

Emotions and Strategies in the Face of the Border(ing): The Lived Experiences of Filipino Migrants in Mainland China

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Even though the People’s Republic of China is still considered a country of emigration rather than immigration, there is a growing number of foreigners who move there for work. In this article, I explore the lived experiences of migrants originating from the Philippines. I focus on their understanding of and affective encounters with the border and with bordering practices. Furthermore, I analyze the strategies these migrants employ to navigate their situations and secure their stay in the country. By doing so, I aim to contribute to the flourishing literature on the situation of migrants based in Mainland China, and to an understanding of the on-the-ground consequences of the Chinese immigration system’s regulations and practices. Based on 20 in-depth interviews, I argue that migration is not merely related to the migrants’ rational decisions and their execution thereof, but rather, that the whole process is accompanied by a range of emotions, varying in kind, intensity, and anchorage. For the Filipinas and Filipinos interviewed here, despite their differences, the strongest reactions were caused by the shape of the state regulations in place, which were perceived as a source of the sense of insecurity and instability.

Keywords: border, bordering, emotions, lived experiences, China, Philippines

Mimo że Chińska Republika Ludowa w dalszym ciągu uznawana jest za kraj emigracji, a nie imigracji, rośnie liczba obcokrajowców, którzy przeprowadzają się tam w celach zarobkowych. W tym artykule badam doświadczenia migrantów pochodzących z Filipin. Koncentruję się na ich rozumieniu granicy i ich afektywnych spotkaniach z nią oraz z praktykami granicznymi. Ponadto analizuję strategie, jakie ci migranci stosują, próbując nawigować swoją sytuację oraz zabezpieczyć swój pobyt w kraju. W ten sposób mam nadzieję przyczynić się do rozwoju literatury na temat sytuacji

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migrantów przebywających w Chinach kontynentalnych oraz do zrozumienia konsekwencji przepisów i praktyk chińskiego systemu imigracyjnego. Na podstawie 20 wywiadów pogłębionych pokazuję, że migracja nie wiąże się jedynie z racjonalnymi decyzjami migrantów i ich realizacją, ale raczej, że całemu procesowi towarzyszy szereg emocji o różnym charakterze, natężeniu i zakotwiczeniu. W tym przypadku Filipinki i Filipińczycy pomimo dzielących ich różnic, najsilniejsze emocje odczuwali w reakcji na kształt obowiązujących przepisów, które postrzegane były jako źródło poczucia niepewności i niestabilności.

Słowa kluczowe: granica, praktyki graniczne, emocje, doświadczenia, Chiny, Filipin

Introduction

In recent years, state bordering practices have been marked by progressive securitization, often embedded in narratives rendering the migrating population dangerous². Through these discourses, as well as through legal regulations and practices formed by their administrative, political, and economic authorities, the states, in defiance of the anticipated 'borderless world' (Koca, 2019), reign over who is allowed to enter, reside, and undertake employment on their territory (Hurd et al., 2017). Their reach is represented first and foremost at the borders through the existence of checkpoints where the regulations are enforced and mediated, and the decisions about foreign citizens' inclusion and its form or exclusion are made. Parting from the traditional static, state-centric view of the borders and instead analyzing *bordering* as a process makes it possible to better understand ways in which these borders are constructed, reproduced, and challenged by multiple institutions and actors (De Genova, 2017). Such an approach highlights that borders constitute relational spaces and brings to the fore social interactions and power relations that emerge and evolve in their context. This way, borders are viewed as sites of struggle determined by relations between powers, which provide the political, economic and social context framing mobility, and individuals and groups whose lives are affected.

This article approaches borders and bordering from the perspective of migrants, and focuses on their lived experiences. It explores how borders and bordering practices are embodied and felt. Here, I build my analysis on the extensive literature that considers emotions as a crucial and dynamic element of all social interactions (Hochschild, 1979, 1983), which is also present in the context of migration (Albrecht, 2016; Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; D'Aoust, 2014; Svasek, 2012). Furthermore, Hurd and others suggest that borders, just as national communities, are "imagined into being" (Hurd et al., 2017); hence, this article also looks at them as objects of social interpretation and construction. As a result, it presents a typology of migrants' encounters with the border – their affective experiences and strategies for approaching and navigating the border and securing their stay in the country.

