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"Talk to Her, She is also Chinese": A Reflection on the Spatial-Temporal Reach of Co-Ethnicity in Migration Research

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Key words: migration research; migrant researcher; intersecting positionalities; space; time; Chinese migration; ethnography; longitudinal study

Abstract: This article rejects the insider/outsider dichotomy as a framework for understanding researcher-researched relationship. It complicates the over-simplified, bounded and binary construct by underlining how insiderness-outsiderness is dynamic and multiple, highly contextualised in the specific space-time of interactions between the researcher and her "research subject". In particular, the article underlines the power of space, place and time in researchers' attempt to establish and manage relationship with the people they study. It puts forth the notion of "spatial-temporal reach" to make sense of the complex, dynamic, deeply situated and often unplannable relationalities between researchers and their research participants. Episodes from the author's journey as a "migrant researcher" illustrate how sensitivity to (socio)spatialities (as in insiderness-outsiderness) and temporalities (such as age, generation, life cycle, time and frequency of research contact) help us, as researchers, reflect on our positionalities, experiences and emotions in knowledge co-production with the people whom we study, that in turn, shape our understanding of our own identities and heritage.

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1. Introduction

Stepping into the "field" for the first time fourteen years ago was an intimidating experience. I was in my late twenties when I received a scholarship to pursue my doctoral research in Germany. I wanted to "study" "my" co-ethnics in a few German cities. Not having grown up or lived in the ethnic Chinese "community"[1] there, I had to make cold calls and hope for interviews. "What should I say?", "How should I introduce myself?", "Should I first contact a woman first?", "Which Chinese language should I speak?" were some of the questions that flooded my head when I picked up the receiver. I am a Han Chinese woman[2]—hence bearing

1 Communities are understood as spaces charged with power hierarchies and replete with diversity and camaraderie, harmony and dissonance.

2 The vast majority (over 90 per cent) of the population in China and Taiwan are Han Chinese.

phenotypical characteristics of a Chinese person as generally perceived, born and raised in Hong Kong. Cantonese Chinese is my mother-tongue but I can understand and speak Mandarin Chinese, albeit with a strong Cantonese accent. Usually I had some basic information of the person whom I was calling, so I could make an educated guess whether I should begin the conversation with Mandarin or Cantonese. If I was uncertain, I would speak Mandarin because it is after all the official Chinese language in The People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan. The introduction usually went, in translation, like this, "Hello, my name is Maggi Leung. I am from Hong Kong, a doctoral student from the University of Bremen, studying the Chinese migrants in Germany." If we consider the different identities we, as researchers, embody as a stack of cards that we can play strategically in framing our encounters with those whom we study, I have here selectively opened certain (hopefully) useful cards to accomplish my research agenda. While rejecting to the essentialist presumption that migrant/ethnic researchers should or can best understand their co-ethnics, I justified my research project with my identities as Chinese, a migrant or at least someone who had been/would be away from "home" for a longer while, hence sharing a form of comradeship with my research participants. My position as a doctoral candidate legitimised my activities that could easily be considered intruding. The fact that I was a foreign student, someone who had to write "a big homework" (as understood by many of my research participants who did not have contact with higher education or research work), also earned me some sympathy. Most of them, women and men, were generous to talk to me; although my rapport with female and male research participants tend to differ. Quite a number of them helped me realise my "snowball sampling method". They introduced me to their families, friends or colleagues, persuading them with these sympathetic words, "Talk to her, she is also Chinese." Though being aware and sensitive to the problematic nature of such (ethnic) categorical thinking and practice, I was grateful that my co-ethnic identity "worked". [1]

Being a Chinese living/having lived in Europe has helped me in my first and subsequent research on Chinese migrants and transnational families (LEUNG, 2004), migrant businesses (LEUNG, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005), tourists (LEUNG, 2009) and transnational academics (LEUNG, 2011, 2013, 2014). In this article, I reflect on the mileage of the co-ethnic and gender identity marker in my work. Drawing on and developing further the sustained discussion and critique on reflexivity, positionality and identity in ethnographic research, I put forth the notion of "spatial-temporal reach" to gauge the perceived proximity ethnic/migrant researchers share with their research participants. The notion can be applied more generally to analyse the complex, dynamic, often unplannable and, most importantly, deeply contextualised relationalities between researchers and their research participants. Here, I illustrate some episodes from my journey as a researcher to show how sensitivity to (socio)spatialities (insiderness-outsiderness based on criteria e.g., gender, place of origin, mobility biography, language and cultural background, occupation etc.) and temporalities (age, stage in life cycle, generation, time (when and how long) and frequency of contact with research participants) help us reflect on our positionalities and experiences (e.g., feeling of affinity, distance, success, confusion, disappointment, frustration) in knowledge

co-production with the people whom we study. This interactional and contextualised process of knowledge production in turn shapes our understanding and performance of our own identities and heritage. [2]

