ALDINA CAMENISCH
University of Neuchâtel

China as a ‘new frontier’: Neo-liberal aspirations, imaginaries and (dis-) enchantments of Swiss migrant professionals in mainland China

ABSTRACT

Mainland China has emerged as a migration destination for foreign professionals in the post-Mao era. This ethnographic article investigates the aspirations of one group among them – self-initiated Swiss migrant professionals – and the imaginative geographies of China that they develop and renegotiate throughout their journeys. The analysis reveals their aspirations and imaginaries signifying a quest to push limits for the sake of neo-liberal self-development. Swiss professionals encounter a China in transformation as a ‘country of extremes’ and approach it as a ‘new frontier’. Rich in challenges and opportunities, it both enables and limits interviewees’ projects for self-realization, further fuelling the strong sense of transience that permeates their migration trajectories.

KEYWORDS

skilled migration
transient migration
China
imagination
migration aspirations
belonging
reflexive modernity
neo-liberalism

1. Names of interview partners have been changed and biographical details de-personalized to ensure anonymity.
2. According to the 2017 data of the World Bank, Switzerland has the second highest GDP per capita worldwide: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=CH&year_high_desc=true. Accessed 1 June 2018.
3. Following Thompson, I understand 'imaginative geographies' as 'the mental images we hold of different places and of the people living there', which 'include understandings of places we directly experience, and those we have never been to' (2017: 79).
4. Among my subjects, almost one out of three maintains legal residence in Switzerland and does not appear in the statistics as 'Swiss abroad'.

INTRODUCTION

Ulf¹ (age 34), a high-ranking manager who I visited in his office at the Chinese headquarters of a European automotive company in Beijing, has been in China for fourteen years. He began his life there as an exchange student, then stayed on to study design and afterwards made a career in the growing Chinese automotive industry. His idea to go abroad developed when he was in high school in Switzerland. He felt dissatisfied with the prospect of a standard Swiss career. As he remembers, he found the plans of his fellow students too 'comfort-oriented'. They wanted to get jobs with a high salary and a high social status in a most comfortable way. But I, I felt: "that's fine but I'm not that comfort-oriented. I'm more impact-oriented; I want to contribute something". [...] And that was my motivation'.

Like Ulf, more and more European professionals live in Chinese metropolises that have become destinations for international migration in the post-Mao era (Lehmann and Leonard 2019; Pieke 2012). This appeal of the new China was also featured in the *2014 HSBC Expat Explorer Report*, where it was ranked as the second-best place for 'expatriation' globally (HSBC 2015).

A mainstream scholarship perspective focusing on motives of economic, rationale 'cost-benefit calculation' (Haas 2011: 9) explains that many western professionals move to emerging countries out of a sense of economic decline at home (Lehmann 2014: 2) but not necessarily why people from an economically strong and an affluent country such as Switzerland² decide to live in developing Chinese cities. Findings have been published on the heterogeneous group and motives of 'westerners' (Farrer 2010; Lehmann 2014; Stanley 2013), or specifically Britons (Knowles 2015; Yeoh and Willis 2005) in mainland China. However, scholarship focusing on Central and Northern Europeans in China is virtually nonexistent (but see Camenisch and Suter 2019), and no attention has been paid to their aspirations and imaginaries.

My article addresses this twofold gap and follows Swiss professionals' trajectories to China. Inspired by Appadurai (1996: 6), arguing that migration has become a part of the repertoire of contemporary imaginations, and Salazar (2011, 2014), who points to the 'power of imagination' and 'imaginaries' related to mobility and migration, I aim to understand which aspirations Swiss professionals have of their 'migration possibilities' (Carling and Collins 2018: 915) and the 'imaginative geographies'³ (Beech 2014; Thompson 2017) that they thereby develop of China.