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Mainland China and immigration

China's border has drawn the attention of numerous scholars. In various studies, it is approached as a part of international relations and a component of wider geopolitics, played out between neighbors and influencing the whole region (Kanwal et al., 2020; Laungaramsri, 2019; Song, 2018). Another set of studies sheds more light on the borderlands: while taking into consideration the historical, political, and economic contexts, they have explored the meaning of the border for the everyday lives of people situated in these areas. They pay attention to issues such as ethnicity (Billé & Humphrey, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021; Shrestha, 2022; Su & Cai, 2019; Tsering, 2022), various forms of cross-border mobilities of both people and objects (Chow & Tsui, 2019; Pengli Huang, 2020; Kook, 2018; Qiu et al., 2019; Rippa, 2019), and cover different sections of the border, including the one between the Mainland and Hong Kong (Chan & Ngan, 2018; Chee, 2017; Leung & Waters, 2021). Up until now however, very little attention was devoted to the international migrants' experiences of the border.

Meanwhile, the national census carried out in 2010 revealed that there were nearly 600,000 foreigners living on the Mainland. The consecutive census carried out in 2020 indicated that this number rose to nearly 850,000 (*How Many Foreigners Live in China – the Seventh National Census in 2021*, 2021). Additionally, in 2010 over 400,000, and in 2020 over 550,000 residents from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan resided in the country. Furthermore, these estimations do not account for people who stay in China shortly for business and travel or for whose entry was not registered at all. The change is visible not only with regard to the increasing number of foreign residents, but also in terms of the existing regulations and shape of the immigration system.

The first comprehensive regulations concerning the presence of foreign nationals in reform-era China were introduced in 1985, and in 2004 a system of Green Cards was established, making it possible for the first time for foreigners to obtain permanent residency. However, only a very small number of people were able to gain this status. Furthermore, the introduction of the new system was followed by a gradual tightening of regulations. One such measure was the introduction of the Exit and Entry Administrative Law, enacted in 2012. The new law combined earlier fragmented regulations, while bringing a clearer division of responsibilities between different government units; at the same time subjecting foreigners to heavier fines and detention for committing “three illegalities” (*sanfei*): those of entry, of residence, and of work. Introduction of the new law was also followed by crackdowns, media campaigns encouraging citizens to report suspected foreign individuals deemed “spies”, and the further tightening of regulations and their implementation, especially amid major national (and international) events.

Further major changes were introduced in 2018, when multiple state agencies were turned into one – the National Immigration Administration (Speelman, 2020).

The regulations currently in place focus on supporting migrants deemed highly skilled and thus most advantageous for the “China’s development”, rather than on the creation of a long-term comprehensive plan that approaches immigration as a part of a wider demographic challenge (Frank N Pieke et al., 2019).

In recent years, a plethora of studies have explored the experiences of various groups of foreigners based in the country. Among the approached groups were the so-called expatriates (Farrer, 2019; Lehmann, 2014), Indian and African traders (Guangzhi Huang, 2019; Mathews et al., 2017), and many others. While there are accounts that analyze the situation of the Filipinos who live in Hong Kong as well as recently in Macau, there is no research that would explore the situation of this group in Mainland China. This is the case even though the phenomenon has repeatedly attracted the attention of the media and was signaled by scholars sketching the immigration landscape in PRC (Hall et al., 2020; F. N. Pieke, 2010). An exception constitutes a chapter written by Sidney Bata, in which he focuses on Filipino-Chinese relations and attempts to assess the role migration plays or might play in those relations (2021). While Bata traced information about Filipino companies active in the Mainland and collects information about Filipinos registered with the Embassy, he did not interview the Filipino community itself, nor collect information about those of them, who remain unregistered. This article aims to add to the already existing literature by exploring the experiences of this particular group. It focuses on migrants’ understanding of, and affective encounters with and strategies towards the border and bordering practices constituting the Chinese immigration system.

