travelers, a grocery store that offers locally plant Chinese vegetables and a newly opened Chinese noodle place that can only serve maximum 16 guests. Apart from them, there are also two shops that sell chandelier and painting frames, whose owners are siblings.

Methodology

Interviews are conducted with Chinese entrepreneurs who run small shops in Derb Omar, including chandelier shop, clothes shop, blanket shop, during the period of fieldwork from 10th of August to 7th of September 2017. The comparatively short duration of the fieldwork owes to the fact that this thesis is done for a taught Masters program in which fieldwork is not mandatory and does not count for credits. Yet, fieldwork is necessary for this topic since little relevant literature has been written previously. Therefore, the fieldwork is conducted during the summer break between the two semesters of my Master program.

The initial plan for my fieldwork was to obtain contacts of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar from the Chinese Chamber of Commerce that is based in Casablanca before my departure for fieldwork. However, there was no reply to the emails I sent them. Hence, the only option was to look for Chinese entrepreneurs on the ground. I spent the first few days upon my arrival walking around the district and keep an eye on shops in which East Asian faces appeared. Fortunately, I found a number of shops run by Chinese without much difficulty.

After mentally locating the shops with Chinese owners, I began my fieldwork with a Chinese shop that was closest to the place I stayed. It was a shop selling chandeliers and frames. Wondering what would be the appropriate opening, I asked if they were

Chinese in Mandarin when I walked in. Noticing I spoke their language, the owner and her Chinese companions instantly eased and invited me to sit with them. I introduced my purpose of visit after a few sentences of casual chats. My grand strategy is to be upfront while maintaining certain level of a casual atmosphere. I intend to give my interlocutors an impression that we are having a chat rather than a formal interview. I always believe that human beings tend to give more genuine answers and are more willing to share their stories when they are at ease. In order to ensure my interlocutors talked with me in a relaxing environment, I avoided recording and taking notes overtly. Instead, I would only take notes of some key points on my phone during my conversations with my interlocutors and then organize them in a café or my place afterwards. I visited a few other shops with the same approach and it seemed to work well. In addition, I paid repeated visits to each shop, once or twice every week during my stay in Casablanca. I find this very useful in nurturing bonding between my interlocutors and I, which is crucial for my interlocutors to be more open to talk about their stories and ideas.

Theoretical framework

The analysis of the Chinese entrepreneurial community in Derb Omar will mainly draw on theories of diaspora and transmigration. “Diaspora” and “transnationalism” appear in articles related to global migration frequently. The two terms have been used more interchangeably in the recent years, nonetheless, each of them has a genealogy of its own. The former is originally referred to religious or national groups living away from an (imagined) homeland. The most prominent examples would be the Jews and Armenians. The latter is confined to migrants’ durable links across countries while encompassing not only communities but also various social formations like transnational networks and organizations. A more conventional interpretation of diaspora stresses forced dispersal, desire to return to an (imagined) homeland, and inability to fully socially integrate into the host society. Newer explanations incorporate trade diasporas and labor migration, replace return with ties across borders and highlight cultural hybridity. In other words, the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism largely converge nowadays.¹⁵ Apparently the Chinese

¹⁵ Thomas Faist, “Ch 1: Diaspora and transnationalism: What kind of dance partners?”, *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, 2010.

entrepreneurial community in Derb Omar concerned in this thesis falls into the category of trade diaspora.

Most literature on Chinese diaspora entrepreneurship focuses on large-scale and historical migration, such as the migration of Chinese from Kuangtung (Guangdong) and Fukien (Fujian) to Southeast Asian countries like Philippines and Indonesia since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁶ A substantial amount of academic works has been done on Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Oceania, Europe, North and South America¹⁷. Little attention has been paid to relatively small-scale and more recent movements. Not much is written on the context of North Africa, let alone Morocco in particular.¹⁸ Given that the economic co-operations between China and Morocco has been significantly intensified and as a result attracting more Chinese entrepreneurs to set up businesses in Morocco, it is therefore paramount to look into this much neglected landscape in the academia.

This research seeks not only to bring insights into a field that have previously been overlooked by scholars, but also to bring nuance to the conventional approaches, namely the culturalist approach and structuralist approach, of examining Chinese overseas communities, especially entrepreneurial communities. Culturalist explanations are referred to the use of familism and relationships (*guanxi*), straits widely perceived as embedded in Chinese culture, in evaluating the entrepreneurial practices of Chinese businesses. Structuralist underscores the importance of state policies in shaping transnational entrepreneurship.¹⁹ While the former perspective would easily fall into the trap of essentialization, which is characterized as taking everything for granted in cultural terms, the latter left out the social aspect to the issue.

¹⁶ Lawrence W. Crissman, "The Segmentary Structure of Urban Overseas Chinese Communities", *Man*, New Series, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jun., 1967), 185-204.

¹⁷ Michael W. Charney, Brenda S. A. Yeoh, Tong Chee Kiong, "Introduction", *Chinese Migrants Abroad: Cultural, Educational and Social Dimensions of the Chinese Diaspora*, (Singapore University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Giles Mohan, Ben Lampert, May Tan-Mullins and Daphne Chang, "The Chinese in Africa: Migration and Development Beyond the West", *Chinese Migrants and Africa's Development*, (Zed Book Ltd., 2014).

¹⁹ Hong Liu, "Beyond a Revisionist Turn: Networks, State, and the Changing Dynamics of Diasporic Chinese Entrepreneurship", *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 3, December 2012.

With no doubt, the above literature provides important knowledge on Chinese trading diaspora as a whole. However, this research intends not only to breakaway from the dichotomy between culturalism and structuralism and highlight the peculiarity of the Chinese entrepreneurs whose businesses locate in Derb Omar, but also to shed light on the significance of the way they positioned themselves in the host society in affecting their settlement pattern and their relations with locals. In light of this, the categorization of transnational formations proposed by Dahinden is useful to conceptualize how the Chinese entrepreneurs perceive their own presence in Morocco through different amount of mobility and locality in the sending and/or receiving countries exhibited by the migrant group in concern.²⁰ The above theoretical framework will be elaborated in details in the first chapter.

Objectives

There are three ultimate goals of this research. First, shed light on the settlement pattern of Chinese nationals who run small-scale business abroad, while large-scale businesses have frequently been subject of studies and destinations like Morocco often overlooked by previous literature. Second, bring nuance to the conventional understanding of social integration, given the way it has been used problematically. The concept has always been under the spotlight of the discussion on immigrants' adjustment and settlement in Europe up till today but at the same time often confused with assimilation. This research seeks to provide an alternative imagination of immigrant-host relations. Third, highlight the significance of economic factors in influencing the relations between the migrant group and the host society. These objectives are sought to achieve by relating the lives of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar to the self-perception of their presence in Morocco and evaluating their relations with the Moroccan society in the social, political and economical context of Morocco.

In the first chapter, it will look into the way Chinese entrepreneurs situate and position themselves in the host society, i.e. Derb Omar in Morocco, by examining their nature of stay in Morocco, the arrangements with their family members, and

²⁰ Janine Dahinden, "Ch. 3 The Dynamics of migrants' transnational formations: Between mobility and locality", *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 51.

comparison between their home town in the PRC and Derb Omar, with reference to theories on diasporas and urban space. In the second chapter, it will demonstrate how Moroccans react to the Chinese presence under Morocco's socio-political and economic context, including the government's cultural and migrant policies and Sino-Moroccan economic collaborations, while comparing such attitude with that towards Sub-Saharan migrants. In the last chapter, it will look into how the interplay between the two aforementioned aspects influence the interaction between the migrants and locals and what are the implication of the relations between Chinese nationals and Moroccans.

Chapter 1: How Chinese traders position themselves in Derb Omar

The center of concern of this research is the relations between Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar and local Moroccans. It is crucial to understand how Chinese traders posit themselves in the host society and how they are in turn received by the Moroccan society, because it provides the context of their interactions. This chapter will discuss the way in which Chinese businessmen situate themselves among the locals through the amount of time they stayed in Morocco, the arrangements they made with their family, their motivations to move to Morocco and their comparison between home society and the host society. The notions of mobility and locality proposed by Janine Dahinden in “The Dynamics of migrants: transnational formations: Between mobility and locality” will be adopted as the key framework in understanding where Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar stand among the vast stream of transnational migration. In addition, studies on urban space in China will be used as point of reference in evaluating the yardstick which the Chinese entrepreneurs themselves used to assess the Moroccan society.

Mobility and Locality: the Duality of transnational formations

Dahinden argues that the level of mobility and locality, i.e. the embeddedness in host and/or home societies, of transnational migrants tends to influence the way they situate themselves in the host society and interact with locals. The more mobile a migrant is, the more likely they would stick to their own community and practices, often because they did not have the intention to be part of the host society in the first place or that their presence in the host society is primarily instrumental, such as money-making.