The remaining of the article is divided in five parts. The next section reviews in the extant scholarship on the methodological aspects of migrant research, especially that conducted by migrant researchers. To advance this important discussion, I propose and explain the notion of "spatial-temporal reach" that offers (migrant) researchers a framework in reflecting on the multiple and changeful relationalities they share with their research participants. The subsequent sections will present some of my research experiences that help illustrate the utility of thinking about space and time more seriously in our research: Section 3 centres on the importance of spatialities, while Section 4 focuses on temporalities. Section 5 presents some episodes of my long-term, multiple research relation (and friendship) with Uncle Liu[3], whom I met when I began my doctoral research in 2002 and had kept in touch till he passed away in the spring of 2012. Our multiple encounters in the course of a decade have helped me reflect upon the importance of space-time in studying migrants, migration and transnationalism. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the utility of the "spatial-temporal reach" framework in reflecting upon ethnographic research processes and knowledge produced thereby. [3]

2. Probing the Spatial-Temporal Reach of Co-Ethnicity

Issues pertaining identity, reflexivity and positionality in the practice of fieldwork and especially in ethnographic studies, have occupied a central position in methodological debates among social scientists since the late 1980s. The core of the critical reflection is on how the production of ethnographic knowledge is shaped by the shifting and contextual relationalities between the researcher and his/her research participants, which are determined by the multiple and intersecting social identities and positionalities (or social situatedness) of both parties. Previous research and methodological reflection have highlighted and confirmed the importance of intersecting identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and other axes of social difference in the (re-)drawing and negotiation of boundaries between the researcher and the researched (e.g., ANTHIAS, 2002; MULLINGS, 1999; NAGAR & GEIGER, 2007; RAMAZANOĞLU & HOLLAND, 2002; ROSE, 1997). As more and more researchers with migration background are engaged in studying migration and migrant communities, more often than not, of their co-nationals or co-ethnics, this reflexive exercise has also begun among "migrant researchers" (e.g., ALEXANDER, 2003; GANGA & SCOTT, 2006; GUNARATNAM, 2003; RYAN, KOFMAN & AARON, 2011; SHINOZAKI, 2012). While it is logical and meaningful to foreground the impact of (perceived) shared identity and cultural background, hence social proximity, when analysing the process of knowledge production in such research constellation, these identities should not and cannot be analysed in isolation. As we interrogate the capacity and limits of "insider" researchers in accessing the life-world of and

3 All names of informants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

representing their research participants, we must remember that relationalities between a researcher and co-national/-ethnic research participants are not only determined by national/ethnic identity and belonging. As SHINOZAKI (2012) warns, a priori privileging national identity, a bias that is characterised by "methodological nationalism" (WIMMERS & GLICK SCHILLER, 2002), would lead to oversight of the influence of other social identities in shaping migrant experiences. In any particular research process, other identities might well take on more dominant meanings than the shared national identity between the researcher and the subject. Migrant researchers studying their co-nationals can therefore not just be positioned as an insider or native in relation to their research participants. Drawing upon work by ALEXANDER (2003) and reflecting on her own research on South Korean migrant women in the UK, KIM (2012, p.134-135) asserts, "Each case of the researcher-researched relationship has different levels of insiderness and outsiderness". Just as insiderness cannot be taken for granted by co-ethnic researchers, outsiderness should also not be assumed when researchers study other ethnic groups. Hence, "insider" and "outsider" are not conceptualised as dichotomous, closed categories. Rather, they are positions on a continuum, denoting the intersection of different factors (nationality, gender, age, class, etc.). The level of a researchers' insiderness-outsiderness is dynamic, continually negotiated and in-the-making in any particular research relationship. The complex contour of relationalities in research is further convoluted when we recognise and take seriously the diversity and fluidity within any social category. To this end, BRUBAKER (2004), among others, has cautioned against the problem of "groupism" by which categories, such as gender, ethnicity and class, are misrepresented as homogeneous groups. [4]

This article contributes to this debate by calling for a higher sensitivity to time and space in analysing our relationalities with the people we study. I put forth a framework to organise our efforts to reflect on our positionalities vis-à-vis our research participants and to evaluate the processes of knowledge co-production we are engaged in. Specifically, this analytical exercise gauges our level of insiderness and outsiderness by opening up the spatial categories such as, in my case, "Chinese", "Hong Kong", "home" and "away" and appreciating their dynamism and constructedness. By doing so, we probe the reach of co-ethnic/co-national identities and uncover what lies below these markers that serve as convenient labels but flatten intra-group complexity and their effects. This framework offers a way for us to go beyond the binary of methodological nationalism and transnationalism (ANTHIAS, 2009a) and answers to BRUBAKER's (2004) concern about groupism. [5]

In addition to the plea for a higher spatial sensitivity, my proposed framework also urges more serious thinking about temporalities in migration research. At least among geographers, migration scholars have focused mostly on the spatial border-crossings by migrants, overlooking the temporal aspects of these processes. One of the reasons for this blind spot is the lack of longitudinal studies (LEVITT, 2001; MAHLER & PESSAR, 2006; WATERS, 2011). As WATERS (2011, p.1120) contends, most research on migration and transnationalism offer only a snapshot of migrants' experiences at one point in time. In order to add

temporal depth to their studies, researchers commonly ask interviewees to reflect back, often having to accept the methodological limitation of post hoc rationalisation on the research process. There are, however, some notable exceptions. These include SMITH's (2005) longitudinal project in a transnational village spanning New York and Mexico, the study by HO and BEDFORD (2008) on the changing dynamics of Asian transnational families in New Zealand over two decades, and WATERS' (2011) work on Chinese transnational families in Canada that illustrates how space, place and time contribute to the construction and daily experience of citizenship and belonging. My long-term interests and engagements with a few transnationalised Chinese-German families have inspired my thinking about and deepened my understanding of key notions and processes in migration, such as that of home, family, identities, circulation/return and heritage. Section 5 of this article will be devoted to uncover the importance of long(er) temporal framework in social research. [6]