Methods

The article is based on in-depth interviews with 20 Filipinas and Filipinos conducted throughout the end of 2019, just before the first information about the coronavirus appeared. The study was possible due to contacts forged during several earlier rounds of research in the area with international migrants teaching English in China, and it was developed based on the snowball effect. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 60 and 180 minutes. Eighteen of them were recorded and later on transcribed, during two meetings, and in accordance with interlocutors’ wish, notes were taken instead.

Among those who agreed to talk to me about their experiences were eleven men and nine women. Their stay in China spanned between five months and fifteen years (with the majority living there for four to seven years). In China, they worked as English teachers, musicians, domestic workers, managers and designers.

Carrying out interviews with migrants whose status is or may any time turn irregular poses specific challenges, especially of ethical nature. During my fieldwork, I planned all activities with the best interests of my interlocutors in mind. I put every

effort into protecting their safety and wellbeing: all meetings took place in circumstances indicated by the interviewees so they could feel comfortable and at ease. To further guarantee their anonymity, I use pseudonyms throughout this article and abstain from revealing details which could lead to divulging their identity.

Filipino migration

Extensive emigration had already become an official policy in the Philippines in the 1970s (Montayre et al., 2017). During this time, several agencies were established to facilitate the movement of men to the Middle East where they were employed as construction workers, and later, as managers covering increasing demands for nursing and domestic workers in numerous other international destinations (Guevarra, 2014). Through the years, migration evolved from a temporary source of livelihood into more permanent schemes and ways of living. In recent years, the support and encouragement of the state agencies, which recruit, market, and deploy future migrants – as well as support from and involvement by individuals and families – are set to put young people on a path to acquire skills that would turn them into workers for export (Ortiga, 2020). As Amie Lenox points out, the official and popular discourses in the Philippines present migration as “lucrative, accessible, heroic, and desirable” (2019, p. 188). This happens even though many aspiring immigrants face hardships while planning, pursuing, and capitalizing on the route to migration. This applies to both migrants registered with the state programs and – even more – to those operating outside the official channels.

Since the 1970s, nearly 10 million Filipinas and Filipinos have relocated overseas, making the Philippines one of the top-sending countries of migrants in the world (Mendoza et al., 2017). As of 2019, an estimated 2.2 million Overseas Filipino Workers (Mapa, 2020) remain scattered across almost 200 states, and those workers generously support their families by sending home remittances; at the same time significantly supporting the Philippine economy. By sending packages, they also transmit social remittances and thereby practice long-distance care, which allows them to maintain transnational ties with their close ones (Patzner, 2018).

Filipino migrant presence in China remains a subject of discussions between the governments of the two countries, alongside business negotiations and political arguments related to the territorial dispute in the area of the South China Sea. In recent years, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte chose to downplay the significance of the controversial issues in favor of economic cooperation and the possible financial investment that may flow from China and the newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Lim, 2017). Among the latest outcomes of this change, besides closed economic deals, is the Memorandum of Understanding on the employment of Filipino teachers of the English language in China, signed on April the 10th, 2017.

The agreement allows for the employment of 2,000 Filipino English teachers. Even though the proposed number does not seem high, the deal might be considered a milestone and according to Filipino politicians and media, will possibly lead to the employment of a further 300,000 Filipino workers in the near future (Aurelio, 2018). Additionally, a trial program that would allow Filipino domestic helpers to work in China was announced and is set to be launched in five Chinese cities. Further deals were signed in 2019 (Musico, 2019), and China was heavily involved in supporting the Philippines by sending medical supplies needed amid the Covid-19 pandemic (Santarita, 2020).

