



# **Gendered Active Civic Participation: The Experience of Chinese Immigrants in Europe**

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POLITIS

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# **POLITIS – a European research project**

## **Project information**

Populations of immigrant origin are growing and changing in Europe. POLITIS explores the potential of immigrants for the development of a civically active European society, starting with foreign students' perceptions of Europe and focusing on sustained social and political activities of immigrants. POLITIS is the short title for the research project 'Building Europe with New Citizens? An Inquiry into the Civic Participation of Naturalised Citizens and Foreign Residents in 25 Countries'.

The study is divided into three parts:

- Part I: A comparative literature review on immigrant civic participation in 25 member states
- Part II: A comparative analysis of foreign students' perceptions of Europe, exploring the potential of their ideas about Europe with the help of essays and focus group discussions
- Part III: A comparative analysis of more than 150 qualitative interviews with civic activists of immigrant origin in the EU to identify favourable and unfavourable biographical and national conditions for active participation

## **The POLITIS Working Paper Series**

POLITIS working paper series may include project-related contributions by all project partners. The main project researchers in the consortium constitute the editorial committee of the working paper series. It is editorial policy to secure quality standards while encouraging the discussion of results that are preliminary or limited in scope.

## **Funding Acknowledgement**

This research project has been funded by the European Commission through the Sixth Research Framework, Priority 7, Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-Based Society.

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## Foreword

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The authors have participated as interviewers in the POLITIS project, conducting, translating and transcribing six interviews with civically active immigrants in the UK and Belgium. They took part in the two POLITIS summer schools, received training, and contributed to the research process during discussions. The POLITIS team welcomes this contribution in the POLITIS working paper series, particularly as it makes use of the POLITIS database in order to provide insights into an under-researched field.

I am grateful to Friederike Walter for helping to bring this paper into a Working Paper Format.

Dita Vogel, March 2007

## Abstract

In this paper, we have explored ten qualitative interviews with civically active Chinese and discovered gendered participation patterns.

Chinese men and women activists have different trajectories of civic participation. While women start with activities that are related to their roles as mothers, they come into contact with the mainstream society and take up a role that is unusual for Chinese women. They present themselves as intermediaries between Chinese immigrants and the surroundings. They have developed strategies to deal with the discrepancies between the traditional role expectations for Chinese women and their more visible roles in the public.

Male interviewees demonstrate more willingness to take up a role in the official public sphere. However, there are also differences among Chinese men in terms of their political ambition in their receiving countries. Some interviewees mainly fulfil their social roles in the ethnic community and see themselves as *bridges* between the Chinese community and the European society, while other interviewees are more willing to identify themselves mainly as part of the receiving society.

We argue that among the first generation of immigrants, Chinese men and women's activation is still closely linked to their traditional Chinese cultural roles. By taking the opportunity of civic participation in their receiving countries, these Chinese men and women transcend their traditional roles in their ethnic community. However, they still prefer to present their civic activities as a service to the Chinese community. This representation could be interpreted as an effort to defend their legitimacy within their own ethnic group and the broad European society.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Our exploration of the relation between gender and active civic participation among Chinese immigrants in Europe is based on the belief that the ways in which Chinese immigrants experience the immigration, integration, and civic participation in their receiving countries are gendered and this process is heavily influenced by social, economic and cultural structures in both their receiving and home countries. This paper will not pursue a feminist perspective but put the balance on both genders, i.e. the research objects are both immigrant men and women.

As noted by Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, women started playing a major role in labour migration after the 1960s. Today, the number of female workers, refugees, and trafficked women is growing in the global immigration movement (2003: 9). However, prior to the 1970s, women have been largely invisible in the studies of international migration. Thanks to the feminist movements and globalisation, new research interests emerged from the male-biased immigration studies. ‘Immigrant women’ in the related research have been transferred from an object to a subject. Contemporary studies on gender and immigration are gaining currency for several reasons. Firstly, scholars point out that ‘female migration is now virtually equal to that of males’; secondly, ‘migration itself is a gendered phenomenon that requires more sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools than studies of sex roles and of sex as a dichotomous variable allowed in the past’ (Donato et al. 2006:4). Because ‘gender’ emphasizes the relational quality of sexual difference and its socially constituted meanings (Teng 1996:119), with a focus on gender, ‘difference became a central issue, particularly in the late 1980s and the 1990s as post-modern theories of gender entered Western scholarship’ (Teng 1996:130). Thus, ‘migration and settlement experiences may lead to significant changes in the social and economic roles of women and girls, men and boys, or they may reinforce gender identities from the country of origin’ (Rose and Dyck 2002).

The gendered approach has been largely relevant to immigrants of varying origins in their participation in different receiving countries (Raijman & Semyonov 1997; Jones-Correa 1998; Salaff and Greve 2003). In our research, we tackle the greater challenge of analysing exactly why immigrant women’s and men’s activities should differ. What are factors motivating immigrants to be active in civic participation in their receiving countries that are different for men and women? This area of studies on Chinese immigrants in European countries remains especially unexplored.

Here, as we speak of *active* civic participation, *active* is used to imply a level of activity that goes substantially beyond voting. We adopt Vogel and Triandafyllidou’s approach that:

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: This paper would have been impossible without the support of many exceptional people living in various parts of Europe. We have benefited tremendously from Dr. Dita Vogel’s expertise, inspiration, and unfailing support all the time. We are more than grateful to Dr. Norbert Cyrus, Dr. Ruby Gropas, and Dr. Anna Triandafyllidou for their helpful suggestions when we conducted field work research in 2005. We are also indebted to Ms. Carol Brown and Dr. Dirk Jacobs for their encouragement and constructive criticism of this paper when we first presented it in July 2006 in Germany. We thank the POLITIS research team for providing us access to its database. We also acknowledge Mr. Anaele Iroh and Mr. Xuan Ye’s contribution of interview data and Harold Otto’s language-editing. Finally, our gratitude goes out to our interviewees who kindly agreed to share their immigration experience and life stories with us.

We define actively participating immigrants (immigrant activists), for the purpose of our comparative study, as people that give a voice to societal concerns, e.g. by engaging in political parties, local committees, parent associations or migrant lobby organisations; and/or organise solidarity and self-help, e.g. by taking leadership functions in religious associations, ethnic associations or informal self-help networks (Vogel & Triandafyllidou 2005:11).