Furthermore, this contribution addresses the silence in extant methodological reflection on the ways various features and dimensions of time/temporalities shape the production of knowledge in ethnographic research. Here, I echo FABIAN's (1983) critique on the "denial of coevalness [shared spatial-temporality]" commonly practices in ethnographic work to underline the need of reflection by researchers on their own positionality vis-à-vis their informants in the production of knowledge. More specifically, I apply ADAM's (2004) conceptualisation of social time—as opposed to quantitative time (such as calendars and clocks) —that underlines the importance of context, as well as the complexity and multiplexity of time, which involves many different features and dimensions. ADAM unpacks "time" to note its structural elements that combine to form "timescapes". Key structural elements of a timescape include: time frame, temporality, timing, tempo, time point, time patterns, sequence, etc. These elements do not work in isolation but implicate each other mutually. Rather than treating these as technical units, it is also important to note how time (and all the elements that comprise it) is nested in power structures. Hence, questions on whose tempo is more respected and prioritised, which time sequence is considered more logical or desirable than others, what events should be synchronised, on whose costs etc., are socio-politically important. In this article, I consider the methodological implication of a temporality-sensitive perspective. [7]

In the following two sections, episodes from my research experiences will be used to probe the utility of the above conceptual proposal. While time-space should be considered in an integral manner, for clarity sake, I focus first on the role of place and space in the next section and move on to the time factor in the following one. [8]

3. Where You are from is What You Know? Charting the Changing Power of Place-identity

Having studied and begun my research career in the 1990s, when conventionally categorical thinking and conventionally assumptions about culture, race, ethnicity, gender etc. were increasingly being problematised, I was aware from the onset that framing a research topic partially with an ethnic category (i.e. "Chinese")—though used always as a heuristic devise rather than implying homogeneity—would be uncomfortable, controversial and challenging. As GUNARATNAM (2003), ISLAM (2000), RAMAZANOĞLU and HOLLAND (2002) and TRUMAN (1994), among others, have discussed, there is a tension in using racial and ethnic categories in research as the processes of categorisation can reinforce and reproduce racial thinking. This vibrant body of work has enriched ethnic and migration studies by urging more and deeper reflection among researchers as they establish and manage relationships with the people they study. All my research projects take this critical discussion and reflection as the starting point. Categories such as "Chinese", "woman", "migrants" etc. are all conceptualised as social constructions rather than social groups or communities with essentialised characteristics (see LEUNG, 2004, 2006, 2007). A thorough discussion of the politics of categorical thinking and practice in research and knowledge production, though relevant and important, is however beyond the scope of this article. This section focuses rather on the power place-based/related identities—understood as social constructs, relational and constantly being negotiated—as well as the opportunities and challenges posted by such spatial-ethnic markers in migration research, especially when the researchers are (perceived/treated as) co-ethnics of the researched. [9]

While it is apparent that methodological nationalism, is problematic, it does not mean, however, that we can/should erase powerful categories such as nation-state, ethnicity and other related markers such as language, etiquette, customs and manners from social reality and our analyses thereof. As mentioned in the Introduction, while my physical appearance did not always guarantee a full insider status, it has served by and large as a key for legitimate entry into all the Chinese "communities" I sought to study. By virtue of my "Chinese look" and born-and-raised-in-Hong-Kong identity, my curiosity about the Chinese community was considered normal and routine, thus arousing little scepticism or reticence. My familiarity with two major Chinese languages (Cantonese and Mandarin), customs and manners greatly facilitated my interactions with members of the Chinese communities, especially those who were first-generation migrants. My fluency in German, on the other hand, enabled me better access to children of Chinese migrants who were born in and grew up in Germany and preferred speaking German in an interview. While I find it highly problematic to put people in boxes on the basis of their cultural or geographical background, I was thankful that my appearance, birthplace and cultural skills convinced my research participants and served as entrance tickets to the many research spaces where I managed to get in. I conceptualise my encounters with research participants as crossroads between two biographies: theirs and mine (cf. FABIAN, 1983). Although my biography is in many respects different from my research participants', there were

contiguous points along our paths where they cross. Certainly being Chinese is an obvious commonality and point of exchange. [10]

The mileage of my ethnicised identity at times went beyond the "narrow" Chinese nationality or ethnicity. Being Asian opened quite a few avenues for me (c.f. SHINOZAKI, 2012). The importance of such crossroads, whether actual or perceived, struck me in particular by a comment from a German friend at the beginning stage of my PhD research:

> "During dinner at a Vietnamese-Thai-Asian restaurant (as they called it), Michael asked me if the restaurant workers were from Vietnam or Thailand. Not being able to speak Vietnamese or Thai, I could only take a guess what language they spoke to each other. I joked that maybe I should ask them to satisfy our curiosity, but perhaps it would be more appropriate to wait till our next visit. When we paid after our meal, the owner approached me and asked me friendly and curiously, 'Wo kommen Sie her?' [Where are you from?] I answered her and we held a brief conversation. They are from Saigon—a welcomed answer for Michael. After we stepped out of the restaurant, Michael teased me, 'You see? It is easy for you to get information for your research, just because how you look! If I asked her, she would only be shocked' " (Field notes, January 24, 2001). [11]

