

The Pursuit of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity: A Case Study of New Chinese Immigrants to Thailand

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Abstract

This study is concerned with Chinese who study in Chiang Mai province and how they engage in full-time or part-time businesses during their stay in Thailand. Survey and qualitative research, including fieldwork, was conducted in Chiang Mai province in 2018 and 2019. Attention is focused on Chinese individuals who have combined migration objectives with business and education, including students pursuing their studies and part-time work, to seek opportunities to improve and change their lifestyle. It is contended that the transient mobility of the recent Chinese arrivals has not prevented them from displaying a cultivated entrepreneurial spirit and a sense of “entrepreneurial subjectivity.” On the one hand, their transnational entrepreneurial practices to search for prosperity and a better quality of life, and to gain modern knowledge and individual freedom, reflect the attributes of a self-governing and self-enterprising power. On the other hand, they form part of the outflow of Chinese who move overseas to contribute to China’s drive to increase its integration with the global economy.

Keywords: New Chinese migration, Chinese entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial subject, Chiang Mai

Introduction

Since the introduction of Deng Xiaoping’s open-door economic reforms in 1978, the economic rise of China has been felt in many parts of the world. Besides China’s economic expansion, the “going out” policy has encouraged the Chinese to move overseas to explore opportunities and to

pursue their personal dreams and success for a better quality of life (Santasombat, 2015; H. Liu, 2016). Recent Chinese arrivals in various countries have often been called “new immigrants” or *xin yimin* (新移民). While many are indeed *bona fide* migrants as an integral part of the overall Chinese diaspora, others are on temporary stay to conduct business, study, or even as tourists. The latter are not “migrants” in the true sense of the word but may more accurately be described as “sojourners.” This study is largely concerned with this group but especially students, and their accompany mothers, who are staying in Chiang Mai on student or tourist visas.

In Thailand, the number of new migrants has grown since the 2000s. These migrants are different from previous waves of Chinese emigrants to Thailand. They had arrived between the mid-13th century to the mid-20th century (Skinner, 1957; Coughlin, 1960; Chansiri, 2008) and had become ethnic Chinese (*Huaren*) or “overseas Chinese” (*Huaqiao*) whose descendants now consider themselves to be Thai or Thai citizens and speaking the Thai language (Siriphon et al., 2022).

According to the Thai Immigration Bureau, the number of Chinese citizens holding non-immigrant visas issued by the Royal Thai Embassy and Royal Thai Consulates-General in 2018 and 2019 were 152,681 and 179,295, respectively (Information Technology Center, Immigration Bureau of Thailand, 2021). In addition, the tourist visas that the Royal Thai Embassy and Royal Thai Consulates-General issued to Chinese citizens in 2018 and 2019 numbered 10,567,292 and 10,863,360. The non-immigrant visa category applied by new Chinese arrivals reflects how this visa serves their multiple goals of searching for business opportunities, pursuing a better education, chasing greater freedom and a lifestyle to attain a better quality of life. There are several types of sub-categories of non-immigrant visas that are usually applied for by the Chinese; these are mainly, for example, to conduct business and work (category B), visit friends and family (category O), long-staying visits (category O-A), and education (category ED). Some of these Chinese initially arrived in Thailand on tourist visas, but then changed their visa status later. Some who hold tourist visas or specific categories of non-immigrant visa status have covertly conducted their business activities without realising that they have violated Thai law. Siriphon & Banu (2021) classify Chinese “migrants” in Thailand according to the pursuit of business, education, lifestyle and long-term leisure, and business-cum-lifestyle.