Thus, such research on immigrants, at the same time, addresses the *elite and leadership*. Ten Chinese immigrant activists, four women and six men from four European countries were selected for interviews about their active civic participation. In the process of selecting interviewees and conducting interviews, we noticed the difference between men and women in terms of their civic activities and presentation. In this paper, we make the case for a gendered understanding of Chinese immigrants' civic participation in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Italy, and Ireland, and thus present a research subject that may be worth following up in further studies.

## **2. Patterns of Chinese Immigration to Europe after World War II**

In order to gain an insight into Chinese immigrants' civic participation, Chinese migration to Europe must be placed in context, before we analyse our interviews.

According to Li, the countries with significant Chinese groups in Europe are the UK (250,000), France (228,500), the Netherlands (132,000), Germany (100,000), Austria (41,000), Spain (35,000), Belgium (23,000) and Switzerland (13,900) (Li 2000). The number of Chinese immigrants to Europe has increased significantly in the last years. However, ethnic Chinese in Europe only account for 0.21 percent of the total European population (Pang 2002:151). While using the general term *Chinese* as an ethnic category indicating people who perceive themselves as Chinese, we want to draw attention to the fact that Chinese immigration to Europe consists of different groups originating from different migration patterns. The most important groups are described below. As the UK is the most important receiving country, some information is only presented for the UK case.

### **2.1. Economic Immigrants from Hong Kong**

Immigration from China to Europe can be traced back to the eighteenth century, but major waves of immigration started after the 1950s (Baker 1994: 291). After WWII, Britain and other European countries suffered from lack of labour and low birth rate. Residents from previous British colonies were allowed into the country to fill the void in the labour market, the public demanded 'exotic and interesting food after the years of wartime austerity' (Baker 1994: 294). Meanwhile, as David Parker analysed, because of the 'changing pattern of consumer demand in Britain', 'the increased labour force participation of women', and 'the growing number of single households' (1995: 65), takeaways and other means of ready-made meals became popular in public demand. Thus, as Ronald Skeldon summarises:

...the British Nationality Acts of 1914 and 1948 had guaranteed freedom of access to the United Kingdom for Commonwealth citizens, and this legislation, together with a post-war demand for ready-made Chinese food, laid the basis for a significant population flow from Hong Kong throughout the 1950s and 1960s (1996: 137).

From the immigrants' perspective, according to Hugh D. R. Baker, high rate of unemployment and a price drop in the rice market drove a lot of young rice farmers in Hong Kong to the lucrative Chinese catering business in Britain (Baker 1994: 294). Young Chinese male farmers found it worthwhile to lease their farmland in hometown and engage in Chinese catering business in Britain (Wickberg 1994: 17).

The similar picture of Chinese-speaking Cantonese coming into the catering business was also found in other Western European countries after the war. Nevertheless, as Baker points out, these early immigrants, mainly male, 'led lonely, frustrated lives, deprived for much of the time of the social contact which they would have had in their native environment, ill at ease in the receiving society which was inaccessible to them for linguistic and work reasons.' (1994: 301) According to one early Hong Kong immigrant, he and his fellow Chinese had no intention of staying permanently in Britain. They aimed to make money out of their catering business and return to Hong Kong for a better living.

However, on 1 July 1962, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was enacted to reduce the number of Commonwealth workers in Britain by making them subject to rules that required the possession of a job voucher (Spencer 1997: 129). To secure their already prosperous business in the UK, many of the Chinese immigrants changed their intention of temporary settlement to permanent settlement (Spence 1997: 131). Meanwhile, the Act permitted the unification of families, which resulted in women and children entering Britain for family reunification (Spencer 1997: 133). The gender composition among Chinese immigrants, therefore, changed. Chinese catering business gradually developed into a *family enterprise* (Wickberg 1994: 26) and the benefits went to the owners – usually the men in these family enterprises.

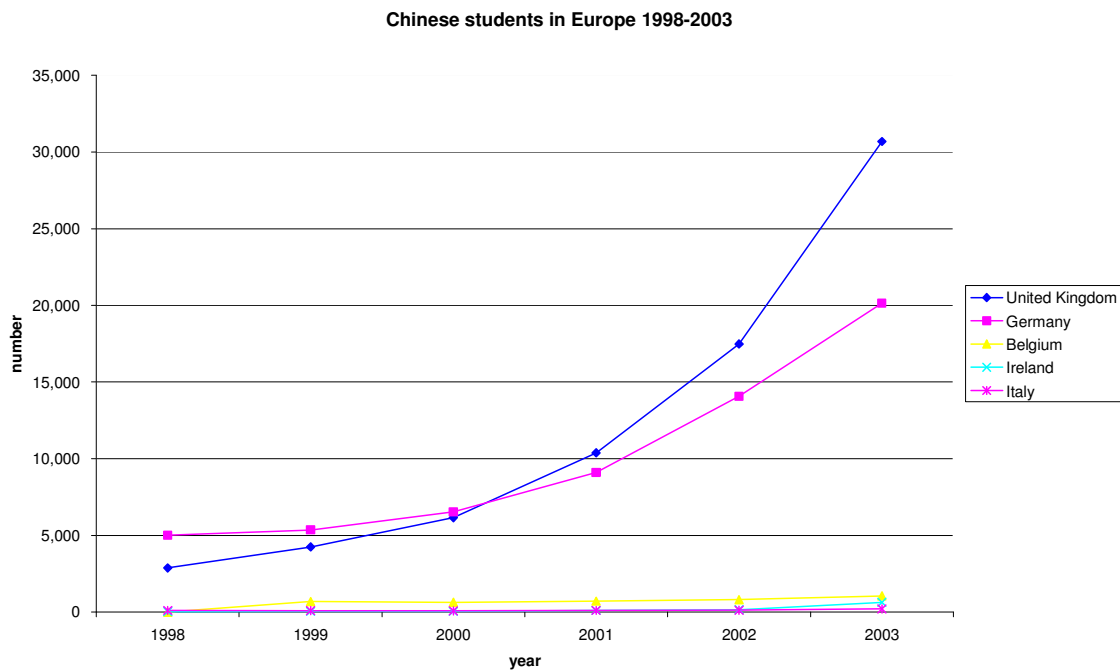
Since the early 1970s, recruitment of colonial workers largely ceased in Europe and 'for colonial migrants in Britain, France and the Netherlands, trends to family reunion and permanent settlement continued' (Castles and Miller 2003:79). Chinese immigrants, along with other immigrant groups, became normalised and formed clearly visible social groups, especially with the emergence of a second generation born in their receiving countries.