Thought it is not possible to scientifically prove the validity of Michael's assumption, it is probably true that "because how [I] look" accounted for, at least partially, the relative ease I have experienced in gaining access to the people I studied. My ethnicity, being a woman, age, body size (height and weight), lack of obvious physical disability etc. intersect to produce "how I look", which "sends" signal to my potential research partners who decide how to receive me (or not). In this particular case, it was probably my East Asian face that arouse the curiously of the restaurant owner to strike a conversation with me, and arguably me being a woman, intersecting with my young age made me more accessible to her. [12]

Such research experiences confirm that it is often not the nation-state or culture where one comes from that binds, but mobility (echoing URRY's [2001] idea of "social as mobility") and/or the common experience of being an "outsider". As a Hong Kong Chinese woman in her late twenties, having grown up in a working class family and begun her journey as a migrant at the age of 17 and continued to study, work and live in the USA, Germany, Hong Kong and the Netherlands, my social background and connections with these different geographic regions shaped how my research participants perceived me. Being someone often on the move, almost every one of my research participants was interested in my mobility biography. My identity as a temporary resident in Germany sometimes connected me "naturally" with many of my research participants and other migrants whom I did not even intend to study. Once I visited a German friend (with no apparent Turkish or migrant background) who had just started her fieldwork in a Turkish neighbourhood in a German city in 2000. She was surprised to witness that her research "subjects", two male waiters in a Turkish restaurant in particular, approached me for conversations. Still going through hard times getting into the field, she said in amazement, "Maggi, they just come and talk to you, on their

own! It is not so easy for me." This illustrates the mileage of the migrant identity marker in migration research. The mutual "outsiderness" vis-à-vis the German mainstream society seemed to bind me and the Turkish restaurateurs. This also demonstrates the need to go beyond the nation-state as the assumed most logical analytical spatial category, when we reflect upon our relationalities with individuals and communities in fieldwork. As AHMED (1999, p.336) observes: "[T]he very experience of leaving home and 'becoming a stranger' leads to the creation of a new 'community of strangers', a common bond with those others who have 'shared' the experience of living overseas." The lack of this (seemingly) common bond, however, does not predict success or failure in research. My friend, for instance, has excelled in her work on Turkish migrants after an initial difficult period of gaining access to and trust from the community. Knowledge of interviewees' language and culture, and visits to their "home" places have been found to be important factors in gaining affinity (or "insiderness") with informants. JEFFERY (1976) and CHARSLEY (2013), both not sharing the ethnic background of the people they studied, appreciated the enabling impact of their earlier visits to Pakistan on research with British Pakistanis. Hence, the ethnic card held by migrant researchers is neither a guarantee nor a prerequisite for quality research in the migration field. [13]

The mileage of co-ethnicity can, however, not be taken for granted when we consider how the nation, ethnicity and culture are in fact open, fluid and multiple notions. Sub-ethnic identities are powerful forces that sometimes create tensions within the diaspora "community". The social boundary between Chinese from the PRC and Taiwan is particularly salient in my research on Chinese migrant communities in Germany[4]. My Hong Kong background has offered me a peculiar access to the ethnic Chinese community that is marked by alliance and disjuncture. Carrying the "Hong Kong" identity marker was sometimes helpful in establishing connections with Chinese people who originated from either the PRC or Taiwan, since Hong Kong has always been considered apolitical and neutral. My perceived outsider-status allowed my interviews with these research participants to take place under an umbrella of neutrality, freeing them to talk more openly about their perceptions of the "Others". I often encountered comments that would probably not have been made if I were Taiwanese or mainland Chinese. This third-space is, however, a double-edged sword and hence should not be romanticised. Exactly also because of my Hong Kong and Cantonese-speaking background, I was often treated as an "outsider" during my interviews and participant observation exercises. At the Sino-European Tourism Summit in 2007 where I sought to conduct some interviews and participant observation for my Chinese outbound tourism project, for instance, I was seated with other Cantonese-speaking, mostly female participants. While I had hoped to make closer contact with the more dominant players in the field, who were from the PRC, I ended up uncovering the development of the business sector and salient axes of inclusion/exclusion within the "community" in an unexpected way

4 This statement obviously simplifies the reality. People from the PRC and Taiwan do not always share the same sentiment against the "other Chinese community". To complicate matters, we also ought not under-estimate the axes of differences demarcating individuals and communities within these national communities. Again, language, hometown, province, generation in migration flows etc. are all important factors that shape identity politics.