China has become Switzerland's third-largest trading partner worldwide and the most important destination for exports and offshore production for Swiss companies in Asia. Over 600 Swiss companies are currently operating in China (Embassy of Switzerland in the People's Republic of China 2017) and business and institutional relations connecting the two countries are increasing. In 2013, Switzerland was the first continental European country to sign a bilateral Free Trade Agreement with China (Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs 2014).

While there are no policies or institutions promoting migration from Switzerland to China, the number of Swiss there has steadily been increasing in the past decades. Approximately 3600 Swiss nationals resided officially in China in 2017 (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2018) and many live in China while keeping their domicile in their home country.⁴ As I have elaborated elsewhere together with Brigitte Suter (Camenisch and Suter 2019), Swiss professionals in China are either employed by Swiss companies or organizations, work for other transnational or Chinese corporations or are entrepreneurs.

These findings are based on my anthropological research, which I conducted over a period of two years (2013–15) including sixteen months of fieldwork in China. Complemented by participant observations, autoethnographic notes and informal conversations, my analysis draws on narrative interviews with 21 Swiss men and ten women living in Beijing, several other metropolises in the greater Shanghai area and the Pearl River Delta. Two additional subjects had moved back to Switzerland after a longer stay in China. My subjects were between 24 and 64 years old, mainly in their 30s and 40s, and while the average stay was eight years, some had spent up to 24 years in China. 23 interviewees initially came to China single and fourteen were meanwhile in a relationship, mostly with a Chinese, and the others moved there with a partner.

A majority moved to China independently and work as so-called local hires or entrepreneurs (see Camenisch and Suter 2019) and can be described as self-initiated (Al-Ariss and Crowley-Henry 2013) migrant professionals⁵ (Meier 2015). They are not corporate expatriates whose posting is both initiated and limited by a contract. Most interviewees define their stay in China as open-ended but envisage returning to Switzerland or moving to another country at some point, at the latest upon retirement. Hence, their presence in China is transient in a way typical for 'professional economic migrants, for whom the possibility of returning home is always contingent rather than predefined' (Mejia and Pink 2017: 87).

MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS...

Charlotte (36) had just moved back from Beijing to Switzerland when we met for our first interview in a café in Basel in 2013. After university education in Switzerland, Charlotte visited China as a backpacker, returned as a language student and then stayed on to work first as an employee and then as an entrepreneur for seven years altogether. Reminiscing over what had triggered her wish to leave Switzerland for (what was initially intended as) a short stint in China, she recalls: 'I was 25 at the time and I looked at my life and thought: 'I have 40 years left until I reach retirement age'. And I did not want to spend those 40 years in the same company in the same city. [...] I wanted to experience something'.

Charlotte's and Ulf's narratives show how most of the migrant professionals I interviewed imagined a future life in small but affluent Switzerland as economically safe and convenient. At the same time, they often described the atmosphere as 'dull', 'predictable', 'conservative' and 'over-regulated'.⁶ Many interviewees were under the impression that social prosperity and economic development were too far advanced, leading to a sense of saturation and striving for convenience among the population in Switzerland. They saw their prospects as shaped by a sense of predetermination and constriction and a lack of challenge and vibrancy.

Going abroad was a way to overcome the perceived limits of their Swiss environment and to provide room for the realization of personal and professional goals. Moreover, most subjects framed migration as a way to give their life an individualistic twist. Iris (28), an event manager and student of Chinese studies, explained that she first went abroad as a high school exchange student because 'I wanted to develop my own identity. [...] And I wanted to do something that others don't do, that was not that common yet'. Ricardo, a former human resources consultant and manager

5. Meier (2015) defines 'migrant professionals' as migrants whose (mostly rather high) formal skills are recognized, and who have a well-accepted social status in the host country.

6. I refer here to my subjects' perception of Switzerland at the onset of their migration trajectories. See Müller and Camenisch (2019) for how these perceptions change over time and distance.

in a major Swiss semi-public enterprise, moved to Shanghai in his mid-40s and started a company. He was also driven by a similar aspiration 'to do something exceptional'.