## **2.2. Students and Scholars from Mainland China**

Students from Mainland China have been coming to the UK since the late 1970s when the Communist Party first sent government-sponsored scholars and students abroad. Now Mainland Chinese students are the largest student group of non-EU nationals in the UK and the number rose on average by 74 percent each year before 2003 (Nania and Green 2004: 1). According to scholarly estimates, the top one hundred UK universities received from mainland Chinese students, in the academic year 2003-2004, an average of £2.9 million or an estimated total of 223 million pounds sterling (Nania and Green 2004: 1).



While the UK is the biggest receiving country for Chinese students, other countries have also received an increasing number of Chinese. The graph displays Chinese student migration to the UK and Germany as the two largest receiving countries and to other countries such as Belgium, Ireland and Italy.



(Source: OECD data)

In the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s, after the completion of their university studies, many mainland Chinese remained in their European receiving countries (Pang 2002: 152). Students and scholars naturally form a sub-group within the Chinese immigrant community due to their educational background. They usually form their own organizations based on common interests such as the Chinese Student and Scholar Association. Most of the students and scholars initially come to Europe for short-term study or research; an unknown, but potentially significant, proportion of them later choose to stay long-term or permanently on work contract. With the growing number of students and scholars coming into European countries, this sub-group of immigrants becomes more significant.

These ‘professional transients’, as Castles and Miller name them, are ‘highly-skilled personnel who move temporarily within specialised labour markets’ (2003: 15). Some European government reject the idea of granting permanent settlement to immigrants and see the new immigrants as a threat to their unified national identity. Other governments (for example, the French government) ‘may accept the reality of settlement, but demand individual cultural assimilation as the price for granting of rights and citizenship’ (Castle and Miller 2003: 15).

### 2.3. Fujianese and Other Economic Immigrants from Mainland China

Fujian is a coastal province in southeast China. Fujianese ‘asylum seekers’, or illegal immigrants through human trafficking channels, have come to public attention due to media coverage of the Dover tragedy in 2000 and Morecambe Bay cockle-pickers tragedy in 2004. Xinyi Jiang’s research (2006) shows that Fujianese fall effectively into *economic* emigrants from smuggling channels, but they usually apply for asylum upon arrival.

Fujianese in the UK mainly comes from two rural towns – Fuqing and Changle. In Jiang’s study of Fujianese in the British society, she argues that such group of people usually pay the ‘snakeheads’ (the professional smuggling facilitators) around 20,000 pounds sterling for getting to the UK and other western European countries. UK became a favourite destination mainly for three reasons: a) relatively cheap smuggling fee to enter; b) high earning potential; c) lower risk of being deported (Jiang 2006: 212). Upon arrival, Fujianese immigrants usually apply for asylum in their destination countries. The alleged political persecution is usually related to China’s one-child family policy, which was enacted in 1979. However, as Jiang argues, for these emigrants, emigration is, in fact, ‘a choice to enhance their economic, personal and social situation to some extent’ (Jiang 2006: 206).

In recent years, undocumented migration from Fujian and Zhejiang (another coastal province in China) has also produced Chinese immigrants to the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and other European continental countries. As Castles and Miller argue, ‘the family and community are crucial in migration networks’ (2003: 27). Chinese immigrants from Fujian and Zhejiang follow the ‘beaten paths’ (Stahl 1993, cited from Castles 2000: 272) of the Chinese migratory chains and are helped by their relatives or friends already in their destination countries. ‘Networks based on family or on common origin help provide shelter, work, assistance in coping with bureaucratic procedures and support in personal difficulties’ in the receiving countries (Castles and Miller 2003: 28).

The Fujianese immigrants usually have the least cultural capital and the lowest level of language proficiency among Chinese immigrants. They rely on ‘ethnic networks’ to survive (Jiang 2006: 218) and usually work in kitchens of Chinese restaurant or takeaways. Apart from being distressed by the ‘lonely’ and ‘unpleasant’ kitchen job, they also ‘worried about health, losing the job, being deported’ (Jiang 2006: 217). They are usually reluctant to obtain the welfare available to asylum seekers (Jiang 2006: 218) and largely remain a quiet group. Similar to the Fujianese, Guangdongese (immigrants from China’s Guangdong Province) and Zhejiangnese (immigrants from China’s Zhejiang Province) also form their own sub-ethnic networks among Chinese immigrants in Europe.

### 2.4. Others

Others types of Chinese who hold a residency permit or have citizenship in European countries include Chinese immigrants from interracial marriages, successful asylum seekers and Chinese medical practitioners.

The *true* asylum seekers come to the UK and other European countries due to political, religious persecutions (the recent example is the Falun Gong practitioners) in mainland China. As the study by Jia Gao (2006) shows, after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, Chinese student

organisations worldwide launched formal and informal lobbying in their receiving countries to help Chinese students receive permanence residence or even citizenship. Chinese political dissidents and religious practitioners in Europe are usually very active in criticizing the Chinese Communist Party on China related issues.

According to our own observations, it is also worth noting the growing number of Chinese medicine practitioners in Europe. Chinese herbal medicine, Chinese acupuncture, and oriental massage are becoming more and more accepted by the general European public. Chinese herbal medicine clinics can be seen on most high streets in British towns and are increasingly popular due to the insufficiency of the National Health Service.

### **3. Gendered Civic Participation of Chinese Immigrants in Europe**

Though factors such as language proficiency, human capital, and length of duration in the destination country play significant roles in affecting Chinese immigrants' civic participation, our findings suggest that Chinese immigrants' activism also has gender-linked reasons and gender ideologies have a distinct impact on Chinese immigrants' civic participation in European society. Our findings also suggest that gendered social, economic and cultural contexts in both China and in European countries affect Chinese immigrants' civic participation.