Among many reasons for the great demand for Filipino migrants is their English language proficiency. As Lorente argues, the language capital has become central to the discourse of Filipino competitiveness in the globalized world (Lorente, 2007). As this research additionally uncovered, this is also true (and not only on the discursive level), in the case of migration to Mainland China, where Filipinos/-as are employed as English teachers in public and private schools and as domestic workers with a focus on taking care of children and teaching them English. Furthermore, Filipino musicians work in pubs, clubs, and restaurants that lure people in by offering music with English lyrics. Finally, those employed in high level positions (i.e. designers, architects, and managers), often act as intermediaries between Chinese companies and foreign customers or partners, both of which depend to a great extent on their language skills. Although the Chinese labor market remains a relative novelty for the Filipino migrants, it seems to have a great deal of potential.

Lived (affective) experiences and strategies in the face of the border(ing)

The checkpoints and the physical border constitute one of the more concrete materializations of the migration apparatus and create “liminal spaces over which state power is absolute” (Hurd et al., 2017, p. 18). While some are welcome to cross it, others become excluded or are let in only under certain conditions. Hence, different people and different groups experience the border and wider bordering practices in different ways. For many, the act of crossing the border evokes emotions of high intensity and remains a sharp, distinct experience. This was the case for Filipinas and Filipinos interviewed here. While all of them recalled feeling stirred and stressed, their views of the border and their experiences were not the same. This section presents a typology of encounters with and strategies towards the border. While I introduce in-depth analysis of three cases, the typology is further informed by other collected materials and conducted interviews. Each of the three introduced people entered the country after obtaining a different kind of visa and thus remain to some extent positioned differently in the hierarchies of cross-border mobility. Based on the details

about their experiences and situation, this section scrutinizes how they view the border and conceptualize the act of crossing it, and examines the emotions they feel as a result of these concrete or imagined encounters. It also offers some insights into some of the strategies they employ to navigate their situation in China.

Crossing the border as a moment of separation

For some interviewed people, crossing the border was primarily associated with a sense of separation between two worlds. This was certainly the case for John, who worked in a Chinese company in a managerial position. Among his duties were the supervision of and cooperation with local employees, as well as the sustainment of contacts with international clients, most of whom were based in Europe. He did not plan to go abroad, much less to China, which according to his account still remained a rather uncommon destination for most Filipinos. Yet, when the opportunity emerged, he did not hesitate much to pursue it, though his plans were different at first:

If you work abroad, you will earn more money, and this quickly. We are coming from a third world country. People leave Philippines looking for better kind of opportunities. Sometimes short term, I thought it would be short-term, when I came here. I thought maybe 3 years and then that's it. It's been almost 8 years now.

He viewed migration in terms of the financial benefits it provided for him and his family. At the same time, however, he deemed it a great sacrifice, demanding hard work, humility and flexibility. He related it to the challenges and risks that may arise along the way, which he also experienced first-hand: "I have had my own share of bad incidents here. My first job... I had to find another one, because I was not paid for several months." He left China 3–4 times a year to visit his family in the Philippines. For John, crossing the border was an act of transition between two worlds. It reminded him that his attempts to create a transnational life were not always as successful as he wished. Crossing the border was an act which revealed the separation of the two worlds in which he lived, and his experience was marked by the sadness and frustration related to leaving his wife and two kids behind:

Imagine you are leaving Philippines and you see your family crying and it really breaks your heart. The emotional factor is difficult in a way that you want to be there. The most difficult part is when I ask my daughter... will you miss me? And she answers: 'I got used to it.' I go back to my apartment. I just sit there alone. I cannot sleep. First time it happened I was really crying. Now I am used to it, but it's still difficult. But what do you do? You make yourself busy with work.