This study is concerned with new Chinese migrants, particularly those who run tourism-related and retail businesses in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Attention is focused on individual entrepreneurs, particularly among those who combine education, residential and business purposes, in order to learn more about their peripatetic lifestyle and entrepreneurial subjectivities. Unlike business management perspectives, Ong (2005) Flisfeder (2015) and Bröckling (2016) suggest that “entrepreneurial subjects” may be understood by viewing entrepreneurs not simply as risk-takers or individuals pursuing freedom in choosing their lifestyles but also as entrepreneurial subjects who are involved in the creation of new forms and modes of subjectivity in which human life is

incorporated through “an interpellation to act” in the manner of entrepreneurs (Althusser, 1971). As argued by Bröckling (2016), the general common sense by which people today cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset and modern techniques of self-disciplinary practices is always associated with multiple regimes of knowledge whose power conveys truths to people about themselves and about the logic that governs their actions and social relations. It reflects modern governmentality, neoliberal rationality and economic behaviour shifting from a culture of dependency to one of self-reliance (Peters, 2001). In the Chinese context, this idea is evident in the works of several scholars who study Chinese citizens, modern knowledge and self-governing intersection with state influence (e.g., Rofel, 2007; Zhang & Ong, 2008; Nyiri, 2010). There is a shift from “relying on the state” to “relying on yourself” that has appeared under a reconfiguration of the Chinese state and its citizens within a new context of neoliberal and post-socialism schemes (Zhang & Ong, 2008).

Methodologically, this paper is part of a broader research project entitled “New Transnational Chinese Migrants in the Era of Globalization” (2018–2020). We used various survey and qualitative methods, including an online survey with questionnaires administered through *Wenjuan Wang*, a questionnaire website in China, to select groups of Chinese parents or guardians in Chiang Mai who have stayed for periods ranging from 6 months to 8 years to gather general information. We received 220 responses, a 22% sampling rate. We also collected data and information from published sources and from official and non-official statistics, and conducted fieldwork by observing and interviewing Chinese residents in Chiang Mai province during the 2018–2019 period and covered different categories and groups such as the accompanying parents of students, entrepreneurs, and students.

The survey shows that Chinese entrepreneurs in Chiang Mai generally engage full-time or part-time in tourism-related businesses in the retail-trade sector. Full-time entrepreneurs are those who operate tourism-related and retail businesses, managing restaurants and guesthouses, Airbnb accommodation, retail shops and other small-scale business activities. This group usually has experience in a Thai locality, having spent more than 1–3 years in Thailand, and has finally found opportunities to run businesses as an experiment. A group of part-time entrepreneurs consists of “entrepreneur students” who are currently receiving an education in Thailand but running online businesses in their free time. Another group comprises the “entrepreneur study parents,” or the *peidu mama* (陪读妈妈) or accompanying mothers who take care of their children who are studying in Chiang Mai, but also spending their free time to engage in Chinese e-commerce.

Interestingly, these two entrepreneur types exemplify the transient mobility (Gomes, 2017; Gomes et al., 2017; Xiang, 2017; Yeoh, 2017; Li & Siriphon, 2023) of the Chinese residents in Thailand who, on the one hand, exploit opportunities to develop their self-awareness via travelling and, on the other, engage in entrepreneurial practices to search for prosperity, individual freedom and a better quality of life. In both cases, they represent a part of the driven trajectory in the dynamic rise of China.

Full-time Entrepreneurs in Tourism-related Businesses

In their field study, Siriphon and Li found that the most popular business among the Chinese in Chiang Mai were wholesale and retail accounting for 115 registered companies, followed by 82 in the accommodation and food services business. This development was clearly related to the increase in Chinese tourism and the stability of the local economy. Two case studies may be conducted to gain insights into Chinese business in Chiang Mai.

Case One: Restaurant Business

This is a case study of Wendy, a female Chinese entrepreneur who runs a Chinese restaurant and related business activities to earn an income while living as a transient resident to follow a way of living of her choice. The 30-year old entrepreneur is a native of Pu'er that is situated at the southern border of China's Yunnan province. She operates a Chinese restaurant and accommodation business in a rented house to cater to the needs of Chinese expatriates and visitors. The restaurant, called "Kungfu Pot," claims to offer the unique taste of original flavours from the provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan (popularly referred to as "Yun-Gui-Chuan" cuisine).