... MEET IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES OF CHINA

The past: Imagining China from afar

My interviewees' migration aspirations thus also referred to imaginative geographies of China. They imagined it as a destination at which they would be able to realize their ambitions to develop personally and accomplish something outstanding.

I met Boris (30), an entrepreneur, in the Paulaner Brauhaus, a German restaurant in Guangzhou popular with expats. He first came to Southern China as an intern seven years ago and has since established his own company. He explains his decision to apply for his internship as follows:

I knew that China would be very important in the future, economically speaking. And I knew that Chinese people are very different from myself. And then I thought: 'oh, good, that means I'm going to have a problem. Which is good because I want to work on my personality. Let's go to China to get to know the people, to become more familiar with it, this will also help me to improve myself.' I knew that this would improve my personality to learn to get along with, to deal better with people who are very different. It was a way to develop myself.

Like Boris, a considerable number of my subjects based their wish to move to China on vague imaginaries revolving around its unfamiliarity and differences and recent economic development. Most Swiss migrant professionals perceived China as 'exciting, something new, everyone is currently talking about China, there seems to be a kind of gold-rush mood' (Ray, 54), as a place that would be important in the future due to its re-emergence on the global stage. In some imaginaries, this was combined with a long-standing fascination with the exotic appeal of traditional Chinese culture as encountered in Switzerland through books, movies, practicing martial arts or studying the language and calligraphy. Overall, the common denominator was the idea of China as the culturally most different 'other', an exotic, unfamiliar and rapidly developing country that would offer the opportunities for self-development through facing new challenges.

The present: Navigating China

Heterogeneity and extremes

Once my subjects are working and living in China, the imaginative geographies that they brought with them are challenged, adapted or consolidated. When Max (31), a director, motorcycle racer and start-up gastronomist living in China for over a decade, describes it as 'the country of extremes', he alludes to a 'supra'-imaginary shared by most interviewees. They sketch it as a country with seemingly incompatible, fast-changing contrasts such as the coexistence of the contemporary capitalist 'China pace' (Véronique) with the millenniums-old cultural heritage in a (post-)socialist state, the vast territory and the heterogeneous population. Against this background, many Swiss professionals such as Boris assess their lives in China as providing a lasting source of fascination

and opportunities for self-development. After seven years in southern China, he says:

One learns something new every day in China. I learn so much. One has so many experiences here. It's crazy. And I would say, people are much more diverse here than in Switzerland [...] where everyone is pretty similar [...]. In China, well, you'll always find people who resemble some China-stereotype, but I find that the Chinese are extremely heterogeneous.

The globalized Chinese metropolises with their mix of a cosmopolitan, ultra-modern vibe and vivid reminders of more traditional, frugal ways of life provide Swiss migrants with a wide range of choices and also with an inspiring environment, as Véronique reflects:

In Shanghai, as a foreigner, it is very easy to live because you can have the very local life and you can also go for a cappuccino with a croissant somewhere. This makes life [...] very interesting because you have this contrast. You still encounter the hairdressers on the street. And this always reminds me, I'm in China. [...] It is a part of the exoticism of my life. I understand that it is a bit selfish [...] but I like the contrast, I like the contrast of the city.

Thus, while imaginative geographies are being renegotiated, China remains a country very different from Switzerland and 'special' from my subjects' point of view. Mary (30), who came to China for an internship seven years ago and subsequently opened a textile manufacturing firm and founded a family with her Chinese husband, says:

I live with the feeling [...] that it is something special, somehow you are like permanently on holidays. And I find this good, it gives you a more relaxed attitude and a sense of freedom. [...] I thought that this must change at some point but it hasn't.

The resulting tension between being exposed to exoticism and heterogeneity while at the same time gaining insights and developing feelings of familiarity is described as inspiring by Véronique and Boris, and, as I interpret Mary's narrative, as liberating.