The traditional Chinese social norms encourage men towards elitist-oriented political aspirations and discourage women from learning, working and any kind of social participation. Women's virtue in Chinese society is associated with being submissive to man and their inferior position was guaranteed by both cultural and institutional frameworks, as Jiang summarises:

... women's institutional inferiority in traditional Chinese society which can be defined by a patrilineal and patriarchal social context – in which female lives are constructed around men – first fathers, then husbands, and finally sons if they become widows... (Jiang 2006: 199).

After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, women have been encouraged to work and participate in social life. The state took a proactive role in decreasing gender difference and guarantee women's equality with men. However, such practice was replacing family patriarchy with a new state patriarchy (Yang 1999: 37-40) and has not caused fundamental changes in the gendered ideologies in the country. Meanwhile, 'state feminism' proved to be fragile and 'a more overt patriarchal culture has reasserted itself with the return to a privatised economy and transnational capital in the post-Mao era (Yang 1999:39). Women have still suffered from feudal ideas, lower pay (Masini and Stratigos 1991), and inequality with respect to land distribution (Ho 2005). Since 'migration is preceded by a process of uprooting' (Mahler 1995: 31), when Chinese men and women are uprooted from their own social and cultural context and thrust into the European society, they face the challenge of renegotiating and reconstructing their respective identities in civic life.

### 3.1. Data and Methods

The following sections are based on the analysis of ten interviews with immigrants of Chinese ethnicity that were conducted in 2005 in the framework of the POLITIS project (for more information about the POLITIS database, see Vogel 2006; Brown et al. 2007). The authors of this paper have conducted six interviews in Belgium (Wang) and in the UK (Wu), and draw on the POLITIS database for three interviews conducted in Italy (Ye) and one in Ireland (Iroh). In both Belgium and the UK, we also included additional information from later contacts that complements the interviews. Eight interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated into English. Two interviews were conducted in English.

With regard to the Chinese migration patterns in Europe we have described earlier, our selection of interviewees covers a variety of migration backgrounds. The following table 1.1 gives an overview of the demographic features of the interviewees in 2005:

*Table 1.1 Interviewee's demographic features in 2005*

Name	Gender	Age	Length of stay (years)	Country of stay	Country of origin	Reference No. in the POLITIS database and Interviewer name
Cindy	Female	47	between 11 and 20	Belgium	P. R. China	012_Wang
Nick	Male	44	between 5 and 10	Belgium	P. R. China	013_Wang
Owen	Male	42	between 5 and 10	Belgium	P. R. China	014_Wang
Betty	Female	58	more than 20	Ireland	Hong Kong	089_Iroh
Dora	Female	40	more than 20	Italy	P. R. China	107_Xuan
Ross	Male	39	between 10 and 19	Italy	P. R. China	108_Xuan
Peter	Male	40	between 10 and 19	Italy	P. R. China	109_Xuan
Matt	Male	42	less than 10	UK	P. R. China	165_Wu
Kevin	Male	53	more than 20	UK	Malaysia	166_Wu
Angela	Female	43	more than 20	UK	Hong Kong	167_Wu

Angela, Cindy and Ross went to their receiving countries for family reunification. Nick and Matt went for continuing their academic study or research. Dona, Peter, and Owen came from Zhejiang Province and they started working as self-employed entrepreneurs when they arrived. Kevin and Betty went to their receiving countries for study and remained after marrying local residents respectively. Our contention is that by studying such a group of Chinese activists from different immigrant paths, we are specifically interested in their shared cultural identity, which might affect their attitudes towards male and female civic participation in public life. We put an emphasis on Chinese activists' motivations for civic participation and the changes of their activities during their stay in receiving countries. We assume that there may be some commonalities in spite of the different migration backgrounds.

All of our interviewees have a prominent position in their local communities or even in the national arena in their receiving countries. Therefore, people with knowledge of the specific field may be able to identify them. The interviewees were informed of such possibility. Some of them expressed willingness to the use of their full names, while others felt more comfortable to talk about their individual biography when their anonymity is protected. As a rule, we therefore provide as much anonymity as possible without leaving out information that is essential for understanding our research questions. We have used common English names when referring to the interviewees. We do not give real names and unique biographical details of the interviewees unless they are crucial for the analysis.

Apart from interviewing activists, we also conducted participant observation of the local Chinese communities and consulted local Chinese media in both Belgium and the UK from July to November 2005. Part of the ethnographic field notes were integrated into the interview transcripts as supplementary text to the interview data.

### **3.2. A General View**

Chinese immigrants' civic participation in British society was described in rather gloomy terms by official reports, Chinese immigrants themselves and scholars. The Chinese immigrants appear to be a quiet community seldom turning their private complaints into public issues (Home Affairs Committee 1985). Compared with other ethnic communities, Chinese immigrants received little public funds to improve their community service or quality of life (Interview with Matt 11/09/2005). Chinese immigrants are not active in politics and are difficult to be motivated (interview with Kevin 08/09/2005). There is a lack of political groups representing Chinese immigrants' interests and defending their rights (interview with Kevin 08/09/2005). Chinese are more or less excluded in the British society 'in terms of getting access to social rights and services associated with citizenship' (Chau and Yu 2001: 104). Pang's research on Chinese immigrants in Belgium has similar results. In contrast to other disadvantaged immigrant groups in Western advanced economies, the Chinese remain a silent and invisible community, while engaging successfully in the catering sector (Pang 2002: 149).

Nevertheless, our findings suggest that, in spite of these facts, some civic participation examples shed positive light on Chinese engagement in broader society. Chinese in the UK, Belgium and other European countries are stepping out of their ethnic communities, integrating into wider European society, and striving to speak out on their societal concerns.