After graduating with a major in Thai language at a university in Yunnan province, Wendy worked as a volunteer Chinese teacher at the Confucius Institute (CI) in south Thailand from 2013 to 2016. Upon finishing her 3-year contract, she decided on a long-term plan to stay in Thailand. She managed to arrange a longer stay in Chiang Mai in 2017 by investing in a Chinese restaurant in the city. The restaurant with its reputation for authentic pungent and spicy Sichuan flavours proves to be a success and is popular among Chinese residents, especially the younger generation working as volunteers at the local CI, students, their parents, and others including celebrities.

Wendy's business journey begins with a "survey" of the major cities such as Bangkok, Phuket, Pattaya and Chiang Mai to identify business opportunities and to weigh possible risks involved in her choice of her desired lifestyle. She realises that three cities are popular among Chinese citizens travelling to Thailand and finds that Chiang Mai offers several advantages such as good business environment for tourists, a convenient location, easy accessibility for those travelling between Yunnan and Thailand, and its relaxed atmosphere and appealing culture for herself and her family. A major reason then was that she was planning to marry a Thai citizen.

The main problem in starting a business is the availability of capital. Without a track record of success in business and facing many problems in obtaining a bank loan, she decides to fall back on her own savings from the three years of working in the CI and a long-term, interest-free loan from her parents. After scouting around for a suitable site for the proposed restaurant and, according to Thai property law, she rents a house on a ten-year lease with an option for renewal every three years.

She recruits part-time and full-time employees via online advertising. The employees are generally proficient in Chinese and Thai and mainly of Yunnanese descent from Chiang Rai province. The operation of the restaurant is supported by the installation of modern technology and gadgets. CCTV cameras are utilised not only for security reasons but also to monitor food quality and for overall business operation. Other modern devices and applications are used to record income and expenses, customer online payments via Alipay, WeChat wallet, Tencent and so on.

The restaurant relies on two business strategies to promote its service and popularity. The first is a “marketing strategy” to establish a niche market in a “unique tasting cuisine” that is not found in Chiang Mai. Through her surveys, Wendy realises that the hot-spicy flavours of the cuisine of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces can provide a unique selling point of the restaurant. She then resorts to online promotion of the restaurant by highlighting the unique Yun- Gui-Chuan brand via online promotion in specific websites on food and beverages as well as social-media outlets to publicise the unique brand of food and to demonstrate the authenticity of original hot and spicy flavours to customers. Advanced and efficient logistics greatly facilitates the purchase of genuine ingredients from the three provinces of China. Easy overland transport between China and Thailand too also encourages the emergence of import-export business of Thai and Chinese products.

The second strategy is the development of a management technique based on the entrepreneur’s marketing knowledge. The entrepreneur interviews and exchanges views with some customers on a regular basis to seek their comments on the quality and taste of the food and service provided. Information gathered is utilised to analyse food tastes, service performance and customer satisfaction. The information also helps in devising a brand audit as a strategy in quality control based on the principles of marketing.

The cultivation of an entrepreneurial spirit by Wendy reflects a modern approach and knowledge acquisition to face risk and challenges, and to rely on managerial and technological techniques to make important business decisions. This pursuit of success has the added advantage of allowing the entrepreneurs to achieve a desire to lead to way of life to satisfy personal choices and individual preferences.

Case Two: Airbnb Accommodation

Tourism is another sector that offers opportunities for the enterprising. Of the many registered companies providing accommodation to tourists, one is an Airbnb accommodation operated by a couple, Bian and Zhou, both in their 40s. The Bian’s, married for 17 years, set up an Airbnb accommodation in the remote areas of Chiang Mai. They renovated the properties and converted them into guest houses to cater to outdoor enthusiasts among Chinese tourists.