The disappearing disorder

An important facet of my subjects' imaginative geographies of China (which may be typical for a developing economy undergoing capitalist modernization; see McKinnon 2011: 9) is that they perceive many areas of public life as working in unregulated, informal, even anarchistic ways. Especially in comparison with their small and orderly home country, Swiss professionals experience Chinese cities as being chaotic, as 'just a mess' (Remo). Differing social norms, urban anonymity and lacking or unenforced regulations are perceived as leading to a tendency for 'lawlessness' (Max), creating leeway for behaviour that would be socially sanctioned or legally persecuted in Switzerland.

Many interview partners such as Didier (41, sports instructor and entrepreneur in southern China for sixteen years) commented that this allows for a greater freedom of action:

7. Similarly, Tseng's study of skilled Taiwanese migrants in Shanghai finds that they experience it as 'present-day gold-rush destination, a place to fulfil modern economic goals and postcolonial cultural dreams' (2011: 765).

This is really one reason why I love China. I want to erect a three-metre wall on the left side of my house. I just buy the cement, the sand and I do my wall the way I want it. I'm not going to have a lawsuit with the neighbour.

However, this leeway is disappearing with growing securitization and regularization. While a few interviewees point out that this also results in increased safety and orderliness in many areas of life, especially welcome in road traffic, most express a feeling of losing some of the freedom they gained after leaving Switzerland. Mary, for instance, elaborates: 'More and more you realize, oh there are regulations now, you can't do this and that anymore what was still normal six years ago'.

A fading sense of invigoration and economic boom

Another pivotal characteristic of Swiss professionals' imaginative geographies of China is that the atmosphere is shaped by a dynamic, outward-looking mood and a booming economy. Emma (46), a sinologist and translator, has been living in China for over 24 years and recalls the initial impressions that she got as an exchange student in an arts faculty: 'It was a vibrant culture. They were all full of enthusiasm, to do new kinds of art, to know things about the West and to create something new. [...] There was a strong sense of hope. It was beautiful'. Many interviewees describe the current atmosphere in Chinese cities as open-minded and opportunity-rich and often draw parallels with the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁷ Remo explains one of the reasons why he decided to stay in China after his first visit:

When I first came, I liked that you were really free to do anything. For example, in (his Swiss hometown) [...] it's so old-fashioned. If you are thinking a little bit outside of the box, they just cut you out. But here, it's like the US at the time of the American dream. Everyone has some idea, there is opportunity, nobody will stop you here. And if you come up with a good idea, then it works.

Most Swiss migrant professionals find opportunities to experiment with their ambitions and interests and develop new skills and insights, as Max says:

The way it works here is that you try this, you try that, you try something else and then, suddenly you find something of which you think: 'wow, I would have never thought five years ago that I would ever do something like this'. [...] I like this.

Also the newly established work environments require creative and experimental approaches, as Mary elaborates: 'It's quite liberating here in the sense that you can simply do something and then see how it turns out'. Charlotte reflected:

Something positive that China taught me is creativity. I did not consider myself a creative person when I was still living in Switzerland because somehow everything has already been arranged. But if one comes to China with the critical mindset we are brought up with in Switzerland, one is able to discover shortcomings and opportunities. And one starts to come up with ideas to address them. So today, I would say that I'm

a creative person, which I wasn't before coming to China. [...] [And] in China, if someone tells you 'no', you'll still be able to find a way to realize your idea. Well, I also became more of a fighter.

Most subjects describe their development in China also as successful career-wise. Many have been able to accumulate substantial work experience and attain rather high positions faster than they consider possible in Switzerland. Ulf puts it as follows: 'It's quite China-specific, which has developed rapidly recently, that along with the economy, the company you develop rapidly as a person'. The entrepreneurs I interviewed perceive conditions for start-up businesses as particularly conducive due to fast turnaround times, low wage and infrastructure costs, the possibility to start a business in informal ways and the sheer size of the Chinese market.