Dahinden stipulates that transnational formations are the outcome of the combination of transnational mobility and locality in the sending or/and receiving country. She refers to mobility as the “the physical movement of people in transnational space”²¹ and locality as being “rooted/anchored – socially, economically or politically – in the

²¹ Janine Dahinden, “Ch. 3 The Dynamics of migrants’ transnational formations: Between mobility and locality”, *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 51.

country of immigration and/or in the sending country”²². She also characterizes transnational migrants into four categories, namely localized diasporic transnational formations, localized mobile transnational formations, transnational mobiles and transnational outsiders. The first group of migrants has settled in the host country for generations with their offsprings and have become citizens. They tend to be socially and economically integrated into the host society. They demonstrate a low level of physical mobility but a high degree of local ties. The second group comprises migrants who move back and forth between the host country and their place of origin for multiple purposes such as holidays, family obligations and businesses. They are high in both mobility and locality. One of the examples would be guest workers who arrived Europe after the Second World War. The third group is made up of people who are on the move to a certain extent. Their ultimate goal is not to settle in another country but to improve their quality of life by staying mobile. They are generally low in anchorage in the receiving country. However, at the same time they have to generate networks with local actors or institutions within their circulatory spaces in order to maintain their mobility. The last group is comprised of individuals who are low in transnational mobility and locality. Examples are asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants.²³

Dahinden rightly points out that the majority of the literature on transnational migration uses “integration”, whether in the host country or home country, as the benchmark to assess migrants, and treats transnationality and integration as two mutually exclusive concepts. The significance of her thoughts is two-fold. First, replacing “sedentarist bias”²⁴, assumptions that people naturally desire a fixed base in a particular space and it is a “normal development” that one move towards that fixity, with locality that could exist in both sending and receiving country. Second,

²² Ibid.

²³ Janine Dahinden, “Ch. 3 The Dynamics of migrants’ transnational formations: Between mobility and locality”, *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 53-59.

²⁴ Giles Mohan, Ben Lampert, May Tan-Mullins, Daphne Chang, “The Chinese in Africa: Migration and Development Beyond the West”, *Chinese Migrants and Africa’s development: New Imperialists or Agents of Change?*, 2014.

acknowledging the coexistence of the various levels of mobility and locality among different migrant groups.²⁵

The notions of transnational formations introduced by Dahinden are useful to shed light on the way Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar position themselves in Moroccan society. They provide a theoretical framework to conceptualize to what extent the Chinese entrepreneurs were mobile and attached to their home society and host society respectively, which in turn influence their interactions with Moroccans.

Meanwhile, it is necessary to caution against the assumption that the way mobility and locality play out homogeneously within a migrant group and that the level of the two elements is static for each migrant. It is important to address diversity within a given migrant group in terms of mobility and locality level they exhibit. Also, the degree of mobility and locality of individual migrant should both be seen as fluid concepts. They may change overtime due to a number of factors including their financial and familial conditions. The following analyses have also taken the aforementioned factors of internal diversity and fluidity within a migrant group into account and avoid applying Dahinden's model blindly, given the particularity of the subject.

Chinese traders in Derb Omar as Transnational Mobiles

Among the four types of transnational formations categorized by Dahinden, the position taken by Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar largely echoed with the third group, transnational mobiles, in general. In order to evaluate how they correspond with transnational mobiles, it is essential to consider the background of these Chinese entrepreneurs, including the amount of time they spent in Morocco, why they came to Morocco and the arrangement with their family. At the same time, as mentioned above, it is important to note that the types of transnational formations observed among Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar are diverse and are subject to changes, given that the economic and political ties between China and Morocco have been improving drastically in the recent year.

²⁵ Ibid.

The Amount of Time Spent in Morocco

According to the limited information I gathered before and during my fieldwork, the presence of Chinese traders in Morocco is considerably recent. In terms of the duration of stay in Morocco, the Chinese entrepreneurs I met in Derb Omar can be divided into three major groups: those who had lived in Morocco for more than ten years, those who recently came to stay in Morocco and those who moved back and forth from European countries along the Mediterranean Sea and Morocco.

Ms Miao, a lady in her sixties running a small bedding shop, belonged to the first group. She used to work for the agriculture department of the People's Republic of China and came to live in Morocco in 2002. She claimed that she was the first Chinese who set up a shop in Derb Omar.²⁶ Ms Luo, a middle age lady running a shop that sold chandeliers and frames came to Morocco eleven years ago, although she spent the first few years touring the country with her husband as a means to promote and sell their products. People who arrived Morocco more than ten years ago tended to stay in Morocco throughout the year, apart from paying a few sporadic visits to China from time to time.

Those who came to Morocco recently appeared to exhibit more experiences in trade in foreign countries. Viola, a lady in her late thirties who sold jeans for children and had previously been involved in the same trade in Brazil, was an example of the second group. She arrived in Derb Omar a year ago and had been staying in Morocco for eight consecutive months since her last visit to China. A middle-aged man whom I met at the Chinese hostel I stayed for two nights belonged to the last group. He was based in Italy and had a department store there. He told me the story of smuggling himself from China to Italy by land in 1997 and how he nearly suffocated to death while he was hiding in the car trunk. It was the fifth time he drove all the way from Italy to Morocco and was his longest stay so far (more than two months). He opened a small boutique in Derb Omar selling lady's clothes he brought with him from Italy shortly before I left the field site.

²⁶ Note: Unfortunately it is impossible to verify the statement with the information available.

By asking when these Chinese traders arrived Morocco and how much time they spent in the country, one can get a sense of the level of their mobility. Given that all my interlocutors reported that they would leave the host country, i.e. Morocco, from time to time, these accounts demonstrate a generally high level of mobility and resonate with an indispensable part of the definition of “transnational mobiles” suggested by Dahinden. Nonetheless, they also reflect the varied mobility among them. It is obvious that some travel more frequently than the others. For instance, the mobility of the boutique owner who was based in Italy is certainly much higher than Ms Miao, since the former had to move back and forth from Italy to Morocco when the three-month visa-free period expired and the latter basically settled down in Morocco. While recognizing the usefulness of the categorization of different types of transnational groups, the varying levels of mobility among the Chinese traders serve as a reminder against the assumption that members from a particular group are homogeneous in all aspects.

Family Arrangements

Another key feature of “transnational mobiles”, the low degree of local anchorage, seems to be evident among Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar. Very few of the aforementioned Chinese entrepreneurs had their immediate family, especially their offsprings, with them in Morocco. There was an apparent absence of the younger generation except a few toddlers among the Chinese in Derb Omar. This appears to be a sign that they did not plan to plant roots in Morocco. Ms Miao was in Derb Omar alone when she first started her business. Her husband joined her in Morocco a few years later after his retirement. Both of her children were married with kids in China. Boutique owner usually came to Morocco with his wife whereas his two teenage sons were going to school in Italy. Ms Luo’s husband went back to China a few years upon their arrival to Morocco and took care of their two daughters who were still young back then.

However, such family arrangement may subject to change. One example that stands out is the presence of Ms Luo’s niece, Qing. In fact, Ms Luo was not entirely all by herself in Morocco. She shared an apartment that was located very close to the Hassan II Mosque with her brother, sister-in-law and niece. Qing was the only teenager I met throughout my stay in the field site. The eighteen year-old dropped out of high school

before coming to Morocco a year before. She said her parents initially asked her to come for “vacation” and then pressured her to stay and help out their business after her arrival. She was taking a private French language course with around a dozen of Chinese youngsters.

Viola’s husband and ten-year-old son were both in China. However, she mentioned plans of sending his son to Morocco to learn English and French, and even Arabic, in order to increase his “competitiveness”. The two cases show that Chinese entrepreneurs are gradually more open to bring their children to stay in Morocco. It is true that having only a few Chinese teenagers in the area learning French or a Chinese mother who had plans to let her son studying English and French, and Arabic in the country does not necessarily imply that the Chinese in Derb Omar are becoming more localized. Nevertheless, trying to learn the languages Moroccans speak is at least a first step and nice gesture to facilitate communications with them, in which language plays an important role.

Motivation for Their Transnational Migration

One may think the reason behind these Chinese’s migration to Morocco appears to be quite self-explanatory – economic motivations. It is true that the Sino-Moroccan trade relation has been significantly improving. The tightening co-operations between the two countries are symbolized by the visit of current King of Morocco, Mohamed VI, to the Chinese capital city Beijing in May 2016. It symbolizes the affirmation of the strategic partnership between the two countries, with the signing of agreements in regards to economic, industrial, financial, legal, cultural, tourism, energy and infrastructure.²⁷ Numerous international economic or development projects led by Chinese investment are carried out under the banner of “One Belt One Road Initiative”, a strategy that aims at fostering economic and cultural exchange with countries along the “Belt and Road” which lies across Asia, Europe and Africa.

²⁷ “King Mohammed VI’s Visit to China, Milestone in Sino-Moroccan Ties: Chinese Minister”, *Morocco World News*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/05/186316/king-mohammed-vis-visit-to-china-milestone-in-sino-moroccan-ties-chinese-minister/>.

Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Morocco saw a staggering rise of 195 percent between 2011 and 2015 and nearly doubled from 2014 to 2015 alone.²⁸

People may have the impression that these Chinese entrepreneurs were drawn by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to set up their businesses in Morocco. While the initiative with no doubt plays a role in attracting Chinese investments in countries across Asia, Africa and Europe, it would be an overstatement if one assumes that this is the primary reason why these Chinese entrepreneurs came to Morocco. First, the BRI is an incredibly vague grand strategy of Chinese Foreign policy. It is more of a slogan that promotes economic co-operations and cultural exchanges than concrete policies. In other words, the Chinese government has not carried out clear policies that encourage the immigration of these Chinese entrepreneurs. Second, the BRI mainly concerns big corporations. Even though small enterprises may benefit from the general favorable economic ties between China and the host countries, there is hardly any policy that directly promotes their operations in the host countries. Although there is an increasing number of Chinese traders with small businesses, especially those who migrated to Southern Europe such as Italy, Spain and Portugal, thanks to the loosened visa requirement by the Moroccan government imposed on Chinese nationals, they are largely left to their own devices.