(LEUNG, 2009). This unplanned research process illustrates how my Hong Kong and female identities have enhanced and restricted my "reach" to the people I seek to understand, I had to be aware of the (sometimes) politicised nature of nationality or place affiliations, and negotiate my insiderness-outsiderness accordingly to navigate along these shifting boundaries with high sensitivity. It is not intrinsically better or worse to be an insider or outsider in ethnographic research. The most important is the awareness of our own positionalities and be reflective in the process of knowledge co-production with the people whom we study. [14]

As a "migrant researcher", my Chinese-, Asian- and migrant-ness intersect with my other identities, as illustrated in my earlier example from the Vietnamese-Thai-Asian restaurant. As a woman, I believe that it was easier to approach my many female research participants than if I were male. Because of our shared gender identity, women were probably less suspicious of my intention in getting to know them. Though a strict gender segregation is not practised and expected in the (overseas) Chinese communities I studied—as compared to some other socio-cultural contexts, the readiness of a woman opening up to a female researcher can understandably be different compared to how she would open to a male researcher. Many of my research participants—depending however on the nature of my research and hence the composition of my informants—invited me over to their homes, meet me in the evening, went out with me to clubs and parties, and shared their rather personal stories and intimate feelings with me. My occupation as a researcher and doctoral candidate gave credence to my attempts to get in contact with people, mostly males, who bore official positions in communal organisations or business associations. The relative importance of my and my informants' multiple, intersecting identities varies across different projects and our encounters. Nationality, ethnicity and home-place were comparatively less important, at least in my perception, in my interactions with Chinese mobile academics. Rather, my position as a (former) fellowship-recipient, a woman/mother, a social scientist (a mobility researcher in particular) and my employing institution seemed to play a more important role defining the social proximity between my research participants and me. Here, I subscribe to the "translocational approach" proposed by ANTHIAS (2009b), which seeks to link identities and positionalities across "multiple but also fractured and inter-related social spaces". Such a perspective enables a better understanding of the complexities and contingency of social categories such as ethnicity as one part of a wider, interwoven web of social differentiations (see also BRAH, 1996). The social distance between researchers and their informants is therefore also contingent and always in the making, producing dynamic and complex contours of insiderness- outsiderness. [15]

4. "If You had Asked me Last Year, I Would have Given you a Completely Different Answer": Gauging the Temporal Reach in Co-Ethnic Research

After having explored the spatial reach of co-ethnicity and shared migrant status, this section will focus on the temporal dimension of my relationalities with a number of research participants. No matter how deeply or long-term we, as researchers, are engaged in our fieldwork, we enter and depart from our research participants' life at certain time-space junctures. As OAKLEY and CALLAWAY, 1992, pp.x-xi) aptly warn, "Monographs have too often been presented, then read as definitive and timeless, rather than selective and historically contingent." Their critique echoes that made earlier by FABIAN (1983) on the discrepancy between the "here and now" reality of fieldwork and the common way researchers wrote/write about their subjects in narratives derived from it. He protests against the "denial of coevalness commonly practised among anthropologists and calls for an awareness and reflection on one's own politicised context and intellectual history among researchers. This section contributes to these authors' call for appreciation of and reflection on temporalities in ethnographic researchers. Beyond recognising the notion of coevalness, it teases out the notion of temporality further using some of the concepts proposed ADAM (2004), which in turn underlines the highly contextualised nature of our knowledge (co-)production activities. [16]

While timing is not everything; it is certainly a crucial factor in ethnographic knowledge production. Two of my research participants, for example, reflected upon their identity as 1.5 generation Chinese- and Vietnamese-German respectively—which in itself provides interesting insight into the temporal dimension of migration as a process that cross space, time and generations—after they had given birth to their first child. While both of them considered themselves "very German" (and chose to converse in German in our interviews); motherhood had brought them new sentiments and sense of responsibility regarding their heritage. Aihong (a banker, then in her 30s, born in China, migrated to Germany in her early teens) and Sarah (home-maker, then in her 20s, Sino-Vietnamese, born in Vietnam, migrated to Germany as refugee as a child) both planned to assume the role as carriers of the "authentic voices" (YUVAL-DAVIS, 1997) of their "home" culture. Aihong pledged to speak Chinese to her daughter, while Sarah vowed to introduce her son to the Vietnamese society and culture, to which she hardly had direct contact after she arrived in Germany as a child refugee. Coincidently, both of them made the comment, "If you had asked me last year, Maggi, I would have given you a completely different answer." This seemingly obvious statement underlines the importance of contexts (i.e. time-space) in research. Important lifecycle milestones, such as parenthood generally has strong identity transforming influence among women and men. Among migrants, the transition to parenthood often marks the beginning of a process in which their identities not only as women and men in a new life phase, but also as migrants are being newly defined, negotiated and performed. While Aihong and Sarah both vowed to take up the responsibility as cultural transmitters, their decision was, however, embedded in rather different contexts.

Aihong was a high-flyer banker, very "cosmopolitan" in style, married to a German man who could not speak Chinese. "Fearing the loss of 'her' culture" and considering the expanding advantage of being able to speak Chinese in the global economy, Aihong took up the sole responsibility in passing on Chinese culture to her child. Sarah, on the other hand, belonged to the lower-skill working class. As a young woman, she decided to become a homemaker after the birth of her son and assume a rather traditional gendered role at home. Her husband was an "authentic" Vietnamese, who migrated as a young man to Germany and was still well-connected to Vietnam through his family. However, because of his work that entailed long hours labour for a modest salary, Sarah considered child-raising predominantly as her duty. Transmitting to her son knowledge about the Vietnamese society and culture, which was not all that familiar to her, was included as part of the tasks she needed to fulfil as a dutiful migrant wife and mother. Drawing the similarities *and* differences between these two young women, we are reminded how the experience and performance of gender and migranthood are highly time and (socio) space dependent. [17]