Chinese schools, newspaper and voluntary associations have long been regarded as the ‘three pillars’ of overseas Chinese societies and play an important role in the evolution of Chinese diaspora community (Liu 1998: 582). In Belgium, for example, active Chinese immigrants who run Chinese schools seek to provide language training for Belgium-born Chinese children, which helps confirm the Chinese cultural identity. In the meantime, they also explore means for integration and civic participation in their receiving country. A Chinese school, which is set up under the name of an association of Chinese professionals, has half of its students coming from local Belgian families. As Nick, the chairman of this association said, ‘this [the Chinese school] is a very significant career and it’s also very successful work. Many local (Belgian) media reported on our Chinese school’ (Interview with Nick 11/11/2005).

According to our interviews and observation, most Chinese immigrant activists who are visible in the Belgian media or known by local society are the leaders or elite members from Chinese voluntary associations. Traditionally, ‘the Chinese diaspora associations were established for the purposes of mutual assistance, dispensing public charities, preserving Chinese culture and fostering group identity’ (Liu 1998: 588). Due to the multiculturalism principle in Belgium’s Flemish-speaking region (Flanders), there are more Chinese associations that are more active in Flanders in comparison to their counterparts in French-speaking region (Wallonia).

When we scrutinise the leadership and elites among Chinese associations, we find that traditional patriarchal relations are still common. ‘Homogeneity also downplays the diversity and inequality between social status and gender among the kins(women) [and] very few women have been selected into the middle and upper level of the leadership’ among the Chinese associations (Liu 1998:604). Such concerns raised almost ten years ago have not been improved significantly. Imbalanced gender presence among Chinese active immigrants is still very obvious in Europe. Nevertheless, we still find female Chinese representatives, though not as many as their male counterparts in number, who are very ‘ambitious’ in engaging in the civic society. Participating in political parties’ activities even becomes an important approach. According to some local media, there have been at least two female Chinese restaurant owners who ran for political office in an effort to represent the interests of ethnic entrepreneurs in Belgium.<sup>2</sup> Another example is Cindy, our study participant who belongs to a Flemish political party that supports ethnic women’s political activities.

In the following sections, this gendered difference in civic participation among Chinese immigrants is to be spelt out in more details.

### **3.3. From The Private Sphere to the Public Sphere: Women’s Civic Participation**

Our interviews with four Chinese women immigrants – Angela from the UK, Betty from Ireland, Cindy from Belgium, and Dora from Italy – demonstrate that civic participation can extend from dealing with issues belonging to the private sphere to issues in the public sphere and from ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> According to the editor-in-chief of *Capital News*, a major Chinese newspaper in Belgium.

networks to wider European society. Chinese women activists show their willingness to perform their traditional role as ‘virtuous wives and honourable mothers’ (*Xianqi Liangmu*) by supporting their husbands and taking care of children. Nevertheless, this traditional value does not confine them at home. On the contrary, this value, along with their language proficiency, motivated them to look after their fellow people from the Chinese community, and later enabled them to access wider European society and interact with other social actors.

### 3.3.1. *Reconciliation between Western and Eastern Values: Angela in the UK and Betty in Ireland*

Angela, the founder of a Chinese Community Co-op Centre (the Centre) is from a Hong Kong, economic-immigrant family. Angela left school at 16 and started to help her family with their own Chinese takeaway and later operating her own takeaway with her husband. Her civic participation started in 1994 as the headmistress of the Chinese Language School in a coastal city in the UK. Her ambition at the time was to teach children (from either Chinese or inter-racial families) to learn Chinese. While directing the Chinese school, Angela gradually realised the problems that many ethnic Chinese faced in the British society. For example, some Chinese women suffer from domestic violence and feel obliged to keep this to themselves; many Chinese do not know how to claim welfare or seek legal help due to language barriers and elder Chinese need special care. In 1996, with help from other volunteers, she founded the Chinese Community Co-op Centre and started to provide service and support to the local Chinese community.

Angela’s civic participation is, to a large degree, based on the traditional Chinese women’s virtue of taking care of her *family* – especially the children, the elderly, and other women. The service provided by her Co-op centre reflects this character. This centre provides the Chinese with:

- Seminars and talks relating to housing, medicine, welfare benefits, adult continuing education, community work training, etc.;
- Support for Chinese women - especially in terms of protecting them from and helping them respond to domestic violence;
- Services for the elderly including housing scheme for elderly Chinese, social gathering, leisure and educational activities for the elderly;
- Classes and workshops on Chinese language, arts (calligraphy, painting, dance and craft), and culture (open to Chinese and non-Chinese local residents);
- Library corner providing Chinese literature, newspapers, magazines, videos, etc.

However, in order to achieve the above goals, Angela had to go out of her ethnic network into wider society. Amrit Wilson’s report on racial discrimination against Asian population in the late 1970s Britain best reflects Angela’s memory of her school time:

What [...Asian children...] face is a kind of colonial experience which they are far too young to fight against [...] It often takes the form of ‘rejection of one’s race’

[...and...] is often accompanied by a desire not to stand out, not to cause trouble, to tip-toe about hoping nobody will notice you. Why? Because this is not your country, because the British have done you a favour by letting you in (Wilson 1978: 89).

Still bearing the memory of being bullied in her school days, Angela now summarised her experience of going out into *British society* for the Chinese community as:

... if you spend more time going out and networking with other ethnic minorities and other government institutions, you will get help. Some British help us as well. Not all British are bullies. Some of them are very fair and ready to help. We are a minority, but more importantly, we are human beings. We need to be treated equally. So when you equip yourself with such an understanding, you will be a bit stronger when you talk to others. You won't feel afraid. We won't shout at or fight with others. But we do need equal treatment.

She has been lobbying and networking to secure funds and support from the local government. The Centre had been supported by the Lottery funding from 1997 to 2003. The Centre also actively participated in local charity events such as Cancer research fund raising and Lord Mayor fund raising. In 2005, this community was awarded the *Queens Award for Volunteers* for their excellent work in the local community.

Zhou suggests that 'although some women may conceive of immigration as a way to escape the patriarchal tradition that has oppressed them for so long in their home society, many of them still carry with them the traditional values and roles' (1992: 15). In balancing the different gender roles from her receiving and home countries, family ties and support are essential in Angela's civic participation. Angela's husband, who owns and runs the family takeaway, used to expect his wife to perform the traditional duty of Chinese women – supporting the husband, helping the husband running the business, taking care of household and children. According to Angela, 'he used to have complaints', but he became understanding later. The husband was presented as playing a supportive role for her activities.