Despite the fact that there are representatives of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar to the Chinese embassy, it seemed that the role of Chinese embassy is more coordination related, such as organizing Lunar New Year gathering for those representatives. According to Ms Miao, one of those representatives, the business environment in Morocco was tough but the Chinese government did not provide any forms of assistance. It was a testimony indicating that these businessmen may not have anything to do with overt state-driven agenda. This echoes with the nuanced views on the predominant focus on transnational firms, inter-state negotiations and multilateral institutions, and the negligence of small firms among literature related to globalization in the book “Chinese Migrants and Africa’s Development”.

²⁸ Amira El Masaiti, “Chinese investments in Africa have ‘Harmful Effects’ on Countries’ Economies, Human Rights: IMF”, *Morocco World News*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2017/09/229598/chinese-investments-africa-harmful-effects-countries-economies-human-rights-imf/>.

While business opportunities are undeniably one of the primary motivations for their transnational movement, there are more layers to that seemingly obvious answer. Before my arrival to Derb Omar, I thought the question would be rather straightforward. However, the reality is not quite what I expected.

In fact, I was a bit confused at the beginning. On the one hand, they would be so kind that they were worried for my safety as a young girl doing field work alone in a “complicated area” like Derb Omar, or invite me to their home for a coke and chat with their spouse during our first encounter. On the other hand, when asked why they moved to Morocco, many of them tended to give very general and vague answers, or simply changed topic.

Viola attributed her migration to the recent removal of visa requirement towards Chinese nationals by Moroccan government. However, when further asked why she chose to start business in Morocco specifically out of all visa-free countries, she replied that “It was coincidence and fate”. Ms Miao told me that she came to Morocco with a few colleagues when she was still working for the agricultural department of the government of PRC and liked the climate at Casablanca very much. Hence, she decided to retire earlier and moved to Morocco and made a living by doing some small businesses. The same lady who was concerned with my safety, Ms Luo, skillfully switched subject when she was asked to share her story behind moving to Morocco. “There is nothing special with mine. You should talk to Ms Jiang instead, her story is more interesting,” she went on telling the story of Ms Jiang, the owner of a hostel of which I had stayed for two nights, “Ms Jiang was meant to do a French course in France but was cheated by the language agency and was sent to Morocco. That was how she came to Morocco.” Perhaps it has to do with his chatty and straightforward character, the Italy-based boutique owner gave the most concrete answer to my question. “I have a Moroccan employee whose brothers buy products from me and sell them in Marrakech back in Italy. That is how I knew there are business opportunities in Morocco.”

From the above responses, one can tell the Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar are extremely protective and cautious when it comes to personal questions in general.

This reflects their sense of insecurity amidst a volatile economic environment nowadays, particularly in a foreign country that is new to Chinese diaspora. Hence, they were worried about new comers from China would take away their market share. A recurring theme among the conversations with my interlocutors, especially those had moved to Morocco for a longer time and experienced the heyday of business, complained about poor business these days. Ms Miao recalled that many Chinese traders in Derb Omar failed to sustain their businesses and had to return to China.

Their Impressions on Morocco

The question of how the Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar find their lives in Morocco is a useful tool to derive their impression on Morocco. One not only can tell if they have difficulties in adapting to life in Morocco, but also have an idea of whether they like the place and get along with its people. Most of my interlocutors said it was not that difficult to adjust to life in Derb Omar. The fact that there were two Chinese grocery shops located in Derb Omar and a few Chinese restaurants scattered the area close to the district might help. My interlocutors tended to shop at those grocery shops and cook Chinese cuisine at home most of the time. For them, life was not so much different from that they had in China. Some like Ms Miao were well adjusted in Morocco. She really enjoyed the climate in Casablanca, saying that it is not too hot, not too cold and not too humid, especially compared to her hometown Wenzhou where the humidity makes nearly all kinds of weather unbearable. Rather surprisingly, she expressed a certain level of belongingness to where she lived for the past fifteen years, “Sometimes I feel more like home here. I feel I knew more people here than that in China.” She also likes Moroccans in general, “Of course there are both good and bad people wherever you go. But people here are quite nice.”

For others like the boutique owner held a more neutral attitude towards the host society. They merely saw Morocco as a venue for money-making and took difficulties arose while living in a foreign country as a given. “You would always encounter problems when you first started business in a new place. You just need to find ways to deal with them. There is always a solution.”

Viola’s view somehow echoes that of the boutique owner, “I am so used to living in a foreign country. It is not very challenging to me, except the language part is a bit

difficult.” The role of language plays in the interaction between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans will be discussed in Chapter three. However, her comment following the above two sentences was intriguing, “Look how dirty, chaotic and worn out here!” She exclaimed, “China is much better. I have been to many well-known cities in the world such as New York City and Paris and they are of no comparison to the level of liveliness in Shanghai.” The way she delivered the comment conveyed a sense of condescension. It appears that she believed that China was the most developed country in the world and even other so-called “developed countries” were inferior. It was not until listening to her comment did it remind me that almost all my interlocutors share the idea that China is becoming very well developed and take pride in it.

Contextualizing their impressions on Morocco

In order to have a deeper understanding of this sentiment, we have to look into these Chinese entrepreneurs’ source of origin in China, as well as how urban space in China is structured. Most of them are either from Fujian province or Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province. The two provinces are located in the more affluent East Coast of the PRC. People from both places are known for being good at doing businesses abroad. One of the Chinese media outlets called people from Wenzhou the “Chinese Jews”, using the stereotype that Jews are good at doing trades in foreign countries among Chinese people to describe how Wenzhou people are tolerant of adversity and make their way to becoming successful businessmen abroad.²⁹ The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council of the PRC published an article highlighting the prominence of Fujian people amongst overseas Chinese in terms of number, and economic, social and political power.³⁰

Since most of my interlocutors including Viola came from the city of Wenzhou, it is important to illustrate the major features of Wenzhou in order to obtain better idea of where they came from. Wenzhou is one of the fourteen coastal cities that first

²⁹ ““中国犹太人’温州人的海外生意（”The Chinese Jews” Wenzhou People’s Overseas business）“，*南方周末*， May 7, 2004, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/g/20040507/1100749828.shtml>.

³⁰ “福建海外华侨华人达 1512 万人 呈五方面特点(There are five features among 15.12 millions overseas Fujian people)“， *国务院侨务办公室*， May 28, 2014, <http://www.gqb.gov.cn/news/2014/0528/33149.shtml>.

underwent economic reforms. Her economic performance and urbanization advanced drastically thanks to privatization and marketization. Her development trajectory was widely seen as the textbook for other Chinese cities that seek to reach the same level of prosperity and was named the “Wenzhou model”.³¹

Since the economic reforms pushed forward from 1978, the socio-spatial of cities in the PRC could be characterized by the following attributes: high-tech and financial districts, space of consumption such as shopping centers, fancy restaurants and hotels, and space of differentiation and marginalization manifested by gated communities and migrant enclaves that are sometimes “illegal”.³² Behind the glamorous façade of the Chinese city lies the hardship of the migrant workers who were the indispensable force contributing to the rapid development of those cities. They used to be residents of the rural area in China but had moved to the city following the economic reform and swift urbanization since the late 1970s. They worked in export-processing factories, new restaurant and construction sites for minimal wages and lived in poor conditions. Due to the Hukou system (household register system) introduced in 1958 by the Chinese government, the movement between the rural and urban area was restricted. A person is either born with a rural or urban Hukou (register). One’s social welfare will be tied the municipality he or she was registered since birth. The restriction was loosened subsequent to the economic reforms but the social system was still associated with the register. Therefore these migrant workers were not protected by the social system in the city, such as the healthcare and the minimum wage law etc.³³ Those individuals were wanted when the city needed cheap labor forces but at the same time they were not genuinely accepted as equals as other city dwellers who had urban register. Apparently, there is a differentiation of treatment between people who have urban register and those who have rural register within the same city space.

³¹ Yang Weifeng, “The Consideration and Countermeasures of Urbanization and Urban Planning of Wenzhou City”, *Urban Research*, 2001(1).

³² Laurance J. C. Ma, Fulong Wu, “Restructuring the Chinese city”, *Restructuring the Chinese City: Changing Society, Economy and Space*, 2005.

³³ Tom Miller, “By the Sweat of Their Brows: The People Who Built Urban China”, *China’s Urban Billion: The story behind the biggest migration in human history*, 2012.

As a middle class Wenzhou resident whose parents own a textile factory, it is not surprising that Viola had only experienced the benefits of the city space in China, including its tidiness and convenience, without having to deal with the sufferings of the disadvantaged group in the city, for instance, the migrant workers. Hence, her point of references would be the well-structured surface of Chinese city when she tried to compare with the host society, Morocco.