Coming from a higher-middle class background in Beijing, the Bian’s graduated in 1995 from their respective universities in Shanghai and Tsinghua University, Beijing. They soon registered an

outbound tourism company to serve Chinese tourists traveling to destinations in Europe, America and Asia-Pacific countries. In 2002, they scouted for a better place to live and preferably where they could gain new experiences and to enjoy their desired lifestyle. They visited many places including Hangzhou, Nanning, Xiamen and Kunming in China, and Bangkok, Phuket and Chiang Mai in Thailand. Two years later, they decided to settle down in Chiang Mai, bought their houses through their Sino-Thai friend and began their life of travelling back and forth between China and Thailand. In the 2010s, the Bian's noticed a growing interest among Chinese tourists in Thailand and especially in Chiang Mai. They decided to convert their houses into guest houses and made this known through advertisements on an Airbnb accommodation website catering for Chinese tourists. There was then a trend to rent out homes to visitors looking for accommodation in popular spots to share their passions and interests with other travellers and the locals. However, the appeal of Airbnb accommodation was short-lived as the volume of Chinese tourists travelling to Thailand and Chiang Mai was not sustained. Besides the decline in the global economy, the idea of Airbnb accommodation was not readily understood in Chinese culture where the host accommodated guests with short-term lodgings and tourism-related activities. The concern with privacy, safety, wariness of strangers and trust among Chinese tourists prevented some from accepting a home-rental service like the Airbnb.

The revenue of the Bian's Airbnb accommodation was sustained for a brief period from 2015 to 2016. Between 2017 and 2020, tourism in Thailand and tourism-related businesses witnessed a noticeable decline. This was brought about by several factors. The first was the increased competition among Chinese entrepreneurs in Thailand as more accommodation facilities such as hotels and other tourism-related lodgings emerged. The next was the quality of tourism service in Thailand was put into question by incidents such as the 2018 tourist-boat disaster in Phuket in which 46 Chinese tourists lost their lives. The third factor was the general decline in the global economy and the slowdown of the Chinese economy resulting from the China-U.S. trade war. Finally, there was the continuing global conflicts as well as the travel restrictions due to the global Covid-19 pandemic that severely disrupted international tourism.

In view of these developments, the Bian's were faced with two choices. They could move to another country in search of opportunities for a more profitable business or they could continue to stay and settled down in Chiang Mai to establish their second home. They were eventually persuaded to remain as Chiang Mai was a peaceful place where they could look forward to their approaching golden years to enjoy the comfort of living and the ease of moving back and forth between China and Thailand. Another reason was that the cost of living was not excessive, and their economic status could support a lifestyle in the midst of the beautiful and peaceful surrounding.

The path taken by the Bian's indicates how the twin objectives of doing business and pursuing their preferred lifestyle was achievable without interference and hassle. They had made a deliberate

decision to realise their entrepreneurial activities and lifestyle choices in a rational manner in their risk-taking assessment of residing as migrants in a foreign country.

Running Part-time Businesses among Students and Accompanying Mothers

The Chinese also develop established part-time businesses during their stay in Chiang Mai. Two main groups could be identified, namely, students who were attending local universities or colleges and the females popularly known as *peidu mama* who accompanied their children during their stay and study in Chiang Mai. The former consisted of students who were sufficiently enterprising and motivated to earn an income through part-time transactions, and the latter had plenty of free time to be involved in buying and selling selected goods via online platforms, mainly on WeChat. In 2019, 17,055 Chinese students were recorded as having enrolled for international education at higher education institutes in Thailand (Siriphon & Li, 2020).

While taking care of their children in Chiang Mai, 69.1% of *peidu* mothers were also running full-time businesses (Siriphon & Li, 2020). Several categories of self-employment were identified, among which 6.8% were involved in WeChat business, 6.3% in accommodation business, 6.3% in various other self-employment ventures, 5.9% were entrepreneurial owners or high-level managers and 5.9% engaged in governmental enterprises or in institutions. Some *peidu* parents described themselves as freelancers, “nomad” workers such as bloggers, writers, or photographers, or as financial practitioners.

The part-time businesses are conducted with the use of mobile phones. Online accounts are created by which to market popular Thai products on various Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, Taobao, Kaola, and Xiao Hong Shu, among others. The volume of online sales of Thai products varies according to market demand and the support of friends and customers. Popular Thai products are brand-name fashion items, foreign and popular Thai cosmetic beauty products, childcare products, health-related goods and food snacks. Chinese customers believe that popular Thai products are of better quality, more authentic, and cheaper than in China. Items sold online are delivered via convenient logistical channels back to China, with the delivery period varying within one to two days depending on the cost and method used.