Very much similar to Angela's experience, Betty from Ireland started her civic participation by taking care of other Chinese people around her. When she was a medical student in London, she was already active in helping the student union to organise Chinese nights or Chinese visits. She married an Irish citizen and started her career as a doctor in Ireland in the late 1970s. Since then, her clinic has become an information centre and a help centre for her Chinese patients. Thanks to her English language proficiency, Betty could help her patients to communicate with immigration officers, working permit officers and police officers. In the early 1980s, Betty and a few others set up the Irish Chinese Culture Society which aims to offer a broad range of socio-cultural assistance to Chinese immigrants in Ireland and Irish people who plan to go to China. She works with her colleagues in giving language training courses to both Chinese and Irish, resolving cultural conflicts within local Chinese community, organising cultural festival for the city, and raising fund for those Chinese families who have experienced loss.



What interests us is that during the interview, Betty constantly reminded the researcher that her social activities are *cultural* rather than political. She agreed with the term *civic*, but showed real reluctance in labelling herself as a woman with *political* ambition. She also downplayed her leadership in the community, while emphasising the *great bridging work* the centre performed between the Irish government and the Chinese community. Her centre has been facing serious financial crisis. This concern was aired in a manner of ‘motherhood’ from 58-year old Betty towards the young volunteers working in the centre:

... the young people, the students come here every day. They study half the day and then they have to work to survive. I feel my heart aching to ask them to volunteer without any payment. Every hour they are working. They have to make a living. [...] I can't ask them regularly to come in to help without payment. So I pray to the government to help us. Help us to help the young people....

Angela and Betty showed strong gesture of *sisterhood* or even *motherhood* in their ways of treating their colleagues and their fellow Chinese who come to the centre seeking for help. They both emphasised the voluntary nature of their activities and their efforts to perform traditionally female work. In Italy, Dora also plays a similar role of helper in her ethnic community. Meanwhile, both Angela and Betty perform tasks such as preparing food and tea in their respective Chinese community centres, which could be interpreted as a strategy simultaneously adopted by both of them to reconcile their leading roles in the community centres with traditional expectations towards Chinese women.

*3.3.2. From Family Women to Political Party Members: Cindy in Belgium and Fran in the UK*  
As one of the first generation of university graduates after China's Cultural Revolution, Cindy started working as a teacher after she came to Belgium. Her university degree in Chinese Language Teaching helped her to get a job teaching Chinese in a history and art museum in Brussels for Belgian students. This work experience is more a means to financially support her family than anything else. By doing so, Cindy fulfilled her traditional role of a Chinese woman who supports the husband in his career development by taking care of the family issues. As she said, ‘My husband was a self-financed student at that time. I wanted to use my professional skills to earn some money [as an income for the family]’.

Some years later, when ‘*money for normal life is no longer a problem*’, Cindy started to pursue her own career which is related to Chinese teaching but not limited to Chinese schools only. Cindy became a volunteer teacher at two Chinese schools in Belgium. As she recalled:

I wanted to introduce a Chinese language class as a normal course into Belgian local schools. That is, I had to ask Belgian government's permission for allowing Chinese to become a normal course that counts for credits hours in local primary and middle schools.

Cindy's volunteer work experience provided her with further motivation and capacity in contributing to such work. When the Chinese School was founded in 1997, Cindy's husband was the first principal of that school. As one of the main volunteer teachers in the school and a supportive wife at home, Cindy put much energy and time in supporting Chinese language teaching. Many years' teaching experience and sustained contacts with the locals and Chinese immigrants made Cindy realise the necessity of introducing Chinese classes into local schools. Chinese students' demand is a major factor:

My students asked me: 'why can't we learn Chinese in our own schools?' In Belgium, many schools recognise the language demand from the Moroccan [immigrants]. 'We want to learn our own language and culture', [as the Moroccan immigrants demanded]. Thus local schools accepted their requirements. That's why Moroccan is the course that counts for credits hours in local schools. The next generation of Moroccans can learn their own language in normal schools. [...] This should be an equal cultural right [for other ethnic minorities as well]. As Chinese, we also need to guarantee this right [for our next generation].

At the meantime, there have been an increased number of local students who want to learn Chinese. This raises challenges to the limited resources of Chinese schools, which initially aimed to enrol Chinese children only. The shortage of classrooms, teachers and other facilities create difficulties. Nevertheless, from Cindy's point of view, the increased number of local students in Chinese schools also suggests the possibility of introducing Chinese classes into local schools. Encouraged by the demands from both Chinese and local students, Cindy started by contacting local Belgian schools and investigating the official procedures in relevant Belgian institutions. She encountered many difficulties because of the fragmented knowledge of the Belgian education institutions and society. Cindy persisted in doing this job and she believed::

This is what I can do and what I can do well [...] There have been Chinese classes in normal local schools in Germany, not to mention in the United States! We'll have such things happening in Belgium in one or two years.

Cindy joined a political party in Flanders shortly after the POLITIS interview with her in late 2005. This party encourages ethnic women to represent their interests and their political participation. In a follow-up communication, Cindy described her motivation for joining the political party as:

We need people here [in Belgium] to know us. We also need to know this society. Representing Chinese and presenting Chinese culture here are also the ways in which we integrate into this society. We should try to integrate into the local society so that we can really know how our voices as immigrants can be heard.

Another Chinese woman who has participated in political party activities was Fran in the UK. When the researcher conducted field observation in Angela's Co-op Centre, Fran volunteered her own story of civic participation. Fran came to Angela's Centre seeking help with family issues in 1996. The dynamics in the Chinese community opened a new window in Fran's life of being a docile housewife. With other Chinese women's encouragement, Fran gradually became involved in the social activities within the Centre, and later became a key member of the Chinese Labour Party Association. Fran distributed election leaflets and promoted the Labour Party's political ideas among Chinese immigrants in London in 2005. She told the researcher that she supported the Labour Party because the Blair government adopts a policy that favours equality and encourages immigrants to participate in civic activities. Fran also explained her motivation for civic participation as to *help other Chinese women who suffer from what she used to suffer*:

We believe that women's activation at the same time is encouraged by the local social norms, i.e. the equal rights between men and women and more favourable civic participation environment for Chinese women than what was in their country of origin. The interview with Cindy displays a narrow orientation towards school improvement and community support, which is already beyond the general expectation of the role of Chinese women in a traditional sense. Moreover, both her educational background and language proficiency (Cindy speaks Chinese, French and Flemish) facilitate her civic participation. Fran's experience shows her resistance to domestic hostility and her use of civic participation as a means to fight against her fate, and renegotiate her social identity in the ethnic Chinese community. In both cases, civic participation is still closely linked to Chinese women's perceived female responsibility within household. However, the opportunities in the political parties might have caused these women to change their activities and also their interpretation of their own roles in the Chinese community and European society.