To sum up, the high mobility and low local anchorage demonstrated by the Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar resembled that of “transnational mobiles” suggested by Dahinden, even though the level of mobility varied substantially within the community. Some had been living in Morocco for more than ten years and spent most of the time during the year in Morocco, while the new comers tended to move around very often. On the other hand, despite the fact that they elicited low level of locality, given that they barely mastered the local languages and their family rarely joined them in Morocco, there was a small hint for possible changes, with the presence of Qing, one of my interlocutor’s teenage niece and the plans of Viola to send her ten year old son to learn languages spoken in Morocco.

Nevertheless, it is too early to jump into conclusion that they are increasingly localized in the near future. It appeared that they still assumed the position of an outsider in the Moroccan society to a large extent, at least until now. Regardless of their mobility level, be they having lived there for more than ten years or newly arrived, they had hardly developed any attachment towards Morocco, perhaps with the exception of Ms Miao. They tended to judge the host society with the standard of their home society and had yet to accept the host society as it is. As a result, a mixture of a subtle sense of superiority and insecurity are observed among them. On the other hand, given that their primary purpose of stay in Morocco was making money and improving their life quality, they would not do anything that may lead to an adverse effect towards their business, such as creating tension with the local community. Thus, their sense of superiority and insecurity had not translated into acute hostility and discrimination towards the Moroccans.

Having examined the type of transnational formation of Chinese entrepreneurs and their attitudes towards their host society, in the next chapter I am going to discuss the

political context in which minorities had been treated and the recent economic developments in Morocco, in order to provide a more comprehensive background to the relations between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans in Derb Omar.

Chapter 2: Situating minorities in Moroccan society

After having some idea on how Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar position themselves in the new environment, it is necessary to grasp the political and socio-economic context of the society they are situated in, before moving on to exploring the relations between them and Moroccans. This chapter will illustrate the diverse attitudes among Moroccan society towards Chinese entrepreneurs drawing upon the portrayal of Chinese entrepreneurs among Moroccan media and conversations with Moroccans collected during the fieldwork. These attitudes will be placed against the backdrop of how the Moroccan state had treated different ethnic groups, with reference to the cultural policies during the colonial era and the current immigration policies of the Moroccan monarchy, as well as the changing economic environment in Morocco and the trade relations between China and Morocco.

Divisive social structure in Morocco

Social structure established over the time from pre-colonial period to independent Kingdom of Morocco would shed light on where the polarized attitudes towards the Chinese community among Moroccans came from. The French colonial administration had had a profound impact on the way Moroccans perceived different ethnic or cultural groups nowadays. Prior to the colonial era, the institution of *mellah*, the walled Jewish quarter was implemented to separate Jewish communities from Muslim ones, which was aimed at restoring the integrity to the “Islamic city”.³⁴ *Mellah* began to emerge in the royal capitals in the fifteenth century. They first appeared in Fez in 1438, then Marrakesh in the sixteenth century, Meknes in the seventeenth century, and some smaller towns. Local Jewish community was relocated from religiously mixed neighborhoods to a segregated quarter.³⁵ Nevertheless, Muslim-Jewish relations remained peaceful due to the ties between Jewish merchant elites and the Moroccan ruler, despite the fact that Moroccan Jewry retained the status of protégés (the immunity from the Moroccan government in a range of tax and judicial matters) as a collective community and were not entitled to the same rights as Muslims. In addition, the awareness of Amazigh as a distinct ethnicity from Arab had

³⁴ Emily Gottreich, “Introduction”, *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco’s Red City*, (Indiana University Press, 2007), 1-11.

³⁵ Ibid.

not emerged, largely because the majority of the two groups were Muslims and their statuses were not much different from each other within the social structure in the pre-colonial period.³⁶

Morocco became a Protectorate of France in 1912. The French government saw themselves as the descendants of the Latin Mediterranean Empire and the emancipator of Amazigh (or Berbers) from the repression of the Arab and Islamic civilization. The French colonial administration changed the pre-existing order and strengthened the division among various cultural and religious groups, in the name of multiculturalism. Consequently, they made great efforts in preserving ethnic and cultural classifications through the separation of administrative, judicial and educational structures.³⁷ They sought to create an elite class among Jews and Amazighs by providing French education, in order to establish leverage against Arab Muslims. They granted Jews preferential treatments including a different judicial status. The colonial rulers also passed laws that aimed at segregating Amazighs from their Arab neighbors. Ironically, French education bred the ideological formation of the nationalist movements in Morocco.³⁸

The rise of nationalism since the outbreak of World War One began to undermine multiculturalism under the French rule. Nationalism gradually became the foundation of political legitimacy thanks to Wilson's impactful advocacy of "national self-determination".³⁹ Therefore, pan-Arab and pan-Islamic discourses were used to construct a unified national identity among Moroccan independent movements that emerged in the 1930s. This was in reaction to the divisive cultural strategies and preferences over the Amazigh population of the colonial government, perceived by the nationalist movements activists.⁴⁰ Nationalists saw the difference between Arab and Amazigh as the deliberate project of the colonial government to divide the

³⁶ Taoufik Djebali and Lee Whitfield, "The Ethnic Mosaic in the Maghreb: Cultures in Crisis", *North African Mosaic: A Cultural Reappraisal of Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, (Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2007).

³⁷ Jonathan Wyrzten, "Colonial legacies, national identity, and challenges for multiculturalism in the contemporary Maghreb", *Multiculturalism in North Africa: Aftermath of the Arab Spring*, (Taylor and Francis, 2014), 17-34.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

nation.⁴¹ Since the independence of the country, such Arabo-centric narrative had dominated the political arena. However, the Amazigh movement began to challenge the nationalist hegemony in 1991, when six Amazigh associations issued the Agadir Charter in order to express their opposition to the marginalization of Amazigh culture and language, call for government's recognition of Tamazight as a national language besides Arabic, incorporate Tamazight in school curriculum and advocate the use of the Tamazight in public media. After years of tension between the movement and the government, the current king, Mohamed VI, finally created the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) as a gesture to acknowledge the plurality of cultures within the nation. Tamazight was also recognized as an official language along with Arabic in the 2011 constitution. Nevertheless, pro-Islamic discourse still prevails after all these years. Although the state ensures the freedom of religion on paper, Islam is the state religion in the constitution and "any means of seduction to shake the faith of a Muslim or convert them to another religion" is punishable.⁴²

The historical development of the social fabric in Morocco lay out above reflected a volatile division among Moroccan society since the last century. In the pre-colonial times, the implementation of *mellah* divided the society along the line of religions. Subjects were mainly categorized into two groups, i.e. Muslims or non-Muslim, referring to Christians and Jews. Jews were segregated from the "Islamic City" but generally peaceful social relations were maintained through the ties between non-Muslims elites and the Muslim rulers. When the French established their administration in Morocco, they not only reinforced the religious division between Muslims and non-Muslims, they also divided different ethnic groups, namely Arabs and Amazighs. The colonial government sought to create elite class among non-Muslims, especially Jews and Amazighs by providing them privileges and French education. Nationalist discourses including pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism fueled the independent movements towards the end of the French rule. These ideologies had been predominant since the independence of the Kingdom of Morocco. In fact, they had been crucial to the legitimacy of the monarchy. Only until very recently did King

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Mohamed VI show gestures to ease the long-standing tension between Arab and Amazigh.

Apparently, differentiated treatments towards different religious, ethnic and class groups were not new in Morocco. Such legacy still haunted Morocco in terms of the differentiated way Moroccan society perceived Sub-Saharan migrants and Chinese entrepreneurs. This was reflected by a news report contrasting the level of integration of Asian and Sub-Saharan migrants published on one of the major Moroccan media, Al-Bayane. The article began with a question “Have you even been stopped on the streets by an Asian asking you for money?” that led to a comparison between the “hardworking Asians” and Sub-Saharans who tended to be “beggars”. It indicated that the secret of the integration of Asians was winning the trust of Moroccans with their hard work. According to the author, “Moroccans accept immigrants who come to work.”⁴³

The article reflected the favorable attitude of Moroccan society towards Asian migrants including Chinese over Sub-Saharan migrants. The way the author contrasted Sub-Saharan and Asian migrants almost gave readers an impression that Asian migrants were the ones who were truly worth staying in Morocco because they produced economic value to Moroccan society. Whereas Sub-Saharan migrants were stereotyped as beggars who simply ask for money from Moroccans without contributing to the society, therefore they were less welcomed. Similar stigma was illustrated by *Maroc Hebdo*, a Moroccan weekly, which portrayed Sub-Saharan migrants as “the Black Danger”, implying they were the cause of increased drug trafficking, prostitution, and various security problems.⁴⁴ In fact, they were constantly the target of violent racist attacks and discrimination in Morocco. The police even randomly deported some of them without checking their right to

⁴³ Ahmed Mesk, “Au Maroc, les immigrés asiatiques seraient-ils les mieux intégrés?”, *Al-Bayane*, September 28, 2017, <http://albayane.press.ma/maroc-immigres-asiatiques-seraient-mieux-integres.html>.

⁴⁴ Hein de Haas, “Morocco: Setting the Stage for Becoming a Migration Transition Country?”, *Migration Policy Institute*, March 19, 2014, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/morocco-setting-stage-becoming-migration-transition-country>.

protection.⁴⁵ Moroccan society's discriminative perception and treatment towards Sub-Saharan migrants could be explained by the fact that these migrants often fled from conflicts in their home countries with little possessions that left them vulnerable to fall into irregularity, such as working in the black market. On the contrary, Asian migrants like the Chinese entrepreneurial community in Derb Omar tended to acquire certain level of resources or generate stable income. In addition, the positive image of Chinese among Moroccans was the result of the favorable state discourse in Morocco, owing to PRC's emergence as a global power and the tightening relations between PRC and Morocco.