He found his solace in work which, he hoped, would lead to the realization of his dreams: he did not see a future for himself and his family in China; instead, he

planned to one day open his own business in the Philippines. While for him the experience of crossing the border was in the first place a reminder of the separation between him and his family, he still immediately indicated another important aspect of his migratory experiences – dealing with the visa system. At this point, his company provided assistance for him, but when asked about the most stressful issues, this struggle was among the first he named. Many others, too, viewed their encounter with the border primarily as a concrete symbol of a rupture between being with their loved ones and their struggles in an environment that they understood as a precious opportunity to seize, but in which they never intended to stay for good. What they did to manage their sadness and frustration was to focus on work. Many also hoped that such a commitment to work would protect them from problems with work visas and work permits in the future.

Crossing the border as a way to stay

For other migrants, the border crossing itself was an essential element in the organization of their stay in China. They crossed the border regularly (once every 1, 2 or 3 months) and this way stayed and worked in China for years. Like Ana, who worked in Shenzhen as an English teacher in a kindergarten and, additionally, in a private training center. She came to China encouraged by a friend she knew from the Philippines; a friend who also taught her how to navigate in the beginning of her stay. The kindergarten administrators promised to take care of all necessary documents enabling Ana to legally take up the employment, but the documentation has never been finalized. Instead, she relied on a multiple-entries business visa, which she had to obtain herself by paying a substantial amount of money to an agent. While being dependent on the brokers, who did not always fulfil their obligations, Ana was also required to leave the country on a regular basis, which she did by going to Hong Kong.

Ana described the act of crossing the border as an always stressful event, something for which she needed to make appropriate preparations. Through her networks, she made sure to be up to date with the most substantial information: what regulations currently applied, how their interpretations evolved, which crossings were considered the “safest”, and what time of day to travel. She was also prepared to answer any questions that could be asked about the business activities declared in her documents, and also made sure that there was nothing on her phone that could possibly reveal any information about her real life.

Ana was pushed to build her life around her entries and exits across the border. It was a strategy that allowed her to continue living and working in China, something that many migrants also from other countries kept doing for many years. Her situation forced her to stay vigilant and cautious, and not just when leaving and entering the country. She kept her status in mind throughout her everyday activities – for instance while she worked:

If you work at school, sometimes they tell you not to come if there is a control about to happen. Everyone is like this.... Business visa, tourist visa... everybody is on the alert. You are just constantly checking if you don't have to run away.

Some schools had access to information about possible crackdowns and were therefore able to instruct the teachers who lacked the required documents not to appear at work on specific days; however, this was not always possible. Furthermore, controls which led to fines and deportation also happened outside of work. Ana was well aware of this fact. In a like manner, she was vulnerable should the school suddenly decide to dismiss her or refuse to pay her salary. Also, other migrants, especially other English teachers had no way to legalize their work and stay because of the strict regulations. However, given the abundance of job opportunities and attractive remuneration in the field, they decided to take the risk. One person explained: "I was scared at first. But I really needed a job. I have a lot of bills to pay. I have a family to support. So I just have to take the risk." They faced stress not only at the border but also on a daily basis, primarily at work. They helped each other by exchanging information about reliable employers and agents.

Crossing the border as a way to leave

Finally, not everyone was able to legalize their stay in China. Some, after the expiration of their visas, could not or did not want to apply for a new one. But they still stayed in the country. Before coming to China, Julia used to work as a domestic helper in two other countries. She left the Philippines when her daughter was 3 years old to spend 4 years working in the Middle East. When her contract came to an end, she made a decision to leave the region, but still decided to continue working abroad. She booked her flight back to the Philippines through Hong Kong and stayed there in order to avoid the high brokerage fees she would have to pay if she were seeking employment while in her country of origin. An agent in Hong Kong offered her work for a Chinese family on the Mainland. She entered China with a tourist visa:

They told me, "It's ok. There is no problem with your visa. We will fix it". They had this Chinese agent; he got my passport. After a week, I asked them about my passport and visa. And after a month, again. But they didn't do anything. And then I thought, "Well ok. I have already overstayed", and I decided I will just stay and work here.