### **3.4. The Male Political ambition**

#### *3.4.1. Being the Political Representatives for Chinese immigrants: Kevin's and Liam's Stories in the UK*

Kevin's civic participation reflects a distinct Chinese *male* political ambition. As the old Chinese saying goes, the noble goals for men to achieve in their lives are: to cultivate oneself, to build a family, to rule the country, and make the country harmonious. For Kevin who has been in the UK for 35 years after graduation, he has achieved at least the first two goals and now his ambition turns to *ruling the country*. Kevin has been a member of the Conservative Party for more than two decades and became more actively involved in politics several years ago. He campaigned successfully in local issues such as the proposed relocation of a health centre away from its community, better primary care resources in an inner city area and inappropriate planning applications at the country level. His political ambition mainly focuses on National Health Service reform and has been covered favourably in the press. During the interview, Kevin constantly referred to Confucius ideals in explaining his political ambition and voicing his willingness in represent the Chinese (and Malaysian Chinese) immigrants. Nevertheless, apart from his political campaigns, Kevin has not shown his close connection with the Chinese immigrant community.

With his focus on health issues, he takes the role of representative of Chinese in response to the demands of the political process (Cyrus 2007).

Liam is a key member of a Chinese human rights organization *Min Quan* (which means Civil Rights in English) in the UK. This voluntary group was set up in 1999 and aims:

- To provide legal, moral and practical support to Chinese people suffering racial harassment, domestic violence and policing problems;
- To monitor the responses of institutions and authorities with regard to these issues;
- To provide information and training on these issues; and
- To support and liaise closely with other organisations to bring these issues to the public attention. (source: <http://www.minquan.co.uk/about-min-quan/> accessed: 05/07/2006)

The Min Quan group successfully called public and media's attention to racial discrimination against the Chinese ethnic minority. In 2005, they called for public inquiry into the murder of Chinese takeaway owner Mi Gao Huang Chen and contributed greatly to the solve of the crime and sentence of the murderers.

#### 3.4.2. *Leadership in Ethnic Associations for Professional Chinese*

Nick is the chair of the biggest Chinese professionals association in Belgium. During the years he spent in Belgium, he has always been active in leading different Chinese associations. His first civic participation experience was to work as a leader of the Chinese association of students and scholars at a university:

Working for the Chinese students association is voluntary. This kind of work needs someone who is warm-hearted, a bit senior, and experienced. Maybe I met these criteria. I was nominated first as a candidate and won the election later.

Nick spent an entire year doing this volunteer job. For him, this job helped him to fulfil the traditional Chinese men's role in a group. He was taking the role of a leader and helping those who were in trouble.

Winning support and trust from his fellow Chinese members, Nick was elected into a key position in a Chinese professionals association in Belgium in the following year. This association has five goals to achieve, as written in its constitution:

- Setting up and maintaining the network of Chinese professionals in Belgium;
- Promoting the exchange programmes in the area of science, technology, education and culture between Belgium and China;

- Promoting [mutual]-understanding and corporation between Chinese people and Belgian people;
- Networking with other Chinese organizations in Belgium and Europe;
- Helping members of this association to naturalise in Belgium and to strengthen their legal positions.

Nick and other leaders organised a series of activities to materialise the association's goals, as he said,

One aim is to help our members to integrate into the Belgian society. We organised a series of activities. Firstly, we held a series of lectures [on legal and political issues in Belgium]. For instances, we held lectures on Belgian Tax Law with a focus on the new law coming into effect in 2005 and laws on tax reform. We invited an attorney to deliver a lecture on how to apply for work permit in Belgium. We also held a lecture on the political system in Belgium. [...] Our association organised a visit to the Belgian Senate and 34 members participated. President of Asian Affairs, Wille Paul, talked with us for more than one hour and he answered our questions.

Apart from helping other Chinese to legalise their residency in Belgium, Nick and his colleagues from the association also organised activities that have close connection with his country of origin. '*We are working as the bridge between Belgium and China*', Nick said. His remarks reveal another feature of the leadership in the Chinese ethnic associations. Civic participation among Chinese male professionals is sometimes characterized by their recognition of *multiple identities*. Though the Chinese government has never accepted dual citizenship among its citizens, it has been encouraging overseas Chinese to acknowledge China as their eternal *motherland*. These professional Chinese, as Liu argues, 'while pledging their primary and foremost political allegiance toward their residing nations, leaders also display cultural affinity and emotional links with their ancestral homes' (Liu 1998: 592).

Students and scholars are the immigrant group that best processes human capital and language proficiency. However, the level of civic participation among Chinese students and scholars is comparatively low and sporadic. There are a few reasons contributing to this. Firstly, as temporary residents, students (and visiting scholars) are excluded from most of the institutional rights in the European society. Secondly, students and scholars are usually only permitted to stay for six months to three years; this temporary residency does not encourage civic participation. Thirdly, even though some students receive work permits after their study, the temporary work contract will not help them to settle down permanently in a city. Finally, although the Chinese student and professional community in European countries are growing; it is still a comparatively new community compared to other Chinese immigrant groups. Students and scholars from mainland China are still negotiating their unique group identity in relation to other ethnic Chinese immigrant groups.