Given that the two countries are geographically far from each other, there had not been much historical interaction, let alone the significant presence of emigrants to one another. The emigration of Chinese entrepreneurs only slowly began less than 20 years ago.⁴⁶ Therefore, Moroccans' perception on Chinese tends to base on current events associated with the country where these entrepreneurs come from, China.

China has recently been taking a more active role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Since the establishment of the PRC, the Chinese government has long been maintaining good relations with countries in the "third world". The most remarkable gesture is the address and statement made by then Chinese Premier Chou En Lai in Bandung Conference in 1955. He exerted support for the independence and self-determination movement in a number of Asian and African countries including Morocco.⁴⁷ More recently, the Chinese government brands itself as the mediator in the region and has high regards among Arab states as "the only major state in the world that supports Arab rights... and it always seeks the common good".⁴⁸ For instance, the country offers to host talks between different stakeholders of the Syrian Civil War. Apart from taking a more assertive political role, the emerging global power also actively looking for new market to invest its abundant amount of capital

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Due to the lack of prior research of the Chinese entrepreneurial community in Derb Omar, this information was inferred from the conversations with my interlocutors.

⁴⁷ "Texts of Address and Statement by Chou at the Bandung Conference", *New York Times*, 1955.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Aronson, "China's vision of the Middle East", *Al Jazeera*, Jan 21, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/01/china-vision-middle-east-160121052018955.html>.

among countries in the area. Hence, numerous international economic or development projects led by Chinese investment are carried out under the banner of “One Belt One Road Initiative”.⁴⁹ Morocco is valuable to the economic interests of China because of its geographical and economical proximity to the European market. This explains the set up of a China-Africa investment fund and plans to build an industrial city in Tangiers that aims at ensuring the access of Chinese products to the EU. It is anticipated that there will be a closer economic tie between China and Morocco in the foreseeable future, including Chinese investment in Moroccan infrastructure like King Mohammad VI bridge, solar power plant, and setting up branches of banks in the other’s country.

Attitudes of Moroccans towards Chinese entrepreneurs

There are mixed feelings toward Chinese entrepreneurs among the Moroccan society. They could be roughly categorized into three major groups, namely those who were curious of them, those who were worried about their presence and those who welcomed their presence. People in the first group tended to be the ones who had not had direct contact with the Chinese traders or were not involved in any sort of trade. People in the second group were skeptical of foreign trader groups who were capable to rival or even overpower local merchants not only due to concerns of the local economy but also the colonial legacy in which Europeans exploited local resources. On the other hand, people in the third group saw the rise of Chinese power and rapidly enhancing economic co-operations between the two countries beneficial for Morocco with increasing business opportunities and containment of Western powers.

Curiosity

Farid, a freelance journalist living on the edge of Derb Omar, has been very curious of the culture of the emerging global power, China, for a while. He was my Airbnb host who was living in an old building with an art-deco architecture style. There were a few piles of books about history, politics and societies of Morocco and other countries in the living room. He did his International Relations degree in both Granada and Brussels. He had always been interested in learning about other societies and loved

⁴⁹ A vision advocated by the PRC government that fosters cultural, social, economic and political co-operations among the PRC and countries across Asia, Europe and Africa.

travelling. We would have long conversations on our travel experiences and political views while having espresso and croissant for breakfast.

He seemed to be very excited for me when I told him about my research topic and purpose of stay in Casablanca. One day during breakfast, he told me his life in Rabat a few years ago. I was surprised to find that he had taken a Chinese class in the Confucius Institute at Mohamed V University a few years ago when he was living there. He would spend three hours in the morning reading Chinese words that he had absolutely no idea of their meanings aloud after his teacher with a few dozens classmates, every Saturday. He expressed that the Chinese language is very difficult to grasp, especially when the formal textbook had never arrived throughout the course. However, he enjoyed the last hour of each class the most, because he would be able to learn about Chinese culture, with topics ranging from literature to food to festivals. In addition, he complained that there is little in-depth and comprehensive analysis on different dimensions of the Chinese society, other than “Western propaganda”. Farid’s example suggests that Moroccans are not very well informed of China in general, but have the interest to learn more about the “giant” that shows increasing presence in their country.

Towards the end of my stay at his place, he invited me to a dinner gathering at an Italian restaurant. Most of his friends were Moroccans who had experiences living abroad and were working in Casablanca, and one of them had been living overseas for more than ten years. None of them had direct interactions with any Chinese living in Morocco before. They elicited immense interests towards the Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar and asked a number of questions about them. The curiosity was believed to root from their lack of contact with and information about the group of concern. A pure sense of curiosity was observed particularly among those who did not own a business or did not involve in trade. Those who did showed a more complex attitude.

Welcoming attitude

Samir, who owns a home decoration company that sells curtains, cushions and tablecloth etc., holds a more positive view towards the Chinese presence. I met him at a newly opened tiny boutique that belongs to a Chinese couple that base in Italy and

seek to explore business opportunities in Morocco. Not long after starting a conversation, he invited me to his office on the other side of Derb Omar. His office is located on the second floor of a building and sized no bigger than several dozen square meters, in which a mini make-shift workshop takes up half of the space. He pointed to the embroidered curtains and cushions that were hanging and piling up all over most of the place, and said “Ninety-nine percent of these products are imported from China.” Largely due to the fact that he has had business cooperation with Chinese businessmen before, he is the person who has the most frequent contact with the Chinese community amongst the Moroccans I talked to. Sitting in his armchair that was surrounded by mountains of papers and other stuff, he expressed his appreciation towards Chinese people: “They are humble. They have their own lifestyle and tend to stick to their own community. But they would not intervene into local matters and lifestyle, unlike the Europeans.”

Samir’s comments can be read into different directions. First, Chinese diaspora has the reputation of forming an exclusive community of which limited meaningful interactions are carried out with people from other cultural backgrounds. It is often perceived as a negative remark, especially judging from social integration point of view – of course it is debatable whether it is the migrants’ responsibility to integrate into the host society, or they should be able to decide for themselves and every choice should be respected. Apparently, Moroccans like Samir do not seem to mind the fact that Chinese people live in their own community. What appears to be a weakness among the Chinese communities in other social contexts is in fact a strength to them. It is not difficult to understand where such sentiment comes from if one has some basic knowledge on the modern history of Morocco. As depicted in the earlier section of this chapter, the colonial administration in Morocco had imposed a political and social structure that is very much founded on the model of the French colonial administration and sought to change the Moroccan society worked originally. Even though China has been more assertive in the MENA region, the non-interventionist image it creates in the global political arena through taking the role of a mediator in conflicts and its migrants’ secluded yet low-key way of living somehow reassures Moroccans that China would not be the successor of European colonial power. In other words, Moroccans feel less threatened by the presence of Chinese people as a result of that.

Second, like many others, Samir sees the presence of Chinese entrepreneurs primarily as business opportunities. While there is a surging amount of Chinese investment flooding into Morocco in the recent years due to the closer economic cooperations between the two countries, it provides more opportunities for Moroccan business to take advantage from projects that involve both countries. It is also evident by the shocking number of Moroccans who have installed the essential communication application found in China, WeChat. I was not aware of this phenomenon until I opened the “People Nearby” function of the application that allows one to find other WeChat users within a radius of one kilometer. I found dozens of Moroccans using the application with this function. Among the Moroccan users are merchants who have business ties with Chinese and Chinese-Arabic translators, a few of them even texted me in Chinese, expressing the eagerness to polish their Chinese. Apparently, these Moroccans would like to foster a closer relationship with Chinese people to enhance their advantages in the competition for Chinese economic cooperation.

Skepticism

There are always two sides to a coin. While there were Moroccans like Samir who were excited for the presence of Chinese traders, there were also those like Omar who were skeptical about it. Omar was one of Farid’s friends whom I met during the dinner gathering. He was the owner and founder of a small advertising agency. He described that it was difficult to meet Chinese people in person and therefore wanted to know more about them and their culture. However, he simultaneously concerned the negative impact of the influx of Chinese goods, known for its incredibly cheap prices, on the sales of local handicrafts. “It is fine if they import things we do not have here. But if we can produce the same things in Morocco, why do we need to import them from China?” He was currently developing a campaign that encourages local women to make candles in Morocco.

An article on a Moroccan online communication platform, bladi.net, shared similar concern with the growing presence of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar. It suspected that these Chinese traders threatened the livelihood of Moroccan traders by selling products with cut-edge low prices and harmed the competitiveness of Moroccan products. The article cited Mohamed Dahbi, the coordinator of the General

Union of Enterprises and Professions (the UGEP), claiming Moroccan traders and producers, especially those who own smaller scale businesses, were worried about their future because the Chinese entrepreneurs are formidable competitors who sold products with a price they could not compete.⁵⁰

The above worries and suspicions could be put into perspective by the perceived rivalry posed by these Chinese entrepreneurs to local Moroccan merchants due to the vulnerable position of the local industry as a result of the Structural Adjustment Packages.