The entrepreneur mothers and entrepreneur students who run part-time businesses reflect the broader situation of “We-business” or *wei-shang* (微商) in China. This refers to a system of “micro businesses” operating via Internet-based retail transactions in China. “We-business” is one of many Chinese e-commerce channels that penetrate every aspect of the lives of many Chinese families. The system has facilitated the emergence of a situation in which everybody can engage in business. Starting with “baby moms” or the first generation who used it for shopping and selling, WeChat business has now expanded to include ordinary employees, and some Chinese companies encourage their staff to be involved in We-business (Guo, 2017).

In Chiang Mai, one of the many part-time student entrepreneurs is Sophia. As a 20-year-old undergraduate, she establishes a part-time business to sell selected Thai products online to Chinese customers. She advertises high quality and luxury products from Thailand on the Guimi Mall website. These products include selected Thai handicrafts, hand-made chic products, and high-fashion and local jewellery and put on online platforms to reach potential customers in China. Her customer list has expanded from close friends to a wide circle of buyers. She believes that online business will become the trend of the future and will bring about the development of the “platform economy” or “community economy.” Among the peidu mothers is 40-year-old Madam Zhang who spends her free time doing We-business to sell Thai products to buyers in China. She concentrates on marketing beauty cosmetic items, childcare and health-related products. Being familiar with these Thai products, she believes that they are of good quality and is glad to promote them to a larger circle of users.

A characteristic shared by these entrepreneurs from China is their readiness to take advantage of advanced digital technology and online business infrastructure to benefit from their stay in Chiang Mai and at the same time to live a different way of life away from home. Online businesses conducted through specific platforms such as that of WeChat offers operational flexibility, easy access to players in the supply chains, and minimal barrier to entry.

However, WeChat and other online business platforms are not without their share of problems. It is clear that Thai law forbids foreign students and residents on an education visa or visiting visa to engage in business. However, some would look upon online business as a grey area in which the legal boundary between online social contacts and business transactions is blurred and uncertain. Nevertheless, there are indeed practical issues that online businesses have to contend with. One is the fact that Thai laws impose regulations on business actions and transactions and specify the standardisation of online markets as well as matters relating to government tax-revenue collection (Guo, 2017; Wong, 2019; You, 2020). Apart from that, problems have also arisen from certain business practices. An example is the practice of “pyramid selling.” A crisis may occur in WeChat businesses when agents and sub-agents are recruited to push sales through devious means (Chen, 2016; W. Liu, 2018). However, online business platforms will only become proper and legal conduits for business transaction with more systematic rules based on the market logic and a country’s regulatory framework.

Concluding Remarks

This study is based largely on fieldwork conducted in Chiang Mai in 2018 and 2019 and supplemented by reference to published works and examines how recent Chinese arrivals in Chiang Mai engage in tourism-related and retail businesses. The study focuses on individual entrepreneurs

among students and their accompanying mothers. While the students pursue higher education in Thai universities, they and some of the accompanying mothers may engage in running selected businesses and at the same time try to pursue a lifestyle according to their desires. In this manner, both students and accompanying mothers are able to allow full play of their entrepreneurial subjectivities as well as to experience a way of living that is different from those in China.

To understand the situation on the ground, case studies were conducted to appreciate the manner of choice and operation of businesses on a full-time or part-time basis, in the context of Chinese students and their accompanying mothers on temporary transit in Chiang Mai and at the same time taking advantage of the entrepreneurial urge for profit-making and to seize the sense of freedom to take risks and make choices for optimal personal benefit. This community of sojourners reflect the wish to act without restrictions to cross multiple regimes of values afforded by conditions of flexible accumulation and neoliberal regulation. These sojourners demonstrate how they utilise modern knowledge and advanced technology to support their daily lives abroad and to undertake transnational business practices to exploit opportunities to develop their self-awareness and at the same time becoming part of the driven trajectory in the dynamic rise of China.

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