Since then, Julia has worked for several Chinese families. Finding a job did not constitute a problem, as, according to her, the Chinese had a very good opinion about Filipino domestic workers. She easily listed the advantages of being in China:

China is good for us. Salary is better than in any Asian country. In Hong Kong, you work 24 hours a day and you have to stay with your employer. And here sometimes we live alone. We have holidays. We can do whatever we want. We just need to be careful.

This imperative to “be careful”, however, cast a shadow on many aspects of her life. She admitted that not all of her own and her friends’ experiences were good, with some marked by physical and psychological violence, difficult if not impossible to be protected from, or fight against, because of their irregular status. This status also meant that she had no chance to visit her family, which she had not seen for the last 11 years. She indicated that at this point there was no way for her to exit China and go home, other than being deported. She conceptualized crossing the border as a final stage of her life in China. Even though she has not crossed the border for the last 7 years, it was part of her plan, and very concrete in her imagination. For Julia, leaving equaled deportation which, while she perceived as a part of her strategy, was something that needed to be planned ahead. She tried to stay on top of things relying on the collective knowledge about the size of the penalty that would have to be paid or the number of days one had to spend in detention (and the kind of facility in which detention happens), as circumstances differed depending on the provinces and cities in question. This way, she believed she could choose how to proceed once she decided to return home. At the same time, she was well aware that the choice of the moment and place might not belong to her. She admitted that, for now, she would rather stay in China “for as long as possible”. Julia avoided any situations she considered risky, such as going out to bars or taking the subway, in order not to stumble on random controls. She admitted that her life in China is not easy:

For me, the fear is there. I am not happy. I pretend that I am happy. In our lives we don’t know what happens tomorrow. You need to be careful. Sometimes our friends are caught somewhere on their way. And you don’t even know about it.

For Julia, crossing the border was a feared confrontation with the immigration system that she had evaded for many years. She viewed it as something that could not be avoided indefinitely. While trying to assert some control over her circumstances, she still conceptualized deportation as a culmination point of the everyday stress and fear she already knew. Other migrants, usually domestic workers in situations similar to Julia’s, also feared encountering the border, but also saw it as the final stage of migration to China.

Conclusions

As the research demonstrates, migration from the Philippines to Mainland China is not an entirely new phenomenon. It has been carried out mostly outside the formal channels, often taking the form of an apparent tourist or business movement. Migrants stay in China for years, with nearly everyone interviewed here staying for much longer than they had initially planned. People’s lives span between clear, identified advantages; among them the availability of jobs, high remuneration, relative

freedom and closeness to their country of origin, and the precarity stemming from the difficulty to secure legal status of stay and work.

At the same time, this article demonstrates that migration is not merely related to rational occurrences and decisions; rather, it is a process accompanied by a whole range of emotions. These feelings are especially visible when migrants come into contact with the border and bordering practices, though their kind, intensity, and anchorage might vary. Koca stresses that one way to understand borders and bordering practices is to look at their purpose: one of “filtering and categorizing wanted/desirable and unwanted/undesirable as well as worthy and unworthy of protection” (2019, p. 186), and this perspective indicates the selective nature of bordering practices. Such an approach recognizes the fact that borders constitute biopolitical architecture, which is not necessarily experienced in the same way by everyone. The cases described here confirm Koca’s assertions and demonstrate that encounters with the border are often marked by strong emotions. For some migrants, they translate into sadness and frustration and are primarily related to the separation from loved ones; for others, these emotions stem from the difficulty in or unfeasibility of obtaining the necessary documents and permits, and these feelings take the form of a potent fear.

The three types of encounters and strategies in the face of the border introduced here also point to the agency of migrants as they undertake specific actions during the actual border crossing, as well as while planning these crossings and their subsequent stay on the Mainland. These migrants’ narratives demonstrate different ways used to navigate encounters with the border and bordering, as well as the general circumstances of their stay in China. The stories of John, Ana, Julia and others indicate the complexity of migrant experiences. They also demonstrate that, while the borders and bordering practices are about *control*, they must also be viewed in terms of the *agency* of the people who experience those crossings, and who deal with those experiences.

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