Economic Transformation in Morocco

The drastic change in economic orientation of Morocco since the adoption of Structural Adjustment Packages (SAPs) in the late 1980s began to open up the local market and expose it to competition in the world. This would provide an insight into where the concern regarding the adverse impact the presence of Chinese entrepreneurs would bring to local industry came from.

After the debt crises in 1980s and the subsequent enforcement of SAP championed by IMF, Morocco has been one of the countries whose neoliberal economic policies were seen as the role model for other countries by international institutions. Since joining the World Trade Organizations (WTO) in 1995, ratifying the Association Agreements with the European Union (EU) in 2000, and signing Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with the United States in 2004, the engagement of Morocco in the world market has been significantly increasing. The Moroccan state retreated from the market and its economy transformed from relatively protected, import-substituted to more competitive and export-oriented. Thanks to the comparatively cheap labor among the global market, Morocco had attracted many foreign companies to set up factories, particularly labor-intensive industries such as textiles and garments, in the country. A staggering 37.8 percent of the total manufacturing employment goes to the industry.⁵¹

⁵⁰ “Casablanca: Will Derb Omar become China Town?”, *bladi.net*, May 11, 2014, <https://www.bladi.net/derb-omar-china-town.html>.

⁵¹ Adam Hanieh, “Mapping the Neoliberal Experience”, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, (Haymarket: 2013).

Although employment in the sector prevailed and exports increased rapidly throughout the 2000s, both were harshly affected by the termination of the Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA) in the middle of the 2000s. The MFA set a fixed amount of textiles and garments that were could be exported from the Global South to the North. The agreement had dominated world trade regarding textiles and garments from 1974 to 2004. Morocco, like its fellow North African country Tunisia, were closely tied to the European market, while enormous Italian, Spanish, French and German companies had established their export zones in the country in order to produce goods for the European market. It is evident by the nine-tenth of their apparel exports went to the EU. The implication of its end is that the most prominent markets for textiles and garment exports, namely the EU and the US, were exposed to Chinese and other cheaper exports. Exports in the sector dropped by 7.4 percent in Morocco the year following the expiration of the MFA. According to the Moroccan Textile Producers Association (AMITH), one in ten of the workers in the clothing industry lost their jobs and 10 percent of the clothing and textile companies closed down between 2003 and 2007.⁵²

With the MFA coming to an end in the mid-2000s, Moroccan textile and garments industry lost their advantage to the access to European market. They are vulnerable to intense competition in the global market and Chinese export is one of their biggest competitors. Moroccan economy was severely hit as a consequence, with numerous workers laid off and factories closed down. Moreover, Chinese companies' plan to take advantage of the geographical proximity of Morocco by building industrial city in Tangier for Chinese factories may make Moroccans suspicious of the Chinese pocketing all the profits without benefiting local population.

In conclusion, the attitude of Moroccan society towards Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar was diverse, depending on whether they were involved in business and whether they had prior interactions with Chinese. Those who were neither part of the business sector nor meeting any Chinese before tended to be curious of the foreign group and sought to learn more about them. Those who embraced the presence of the Chinese traders often had a positive outlook on the rise of the PRC and were

⁵² Ibid.

confident that the collaborations with Chinese would contribute to economic growth in Morocco, echoing Moroccan state discourses. They were also beneficiaries of the swiftly advancing Sino-Moroccan relations.

Those who were weary of the rising number of Chinese entrepreneurs were concerned about the threat of these foreign traders might pose to local industry. The above perceptions were evident showing the divisive social structure in Morocco dating back to the pre-colonial era did not necessarily lead to hostility towards a foreign group that is neither Arab nor Muslim. Rather, it appeared that economic factors were the key parameters used by Moroccans to assess Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar. In other words, economic power appeared to be the paramount element to determine whether a foreign group is accepted by the society or not in the context of Morocco. After having a basic understanding of how the Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar position themselves in the host society and the social context of Morocco, we can take a closer look into the relations between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans in everyday life in Derb Omar.

Chapter 3: Relations between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans

The interplay between the self-positioning of Chinese entrepreneurs in the Moroccan society and the perception of Moroccan society towards foreign minorities against its social, economic and political context explained in the previous chapters provide a backdrop to comprehend the interactions between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans in Derb Omar, which is going to be discussed in this chapter. The objective of this chapter does not stop at illustrating the ways in which the two groups interact, but moves on to explore the implication of their interactions on the predominant paradigm in analyzing immigration and “social integration”.

Whenever the relation between transnational immigration or immigrants and the host society is concerned, discussions in the academia tend to center around “social integration”. Unfortunately, integration was often mixed with assimilation, which is generally understood as the adjustment of the immigrant groups such that they would connect to the host society that has well-defined boundaries, integrated social and coherent cultural systems.⁵³ While the integration discourse still dominates studies on migration, there seems to be a new wave of thoughts that reconsider what integration entails under this increasingly interconnected and ever-changing world.⁵⁴ Resonating with these more nuanced views on integration and dynamics between immigrants and the host society, this chapter is going to discuss how interactions between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans in Derb Omar may not conform to the integration/assimilation model and yet the immigrants are still accepted by the host society to a large extent.

Features of the lives of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar

The lives of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar seemed to revolve around the “Chinese bubble”. They had little contact with locals outside the business setting. To my knowledge, there were two small “Chinese supermarkets” that sold a large variety of Chinese food, ranging from locally grown Chinese vegetables, frozen buns and

⁵³ Aleksandra Grzymala-Kazłowska and Jenny Phillimore, “Introduction: rethinking integration. New perspectives on adaptation and settlement in the era of super-diversity”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2018.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

dumplings, to seasonings and instant noodles. My interlocutors tended to buy their grocery there and cook their own meals. Ms Luo told me that not only you could get various types of Chinese food products there, but also pork meat, of which one could hardly find anywhere else apart from those “Chinese supermarkets”. There were also a few established Chinese restaurants and a newly opened mini noodle and dumplings place not long before I left the field site. Given that prices at Chinese restaurants were quite high – a bowl of beef noodle cost 50 Dirham at the under-decorated noodle place – my interlocutors rarely ate out except for special occasions such as meetings with officials from the Chinese Embassy in Rabat during Lunar New Year. In addition, they had very few activities other than resting at home when they were not working. According to Viola, there was not much one could do in Casablanca. She would stay at home and watch TV series on the Internet in her leisure time. Once in a while, she would visit the beach next to Hassan II Mosque. Ms Miao said quite a number of her fellow traders loved gambling and visiting casinos during holidays. Travelling within Morocco was another common way of spending longer holidays among Chinese entrepreneurs.

Similar to what has been identified as the settlement pattern documented in studies on Chinese migrants who work in the retail sector in Africa, Chinese entrepreneurs tended to live close to or even right above their shop premises.⁵⁵ Those I met in Derb Omar often rented apartments in one of the multifunctional or residential buildings either in the same area of their shops or somewhere close to the storage for their products among locals. Ms Miao’s and Viola’s apartments were just a few blocks away from their shops. Ms Luo and her brother’s family stayed in an apartment near the Hassan II Mosque since the location was close to the place where they stored their goods. The family would commute between their home and shop by taxi. For people whose bases were in Southern Europe, they would only stay in Morocco for a few months, usually less than three months, which is the amount of time they could spend in Morocco without a visa. It was common for them to stay in hostels or low-budget

⁵⁵ Giles Mohan, Ben Lampert, May Tan-Mullins, Daphne Chang, “The Chinese in Africa: Migration and Development Beyond the West”, *Chinese Migrants and Africa’s development*, 2014.

hotels run by Chinese owners. The Chinese hostel in which I spent two nights was actually a medium size apartment in a residential building resided by ordinary Moroccan families right next to the Victory Square. The apartment was converted into a mini-hostel with five bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a living room and dining room. The owner, who also ran a few other businesses, said many Chinese who came for “market research” would stay there.

The pattern of spatial settlement of these Chinese entrepreneurs indicated that it was not uncommon for them to live side by side with Moroccans rather than living in the same building or neighborhood with their fellow Chinese nationals. In other words, their living environment was quite mixed. There seemed not to be obvious efforts in forging a situation where Chinese migrants sought to live in the same building or neighborhood. The choice of location of their homes reflected that they prioritized practical concerns, such as convenience in reaching their shops or storages, over proximity to other Chinese migrants. Those who were meant to stay only for a few months and had the tendency to stay at Chinese hostels, their primary motivation was the fact that they spoke neither of the local languages and hence save troubles of communicating with Moroccans. But these Chinese hostels were also located in one of those buildings that were resided by locals.

Interactions between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans

On the other hand, Chinese entrepreneurs had plenty of opportunities to interact with Moroccans while working. There were three types of Moroccans Chinese entrepreneurs would usually interact with, namely their employees, customers and fellow businessmen.

Language played a significant role in their interactions with Moroccans. My Chinese interlocutors tended to hire one or two young Moroccan men as their shop assistants. The duties of a shop assistant were mainly carrying or moving the products, showing products to customers and most important of all, facilitating communications between their Chinese employers and Moroccan customers. While French was the language Chinese entrepreneurs would most likely learn when they arrived Morocco, they would communicate with their employees in French. Whenever a customer came to their shops and made some queries, their employees would act as the middlemen

between their bosses and potential customers. They had to digest the thoughts of Chinese entrepreneurs who sometimes might not be able to find the word or formulate a complete sentence in French, and explain them to their customers in Darija (Moroccan Arabic), or the other way around. Those who stayed longer in Morocco and acquired sufficient capacities in French, such as Ms Luo and Ms Miao, would deal directly with the customers.