Our informants' complex and shifting identities offer us, (migrant) researchers of a specific gender, class, life cycle etc. positions at the moments of research encounters, certain opening, limits and closure in accessing and gaining insights into their life world. At the time of my conversation with Aihong and Sarah, I had the privilege of being a young woman, a(n) (ethnic) Chinese and a migrant in my quest to understand them with a reasonable level of insiderness—while noting the importance of other social divisions, such as class and specific geo-cultural background that set us further apart. Upon reflection, I ponder how differently I would have noted their response if I were then already, like I am now, a mother of two young children, living away from my "homeland", and how our conversation would have proceeded differently because of such shared fate. It is likely that our conversation would have gone more deeply into the (perhaps different) notions, experiences and sense of duties of migrant-motherhood. Though this shared life cycle identity does not guarantee a closer relationship between me and the two young mothers, or a more open or intensive sharing from them, it is almost certain that the "data" I managed to collect would be different from what I have on tape now. This echoes much how SHINOZAKI (2012, p.1823) reflects upon the context (or constellation)-specificity of her research on Filipino migrants in Germany:

> "The kind of data I have gathered is a particular kind of product resulting from a specific constellation and fieldwork dynamic composed of the researcher and the researched at a particular point in time. Even if I were to carry out fieldwork on the same research topic now, my age, stage in life cycle and social class might also influence the data." [18]

In a similar vein, KENNA (1992) writes about the difference in returning to the field as an older woman and mother. Reflecting upon who we are at the various crossroads when/where we insert into the lives of our research participants and who we have become in the course of (longer-term) research is an important exercise that has hitherto been sidelined in the extant scholarship. [19]

In addition to stages in life cycle, sequences of other events also have a big impact on the kind of data we can collect. In the course of my research periods, events such as the earthquake in Taiwan in September 1999 and the changes of outbound tourism policies in China throughout the 1990s are key events that far from being a background for my research. Rather, they are events that respectively marked drastic changes of emotions among Taiwanese migrants in Europe, and rapid expansion of livelihood possibilities among Chinese migrants in Europe in the Chinese outbound tourism market. These in turn shaped, in a very fundamental way, the data I could collect from the field. If it were not because of the earthquake in Taiwan, the fund-raising event I attended would have been a "usual" mid-Autumn Festival celebration where community politics are played out but probably not as sharply as how I experienced it. My interpretations and conceptualisation (of diaspora, identities, community and home etc.) would have proceeded differently if my research was timed otherwise. While it seems self-evident, the importance of the temporalities of our research project and the specific activities involved is yet to be considered in more depth in methodological reflection. Oral historians such as (PORTELLI, 1981; THOMPSON, 2000) have conceptualised the relationship between the sequence of life events and the sequence of recollection among interviewees, the sequence of interactions between the researchers and researched, as well as the temporal order of our observations in the field in producing knowledge is however less critically considered. Such reflections are crucial for us to gauge the temporal reach and limit of our research findings. The important role of contingency in knowledge production reminds us the need to be modest in representing the people and events we study. Just as many ethnographers have tried to pin down the spatial-temporal dynamism of migrant life by conducting multi-site and longitudinal studies, it is also imperative that we problematise our own changing identities and positionalities across time and space. [20]

In the following section, I shall reflect on my long-term and multiple exchanges with "Uncle Liu" whom I met for the first time in 1999. Through recapturing a few of our many crossroads spread out in time and space, the utility of the notion of "temporal-spatial reach" in reflecting upon the moving positionality of a migrant researcher in migration research that stretches a long(er) time frame will be made evident. [21]

5. Encounters Across Space and Time: Migration Research as a Journey

Leaving his rural village in Hong Kong to Europe, at age of twenty, in 1960, Liu was one of the first migrants from Hong Kong, then a British colony, who settled in Germany in the post-Second-World-War era. Our first rendezvous took place in a café in the downtown of his home city in Germany. He was from the onset very generous and even eager to share his migration story with me, noting that "[his] children are not interested in [his] stories." My identity of being a young woman (I am as old as Liu's youngest daughter who introduced me to him) from Hong Kong was very productive in the establishment of our rapport. This echoes, to a certain extent, SKULTAN's (1997) reflection that her shared past as co-

Latvian was extremely productive in establishing rapport with her informants. Though in my case, this shared heritage is more imagined than real. Looking beyond the surface, the label "Hong Kong" turned out to offer little common ground between us. The "Hong Kong" that he called "home" was namely very distant from the "Hong Kong" that I knew. Having grown up in the 1970s and 80s in the urban area, I had practically no understanding of village life in Hong Kong, except a few glimpses I had gained through my hiking trips in the rural area. Liu's narrative was an eye-opener for me, offering a spatial and temporal stretch and depth to my understanding of my home-place. His stories were interwoven with elements of history, culture and heritage of my birthplace that were hardly taught in formal education and not treasured in the collective narrative as I grew up in the end phase of the British colonial period[5]. He began with his life as a young man in his home village, located near the border between Hong Kong and Shenzhen in Gaungdong Province (Interview in November 1999):