Our interviewee Matt was a visiting scholar when he first came to the UK in 1996. After one year's stay, he continuously received work contracts, which allowed him to obtain British citizenship for the whole family. However, in the past years, this contracted work also dragged his whole family from one city to another throughout the UK. His wife, who came as a dependent, now works in a Chinese medical clinic. Matt's civic participation started when his daughter registered in the local Chinese language school. After involvement with management of the Chinese language school, Matt became more aware of the living situation, cultural demands, and political concerns of new professional immigrants from mainland China. Though Matt was ambitious in representing the new immigrants' voice in the British society, he admitted that the pressure of getting the next job contract (as his present job contract was finishing when the interview was conducted in September 2005) was a deterring factor for his civic activities in the British society.

### 3.4.3. 'Homeland politics' Centring around Kinship and Trade Connections: Owen in Belgium, Peter and Ross in Italy

'Homeland politics', as Østergaard-Nielsen explains, 'denotes migrants' and refugees' political activities pertaining to the domestic or foreign policy of the homeland. That is, it means opposition to or support for the current homeland political regime and its foreign policy goals' (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2001:5). Other scholars describe 'homeland politics' as 'long-distance nationalism' (e.g. Skrbiš 1999) in 'deterritorialized nations' (Basch et al. 1994) or as a result of the 'globalisation of domestic politics' (Kosłowski 2001). Such practice of home politics can be found in the civic activities of Owen and other Chinese male civic activists.

Owen is a responsible person in an association in which all the members are from the same geographical area in China and they share the same dialect. Owen's association is one of the many so-called *Tongxiang* associations that exist in different regions of the world. The literal meaning of *Tongxiang* in Chinese is fellow people from the same village who usually have the same ancestor. Therefore a strong sense of kinship bonding is usually found in such associations. Apart from encouraging *mutual help among its members*, Owen's association mainly focuses on activities that *promote economic, cultural and political connections between China and Belgium*. Being a Chinese entrepreneur himself, Owen organised a series of business visits and economic activities between Belgian cities and his home city in China. By raising fund from Chinese diaspora in Belgium, Owen and his association helped his home city in China with its infrastructure construction and charitable works.

Similar experience could be found in the civic participation activities of Peter and Ross who are Zhejiangese entrepreneurs in Italy. Being the Vice President of a Chinese business organisation in Rome, Peter said that his association's role is to help Chinese entrepreneurs *to solve problems in doing business* in Italy. Such business problems, according to Peter, sometimes take the form of disputes over the ownership or shareholding within Chinese restaurants owners, dressmakers and other business people in Rome. At other times, they could be conflicts of interests between the Chinese community and the local Italian community. Ross, a key member of the Foreigners' Council in Rome (*Consulta degli stranieri*), mentioned how his association dealt with racial hatred towards Chinese entrepreneurs in Rome:

Most Chinese in Italy are entrepreneurs and I'm happy with this fact. But we have various problems here: our warehouses were burnt; there were crimes in [Little China in Rome]. I wrote a letter to the mayor and I got an answer [...]. The mayor called for a special meeting [...many Chinese entrepreneurs have...] problems like their warehouse being burnt. However, when the police came to investigate, they didn't report anything. They are scared of revenge. But we want to solve such problems now. It is an important issue.

In both Peter and Ross' life stories, a strong kinship bonding worked as the agent for their civic participation. They both joined the *Tongxianghui* first and gradually moved their focus towards protecting other Chinese entrepreneurs' interest in their receiving country. However, most entrepreneurs do not see their chance of actively participating in the civic society in their receiving countries beyond their present associations. The leadership within ethnic associations validates male leaders' social status, which further ties them to their home country. Such attachment to their home countries sometimes takes away their motivation in pursuing other forms of participation, such as joining political parties or taking part in political election in their receiving countries.

There are real difficulties. Nick believes that Chinese immigrants in Europe are facing difficulties that they can hardly overcome:

It's very hard for us to be truly integrated in the receiving countries. European society has its own characters. It's very conservative. Of course, we can't say that it is the local society [in the receiving countries] that makes us be [civically] inactive. We have our own problems, for example, the language barrier.

Peter and Ross echoed this view during interviews as well. Lack of language proficiency causes many of the problems in Chinese businessmen's immigration experience: they cannot read newspapers, government regulations, or even legal documents. Therefore, they might even unintentionally violate law due to their lack of knowledge in their receiving countries. Moreover, the difficulty in obtaining legal residence permits in some countries (such as Italy) creates further obstacles for Chinese immigrants' civic participation.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Based on our observations of and interviews with Chinese social activists in the UK, Belgium, Ireland, and Italy, this paper explores the relation between gender and civic participation among Chinese immigrants in Europe.

We conclude that Chinese men and women activists have different trajectories of civic participation in European countries. While women start with activities that are related to their roles in family, for example as mothers, they come into touch with the mainstream society. They are more likely to pursue the broader ways to present immigrants' interests through 'taking the roles of intermediaries between the immigrant community and the surrounding society' (Jones-Correa, 1998: 346). However, some women interviewed are more aware that they are exceptional role

models for Chinese women. They have developed strategies to deal with the discrepancies between the traditional role expectations for Chinese women and their more visible roles in the public. Male interviewees demonstrate more willingness to take up a role in the official public sphere. However, there are also differences among Chinese men in terms of their political ambition in their receiving countries. Active men in Belgium and Italy mainly fulfil their social roles in the ethnic community and see themselves as *bridges* between the Chinese community and the European society. In the UK, our male interviewees are more willing to identify themselves primarily as part of the British society. To summarise, male immigrants frame their activities in terms of leadership, female immigrants frame it in terms of support.

Besides these differences, we find some commonalities. We argue that among the first-generation of immigrants, Chinese men and women's activation is still closely linked to their traditional Chinese cultural values. The cultural baggage helps them to gain the resources and networks in different ways, which made them interesting persons to be approached by either political parties or voluntary associations in search of immigrant members. By actively participating in the civil society in their receiving countries, these Chinese men and women transcend their traditional roles in their ethnic community. However, they still prefer to present their civic activities as a service to the Chinese community. This representation could be interpreted as an effort to defend their legitimacy within their own ethnic group and the broad European society.

We are aware that our conclusions are based on a small-scaled qualitative study. Nevertheless, our findings suggest a link between the gendered cultural values in home countries and the civic activities in receiving countries among Chinese immigrants. In that sense, we believe that such a topic is worth further studies and deliberation.



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