Nonetheless, language barriers still created tension, especially with customers, from time to time. This was due to the fact that most of the Chinese traders tended to master rather low level of languages most commonly spoken in Morocco, French and Darija. They only learned a few French words related to their trade by picking them up while they were working in the shop. The most extreme case of such lack of language skill would be the boutique owner, who was illiterate and hardly spoke any Italian after twenty years of living in Italy. I can still recall one episode quite vividly. I was at Viola's shop that afternoon and a Moroccan lady was interested in buying a large amount of jeans of various models in the shop. She tried to ask for the price and bargain directly with Viola in French and Darija since she was the owner.

Unfortunately, Viola knew only a few words in French due to the fact that she did not attend any language course but simply picked a few words up after her arrival; she did not speak any Darija. The customer got a little irritated and said "no French, no Arabic" in Arabic, clearly referring to the inability of Viola to speak either of the languages. Viola's Moroccan staff quickly came to her rescue by translating what she was trying to say.

Despite the language factor, my interlocutors maintained relatively good relations with their employees, the Moroccans with whom they interacted the most, in general. They would have occasional chitchats during work hours. In addition, if the employer and employee bonded, they would care for each other. For instance, the younger of Ms Luo's two employees was a shy yet hardworking young man. On one occasion he had a bad case of stomach flu. Ms Luo told him he could stay home and rest but he insisted in coming to work for the whole day. This incident could lead to several interpretations. On one hand, one could interpret this as the employee's attempt to earn trust from the boss with his hardworkingness, as well as the fact that he would earn less money if he took leave. On the other hand, one could tell Ms Luo not only

appreciated the hardworkingness of her employee but also genuinely cared about his health from the way she mentioned it. This could plausibly illustrate that there was some warmth, i.e. something more than mere employment relationship, into the relations between these Chinese employers and Moroccan employees.

The relations between Ms Miao and her employee also shared a similar, rather warm dynamics. Among my interlocutors, Ms Miao had the closest relations with her employee. The Moroccan man in his late twenties had worked for her for a few years. I often caught them making fun of each other. The employee even invited her and her husband to celebrate Eid al-Adha with his family that lived close by the shop according to my interlocutor. Ms Miao accepted his invitation last year and received great hospitality at his home. Perhaps because Ms Miao had been living in Morocco for fifteen years and enjoyed her stay there, she knew quite a number of Moroccans in Derb Omar, whether they were businessmen or street vendors. Over the times when I was at her shop, a few Moroccan businessmen had greeted her while passing by. One day was unbearably warm and the air in her shop was really stiff, she took a chair and sat outside. There were mountains of goods that belonged to street vendors piled up outside her shop. I was talking to Ms Miao when a Moroccan middle-aged man picked up a school bag with Disney cartoon prints and said something to Ms Miao. She shook her head and said something in reply. Ms Miao told me that man had mistaken her as the seller of the school bags and asked her for the prices. "I would tell him if I knew the price." It appeared that this was not the first time such situation happened. There was another time when I stayed till the shop closed at around five o'clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, an elderly Moroccan street vendor whose spot was right next to Ms Miao's shop dragged a massive pile of products and moved them into her shop, which was rather small and narrow by itself. Before I understood what was happening, his teenage assistant helped him bring in more products that nearly filled up the tiny space. Meanwhile, he begged Ms Miao to let them put the stuff there in a joking tone. Towards the end, the street vendor even closed the shutter of the shop and locked it for Ms Miao (of course under her supervision). Ms Miao noticed my astonishment and explained to me later that she usually agreed to let street vendors she knew to store their products overnight in her shop, in exchange for their services for carrying goods from other locations to her shop.

The above account revealed that Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar and local vendors or businessmen were doing reciprocal services to each other. Since Chinese entrepreneurs were the minorities in the area, they knew that maintaining friendly relations with their Moroccan counterparts was significant for their survival, or at least made their own lives easier. In light of this, they made good use of the strategy of helping each other, which was exemplified by Ms Miao allowing the street vendors to store their products in her shop overnight in exchange for logistics services. Not only did it lead to a win-win situation, but also further strengthened the ties with the local business community.

Implications behind the way Chinese entrepreneurs lived and their interactions with Moroccans

After my stay in Derb Omar for several weeks, my impression was that there were friendly interactions between the Chinese traders and the locals in a business context, but that these interactions did not frequently go further to the personal sphere. The private life of these Chinese entrepreneurs was very much centered around the “Chinese bubble”.

The notions of “strong ties” and “weak ties” among different social groups introduced by Koramaz in her article “The Spatial Context of Social Integration” are useful to help one understand the dynamics between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans in Derb Omar. Using the case of Istanbul, she stipulated that people within a social group had a tendency to develop strong ties with each other, especially in more deprived neighborhoods, while “weak ties” tended to be developed among members of different social groups in order to seek opportunities across boundaries of social groups.⁵⁶ Notwithstanding that social groups here refers to a broader social strata than ethnic groups, such idea is applicable to the relations between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans. A strong tie was developed among the Chinese while the relations between the two groups was characterized by the “weak ties” suggested by Koramaz.

Apparently, there had been a good amount of contact between Chinese entrepreneurs and members of the host society due to the nature of their businesses. These Chinese

⁵⁶ Elif Kısar Koramaz, “The Spatial Context of Social Integration”, *Social Indicators Research*, Vol 119, Issue 1, October 2014.

were small entrepreneurs who sold cheap and affordable products. More often than not, their potential customers were ordinary Moroccans who earn humble livings. Chinese businessmen had high incentive to be on good terms with the local populations in order to increase their likelihood to patronize the shop and thus maximize their possible gains.

Nonetheless, frequent encounter and interactions do not necessarily imply there was a close tie between the two groups. Although Chinese entrepreneurs who run a shop in Derb Omar interacted with Moroccans on a daily basis for their business and lived alongside locals, their ties remained weak and pragmatic. Social lives of Chinese entrepreneurs were largely kept within the Chinese circle. Socialization between the two groups outside work context was rare. It might only happen in special occasions, such as the invitation for major celebrations like Eid al-Adha Ms Miao received from her employee. This resonated with what Samir, the Moroccan businessman who embraced the presence of Chinese traders introduced in the previous chapter, described that he did not know any Chinese whom he could call a genuine friend. He had worked with Chinese entrepreneurs for some time and knew a good number of them. However, when I asked if there was any Chinese he would consider as genuine friend, he expressed some reservation. “Friends are people who would share their personal life and secrets. I do not know any Chinese who share such bonding with me.” Language barriers could be one of the plausible explanations to their lack of more in-depth socialization. Despite the fact that quite a number of Chinese entrepreneurs, especially those who had stayed longer, mastered a certain level of French which they had picked up in the workplace, the extent of their vocabulary was mainly for commercial purpose. They did not have much problem in making deals with customers or communicating with employees, or even having small talks. Yet, when it comes to more complex topics, they would not be able to follow, not to mention having a deeper conversation. One may say they could polish their language and enrich their vocabulary overtime. However, it is doubtful if they had such intentions.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar positioned themselves as transnational mobiles. For them, Morocco was merely the venue for making a better living. Most of them still had their core home base in China or Southern Europe. Particularly new arrivers like Viola did not even know how long

would she stay in Morocco or what were her future plans. They had little incentive to plant roots in Morocco. Therefore it was understandable that they did not work hard in perfecting the local languages apart from learning the minimal basics for business communications or build close bonding with Moroccans. In fact, language barrier was just the symptom; the crux of the issue was that Chinese entrepreneurs did not view Morocco as their potential home. Even though the length of stay might influence the proximity of a Chinese entrepreneur towards the Moroccan society, for example Ms Miao elicited more emotional bonding with Moroccans, they had yet see Morocco as their genuine home.

The settlement style of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar brought nuance to “social integration”, a concept still broadly used to analyze migrant adaptation in “traditional” migration, which is understood as immigrants settling permanently in the host countries, as well as into the majority communities.⁵⁷ The conventional understanding of “social integration” is hardly applicable to the current world that is so high in transnational mobility. With no doubt, the Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar exerted low level of locality and they might not even have the intent to localize or assimilate. They might not have developed close relations with members of the host society but their presence was still generally accepted by the host community. The foreign group and local group lived peacefully with each other despite their difference in languages and lifestyles. This is perhaps a good example to inspire thoughts on whether traditional idea of social integration, i.e. assimilation, is the only path to achieve a harmonious society with transnational immigrants. If the two groups managed to co-exist peacefully in the same space, is it really necessary to require immigrants to act exactly like the majority population? The dynamics between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans in Derb Omar could serve as an example questioning whether assimilation is the necessary criterion for the host society to accept a foreign group, or the host society could accept immigrants as who they were and live together harmoniously.

⁵⁷ Aleksandra Grzymala-Kazłowska and Jenny Phillimore, “Introduction: rethinking integration. New perspectives on adaptation and settlement in the era of super-diversity”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2018.

Certainly, the acceptance towards Chinese entrepreneurs observed among Moroccans in Derb Omar did not come from nowhere, especially in a society that was socially divided along the line of religions and ethnicities. It was elicited in a peculiar condition. There are two key reasons that explained why Moroccans would accept a migrant group that shared little in common in terms of religion and ethnicity with the majority Moroccan population.