> "We were farmers, you know? Growing rice paddy. Life was tough. And then at that time there were not so many factories. We were farmers and never went to school. ... only the very smart ones got to go to school. We were working on the farms, and it was hard life. At that time we had the British passport, so if the people had got the money [for the journey], they would leave to make a living abroad." [22]

Though sharing one place of birth, Liu's and my trajectory cannot be more different. We belonged to different generations, different genders, growing up on opposite sides of the rural-urban divide; he had to leave home for a better livelihood because he was not good at school while I was able to go overseas for further studies thanks to my good school grades. Liu went on charting his journey for me, describing in details how he, together with around 70 other men, boarded a ship at Queen's Pier in Kowloon, which was demolished in 2008 for the construction of a highway, to sail to Marseilles and then to Germany. He reminisced about the mostly boring but also romantic(ised) sceneries spotted along his one-month journey to Europe. A few times he repeated how he was amazed with the camels he saw while passing the Suez Canal—geographical imaginations that I failed to make connection to, as I was trapped in my time of global connectivity where Hong Kong and Germany are linked by flight routes in my mental map, as far as passenger traffic is concerned. Many a time Liu reminded me the spatial-temporal gulf between us, stating, "Ah, you would not know, would you?" but was glad to share his stories with me. As a curious researcher, I could only be grateful for his memories that were deeply and multiply embedded in the places both in Hong Kong and Germany that were meaningful and important to me (as a research, a compatriot and a co-migrant) that were *de facto* other gendered spatial-temporalities that were beyond my immediate reach. [23]

Our inter-temporal/spatial/gender crossroads took places also "back home" in Hong Kong where he showed me his ancestral village. Due to its remoteness,

5 Local history was by and large ignored in the school curricula during the colonial time. After the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, there has been a more lively discussion on and push for local history and culture.

there has been a much lower level of "development" and in-migration of "outsiders" as compared to many other emigrant villages in Hong Kong New Territories that are well-connected by public transport. By going through the abandoned communal "young men house" and deserted fields with Liu and listening to the many old stories Liu narrated, I learned about another facet of my homeplace, with a new and higher spatial-temporal sensitivity. I experienced with him and his family some of the village rituals, such as the traditional *poon choi* (big bowl feast) that has now been highly commercialised and re-territorialised in restaurants and even fast-food eateries all over Hong Kong during festival seasons; I learned about the importance of Chung Yeung Festival to which village kin from all over the world return annually to pay respect to their ancestors. These encounters were emotional and empowering for me. Because of the spatial-temporal distance between Liu and me, I could learn about parts of my homeplace's history, culture, heritage and gendered practices. These in turn have expanded my knowledge of and sense of belonging to Hong Kong. [24]

My multiple interactions with Liu also highlight the importance of temporalities, in particular the elements of sequence and frequency, in ethnographic study. Here, I would like to illustrate with my quest to understand the multiple and dynamic notions of "home", the central research question that framed my doctoral research (LEUNG, 2004). It was especially through my interactions with a few committed research partners, like Liu, with whom I could conduct interviews across time and space, that I uncovered the very time-/space-situatedness nature of "home". After Liu left home in 1960, he only returned once shortly thereafter to marry his wife. As he was working (more than) full-time, he always stayed in Germany while his wife and children sometimes travelled to Hong Kong, around Europe and the USA to maintain their familial contacts with the transnationalised family. Liu began visiting Hong Kong for more extended period of time after his children have become more independent. During the first years of my research, Liu considered both his village in Hong Kong and the German city where he had lived for over 50 years as home—fitting snuggly into the "transnational home/identity" schema. Having always maintained their small house in the village, Liu and his wife were relatively flexible to return and stay for extended period in Hong Kong where rental is very high. I remember categorising Liu as something "embodying transnationalism" when he presented his sense of home to me during one of our first encounters in 2000:

> "Now that I have retired, we can go back to Hong Kong more often. We [he and his wife] take turn but one of us is there for the Chung Yeung Festival (in autumn). There we can stay for a few months to escape the bitter winter in Germany." [25]

Nevertheless, he revealed his reservation to me during our last interview conducted in 2008. We met in the small living room of his youngest daughter a few days before he would return to Germany. Contrary to how I had known him - a positive and open person, he appeared frail and pessimistic. He said to me in an exasperated and sad tone:

> "I don't think I will come back again.
>
> [Why?]
>
> I don't feel at home here, in the city. But my [village] house is not in order. The roof is not in good shape. The city is just not my place. It always looks different, and I cannot find my way. I feel suffocated in the crowd. It's just too busy, I don't know. This is not the place I know. I don't think I will come back again. This might be my last time being back in Hong Kong.
>
> [But your daughter will get your house fixed. Then you can stay there when you come back next time. You will feel at home again. You can also take a bus and go to see places or visit your friends, rather than staying here in the flat all day, waiting for your daughter to come home.]" [26]