First, Chinese traders' secluded lifestyle and their lack of historical contact with Moroccan society actually made Moroccans more at ease. Although the business-oriented and nominal relations between Chinese entrepreneurs and the host society appeared to be quite negative, it might not necessarily be the case for the locals. For some Moroccans such as Samir, they appreciated the fact that the Chinese lived their own lifestyle and focused on doing business. According to Samir, the Chinese did not attempt to change the local way of living like European colonizers.⁵⁸ In other words, the social distance kept between Chinese traders and locals actually made Moroccans less suspicious of their presence. In the same light, it also helped that the Chinese had limited contact with Moroccans as a group historically. Hence, there would not be any presumed perception of Chinese based on tensions in the past. The above could be the explanations of why Moroccans in Derb Omar accept the emergence of Chinese entrepreneurs quite readily.

Second and more importantly, one should not overlook the significance of economic factors in the acceptance of Moroccans towards Chinese entrepreneurs. Drawing from the perspective of the author who wrote the article comparing "hardworking Asians" and "beggars Sub-Saharans", Chinese traders were more respected because they "rely on themselves". Problematic as it is, they were preferred because they did not need the assistance of the host society, contrasting with Sub-Saharan migrants who tended to have little possessions with them and had no choice but to seek help from the host community. To put it more bluntly, Chinese traders were accepted by the host society because possessed certain amount of economic resources, albeit they were not as much as those mega companies that enabled them to start their business in Derb Omar.

⁵⁸ Note: Samir expressed such view during my conversation with him.

On top of that, these Chinese traders also represented the increasingly prominent global economy, China, and the opportunities entailed, even though their transnational movement was not necessarily triggered by policies of the Chinese government. Given that Sino-Moroccan economic co-operations had been rapidly growing, Moroccans saw significant business opportunities in China, a “Third-world” country developed into a world-leading economy. While some worried about the presence of these foreign businessmen, the Moroccans I met in the field site viewed them as opportunities and thus welcomed their stay in Morocco, despite the fact that did not fit into the predominant discourse of national identity with being an Arab and Muslim was at its core. This reflects the impact of the economic power of China as a country on the welcoming attitude among Moroccans towards Chinese traders in Derb Omar.

In short, the observed relations between Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans in Derb Omar seem to suggest that the divisive social structure along religious and ethnic lines since the pre-colonial period did not naturally generate hostility towards a foreign group like Chinese. Rather, economic resources and influence of the migrant group seems to be a more prominent indicator to the migrant-host relations.

Conclusion

While a substantial amount of literature has been written on Chinese trading diaspora and more recently on Chinese investments in Africa, this research aims at filling in a missing piece to the field. Most of the previous writings on Chinese involvement in Africa focused on the “bigger story” and “significant” figures, such as large-scale investment and state-owned enterprises in resources-rich African countries.⁵⁹ These subjects are often more valued than what seemingly not so impactful like Chinese traders who own a small shop in a foreign country. However, the case of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar introduced in this research precisely add to the gap of the existing literature by depicting the lives of Chinese owners of small businesses and how they interact with locals. It complicates the dominant picture of portraying Chinese presence on the continent solely as (mostly state-driven) resources exploitation and shed light on the more individual-based businesses. As a result, the internal diversity within the Chinese businesses in Africa in terms of scale, type of business and destination is underscored.

At the same time, this thesis has also attempted to nuance the conventional imagination of “social integration” through the lives of Chinese entrepreneurs who ran their shops in Derb Omar and their relations with the locals. The case poses two major questions regarding “social integration”. What types of migrant-local dynamics fall into the category of “social integration”? Is “social integration” the necessary condition to maintain good relations between foreign and local groups?

The predominant literature on immigration and integration tends to assume that assimilation of the immigrant groups would eventually lead to the acceptance of the host society. This appears to have become the yardstick to examine various immigrant groups across different host societies. Those migrant groups who did not follow such trajectory have been criticized. Some even attribute the tension between immigrants and the host society to the lack of “social integration” of the immigrants.

⁵⁹ Giles Mohan, Ben Lampert, May Tan-Mullins and Daphne Chang, “The Chinese in Africa: Migration and Development Beyond the West”, *Chinese Migrants and Africa’s Development*, (Zed Book Ltd., 2014).

The presence of Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar and their interactions with Moroccans seems to challenge the aforementioned model. The foreign group did not quite fit into the characterization of “social integration” in many ways. They shared very few things in common with Moroccans in terms of language, religion, and lifestyle etc. On top of that, not only did they have limited mastery of the local languages and formed largely secluded social circles amongst themselves, but also they demonstrated little willingness in adapting to the lifestyle of the locals and saw Morocco primarily as a venue for earning money. On the other hand, they had an abundant amount of opportunities to interact with Moroccans during business hours. Further still, the Chinese traders were generally well received in the host society and managed to maintain friendly relations with Moroccans, despite occasional misunderstandings.

Despite the fact that the way the Chinese entrepreneurs settled in Derb Omar obviously does not fit into the “social integration” discourse, it may not be an issue in Morocco. Even though they lived in their “Chinese bubble” and the two groups rarely interacted outside work context, Moroccans accepted them rather readily. This begs the question: is such acceptance without immigrants’ assimilation considered genuine “social integration”? If not, is it necessary to push forward assimilation given that the foreign and local groups were on good terms with each other?

Nonetheless, one has to bear in mind not to over-romanticize their relations. First, the Chinese went to Morocco for clear business objectives, their nature of stay motivated them to keep peaceful ties with locals – nobody would like to do business with someone who is hostile against them. Second, the fact that Chinese came as entrepreneurs, reinforced the acceptance of the host society. This echoes with the article that portrayed Asian migrants as hardworking and trust worthy people while contrasting them with Sub-Saharanans, published on al-Bayane discussed in Chapter two. Third, their presence fit into the grand narrative of the Moroccan government that sought to push forward closer ties with Chinese government under the influence of the Belt and Road campaign. This indicates that the possession of economic resources is the key determinant to the acceptance of the immigrant group under the backdrop of the tightening economic ties between the two countries.

Owing to the limited time and resources that were available for this fieldwork, the ethnographical descriptions and subsequent analyses may only shed light on a particular part or version of the story. Yet, they give some ideas of the dynamics between the Chinese entrepreneurs and Moroccans and inspire reconsideration of the concept of “social integration”. Moreover, what is illustrated in this research may be subject to change (possibly towards any directions) in the future, given the rapidly evolving economic-political environment and new technologies in the world.

One good example would be the installation of WeChat among Moroccans in Derb Omar. WeChat is a communications application comparable to Whatsapp created by a Chinese company. Most Chinese who own a smartphone rely on the application to communicate with family and friends. I had to install the application in order to contact my interlocutors during the field trip. I was told that there was a function on the application called “People Nearby”. When you turned on the location on your phone, it would show everyone who had a WeChat account with their location switched on within a radius of one kilometer. I used the function once out of curiosity. To my surprise, quite a number of Moroccans also installed the application. Some even gave themselves Chinese names. Among them, I knew a few were professional translators between Arabic and Chinese from my interlocutors. More stunning was the fact that this function allowed others to text you without having to the person’s consent in advance. I instantly received a few messages from Moroccans. One of them greeted me in Chinese characters. The other texted me in Arabic (Fusha’) and told me that he went to China for trade. It was unclear whether they took the initiative to text me for new business opportunities, or practicing their Chinese, or because I appeared to be a young Chinese woman on my profile picture.

Unfortunately, I did not discover the “People Nearby” function on WeChat until the very end of my field trip and thus was not able to learn more about the background of those Moroccans who were using WeChat. However, my few brief encounters with Moroccans on the messenger application thanks to this function seem to suggest that channels of communications between Chinese entrepreneurs in Derb Omar and the host community had been opening up. Apart from interacting with each other in person in work settings, they could now communicate via messenger applications. Undoubtedly, most of the conversations would be for business purpose – which is the

primary motivation for these Moroccans to install WeChat at the first place. Yet, as time goes by, perhaps the two groups would start making friends through these platforms in the future, just like those greeting messages I received.

In addition, since this research field is still very under-discovered, many interesting dimensions could be further studied. For instance, it is worth looking into Chinese Muslims entrepreneurs who choose to settle in Morocco in future studies. For them, business opportunities may not be the only motivation for immigration but also religious familiarity. I met quite a few members of Hui, an ethnic minority that follows Islam in China, coincidentally in multiple occasions through my interlocutors. One of them was a young man who had obtained a Bachelor Degree in Arabic language and literature in Jordan. He went to Morocco some months ago and really like the country. He decided to stay and had been trying to set up some small business, including a tourist agency and a youth hostel. He did mention that living in a Muslim-majority country allowed him to practice his religion more comfortably. It would be interesting to examine in the future whether the common religion would affect their proximity to Moroccans.

Last but not least, I hope this research is going to inspire more studies of different disciplines on small-scale entrepreneurs or other seemingly insignificant communities among the Chinese diaspora to be done in the future. Hopefully by doing so, people would have better understanding of the diversity of the Chinese investments abroad and voices would be given to ordinary people in a world where spotlight is only dedicated to people who have power and resources. Their presences and thoughts are no less important than those supposedly “influential” stakeholders, because they are inseparable parts of the “bigger picture”.

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