Over the years of regular interactions I had developed a kind of familial relationship with Uncle Liu, also because his youngest daughter and I had become good friends. Rather than being a "neutral" researcher, I felt the duty, as a surrogate daughter in a way, to intervene in "managing" his disappointment and stark sense of loss (of home). I tried to comfort and convince him that the urban area ("my" Hong Kong) was not only stressful and could be enjoyable. It was, however, apparent that the shock and alienation was so strong that Liu had determined to stay away from this home that was no longer what he was used to. In a curious way, besides feeling the duty to "help him", I also had a sense of uneasiness, even guilt. I felt that I had "exploited" Uncle Liu for expanding my sense of home and heritage in the course of our friendship, while having to witness rather helplessly how he, on the contrary, experienced a dramatic shrinkage of and distancing from "Hong Kong" as home. I could sense how detrimental it was for him to come to terms with the loss of his original home. That trip turned out indeed to be his last visit to his ancestral home. He became ill and passed away in the spring of 2012. Paradoxically, contrary to his plan of not returning to Hong Kong, his family members made the decision to bring his ash back to rest in a temple adjacent to their ancestral village. This last migration journey underlines the perpetualness and unplannability of migrancy (roots and routes) and transnational(ised) life (and after life). [27]

The above summary of Liu's experiences in leaving, making, maintaining, returning, negotiating and leaving "home(s)" as a migrant serves to underline how come-and-go ethnographic research can produce at best partial and at worst misleading representation of our research participants. As researchers who study co-nationals/-ethnics, we cannot under-estimate how little mileage our shared identity has in gaining access to and providing grounded understanding of our interview participants' life, as a result of the spatial-temporal limits we have to work with. [28]

6. Conclusions

Having been engaged in migration research for over a decade, I have taken this opportunity to reflect upon my journey as a researcher and evaluate to what extant I have been able to access my research participants' life world, mind and heart and understand the contexts in which they are embedded. Using a few illustrative examples from my research experiences, I have operated the concept of "spatial-temporal reach" to gauge my positionalities related to my research participants. Addressing the commonly shared mistrust toward methodological nationalism, I have on the one hand emphasised how nation-state and nation-based identity and cultural practices continue to shape how researchers view and categorise research participants and vice versa. On the other hand, I have also shown how nation is not the only scale at which the co-ethnic/-national identities work. Being Chinese in Europe, I have time and again been considered as an (partial) insider by non-Chinese migrants and ethnic groups. I have, however, also demonstrated how the reach of the co-national/ethnic identities can also be limited at circumstances when intra- national/ethnic differences play a divisive role. While I have found that ethnicity and nationality play a particular salient role in my research, the importance of other axes of differences such as gender, class and religion etc. can also not be underestimated. [29]

The importance of temporality is often sidelined in (migration) research and our reflection thereof. Here, I have first underlined the need to recognise research as a crossroad between the researched and the researcher. This echoes FABIAN's (1983) notion of coevalness in ethnographic research. Rather than representing informants as objects to be found (and fixed) in another temporality, the awareness and appreciation of shared spatial-temporalities between the researcher and the researched confirms the co-production of knowledge. This in turns emphasises the need to reflect upon the shifting and negotiated positionalities between the two parties in a research process. Drawing upon ADAM's (2004) timescape perspective, I have further drawn attention to the importance of a few temporal elements, namely, life cycle, timing, sequence and frequency in gauging my spatial temporal reach to my research participants. It is not only about being alert to when, how often and for how long our research intersects with our research participants' life. Rather, conducting ethnographic research critically also requires a realisation of the changes of our own identities over time, which in turn shapes our relationships with our research participants. In retrospect, I can only be grateful that a few of my long-term research participants have accompanied me for years, become my friends and been continuously supportive of my work. Our repeated encounters spreading across long(er) time spectrum allowed me to conceptualise and validate, in more substantive way, the "spatial temporal reach" construct. As a number of scholars (HUANG, YEOH & LAM, 2008; LEVITT, 2001; MAHLER & PESSAR, 2006; WATERS, 2011) have advocated, longitudinal research on migration, transnational families and communities should be practiced to greater extent, so that we can garner more time- and space grounded evidence for substantiated theorisation. Nevertheless, as we are aware, conducting large(r) scale, organised longitudinal research is

challenging when funding sources and research jobs tend to be, and becoming increasingly, intermittent. [30]

As a Chinese woman, born in Hong Kong, and have mainly conducted research on ethnic Chinese peoples in Europe, I have conducted an arguably self-centred exercise in assessing the authority I, as a "migrant researcher", have granted myself in (re)presenting my co-ethnic research participants in numerous publications, conference presentations, seminars and lectures. I caution, however, against installing an inflexible boundary between "migrant researchers" and "non-migrant researchers" in such reflexive exercises. Whether we are migrants or not, we are positioned in multiple, complex and shifting ways in relation to our research participants. To this end, I have hereby proposed the spatial-temporal reach, which can be adopted (and further developed) by researchers with or without migration background, to frame similar reflexive endeavours. By thinking through our relationalities with our research participants with higher sensitivity to space and time, we can conceptualise and realise the mileage and limit of our findings better and in more structured manner. The conclusion of such exercises is likely to be humbling as we recognise how space-time-situated and provisional our findings are. The purpose of this self-assessment is, however, neither to discourage researchers from making well-founded claims nor to trivialise our findings. Rather, it is to underline the need to appreciate the contextualised and fluid nature of research, to anchor our findings solidly in the encounters between us and the research participants, and to acknowledge our research as journeys of knowledge co-production involving us and our research participants, who are embedded in multiple intertwined social, cultural, economic and political processes, across space-time. [31]

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