Notably, such successful careers are not only described as economically rewarding but instilling important feelings of having a purpose and being given room for self-realization. Gregor (46), an engineer and high-level manager in a multinational corporation, elaborates: 'I could realize my potential here and always had lots of work. And I was able to do new things. That was the main reason why I stayed that long [23 years]'.

At the same time, some subjects question this glittering image of China as a dynamic country full of opportunities. Bernie (42), a designer, eventually turned to teaching after having been involved in entrepreneurial projects over several years and came to see the captivating atmosphere of invigoration as deceptive:

Shanghai is quite dangerous because you get the feeling quickly that you can do this and that [...]. But I realized that many people here have utopian ideas and go quite far in pursuing them. [...] It can happen that you contribute a lot to a project but then it doesn't develop any further or you are being pushed out. [...] That makes it illusory for many people; you see lots of opportunities but nothing really comes out of it.

As in the following quote by Boris, many interviewees point to the slowing market growth and rising cost levels and how this may impact their future in China: 'That sense of hope everybody shares when economic growth rates are at ten percent is fading out. And that makes one wonder whether China is still the right place to be or whether one should go somewhere else'.

Quite a few, long-term Swiss migrant professionals like Emma find that a money-oriented and ruthless mood has been replacing the welcoming and invigorating vibe that they initially encountered:

I observed how the whole city is being replaced, actually the whole thinking. Everything has been radically changed in a way that I don't like at all. With skyscrapers, cars, the whole ideology of success and getting rich. It has been only about money, only about money [...] for years.

This transformation is also observed by Remo, who elaborates how the money-driven vibe and the floating population in Chinese metropolises, shaped by intense urbanization and massive internal migration, leave him with a sense of vulnerability and unsettledness: 'It's pretty dangerous because you never know who the guy is you are doing business with. [...] They just want to make money fast and then disappear'.

8. As Fechter and Walsh point out, this observation may not only apply to China but mirror a more general tendency (2010: 1207–08).
9. The Tiananmen Square is located in Beijing in the front of the Forbidden City. A major tourist and historical landmark, it is to this day also strongly connoted with the ‘Tiananmen incident’ of June 1989 when China’s government violently suppressed a democratic student movement.

On being foreigners and the state

Another aspect that shapes Swiss professionals’ imaginative geographies of China is their social position as foreigners (Camenisch and Müller 2019). Most interviewees feel well-regarded and explain this with a favourable perception of ‘the West’ and Switzerland in China. However, my interviewees describe how, along with China’s rise to a global power, white western foreigners are gradually losing their former aura of supremacy and attractiveness (see also Farrer 2011)⁸ – also in terms of employability (Camenisch and Suter 2019).

Many Swiss migrant professionals whose stay in China is not cushioned by an intra-corporate transfer perceive their legal status as disadvantaged and insecure. Sandrine (41), a language teacher at a state college, mentions the high income tax for foreigners and that, unlike her Chinese colleagues, she does not have access to domestic schemes of social insurance and for promoting home ownership, let alone a long-term visa. She concludes: ‘China doesn’t want a long-lasting immigration. They want people who stay to work but [...] they are not encouraging you to stay’. This tendency to foster transient migration is apparent in stricter and more strongly enforced immigration regulations (Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014; Haugen 2015) and, as interviewees experience, the gradual closing of loopholes such as the possibility to procure a visa through brokers despite not strictly meeting formal requirements.

With respect to the Chinese state, most Swiss professionals I interviewed express appreciation of the country’s general development in the post-Mao period. Yet, their narratives also reveal how a lingering presence of political oppression and control complicates their imaginative geographies of China. While many interviewees stress that they deem themselves immune from state repression as a foreigner, most assume that their activities are monitored by state institutions and adjust their behaviour accordingly. As the following quote exemplifies, most navigate this condition in a pragmatic way:

Well, for example, air quality is a sensitive topic. And so yesterday we had a big discussion if we should use the American standard for measuring it in our new product or the Chinese standard. The American standard is much more harsh. [...] And then [...] we wanted to do the American one because that’s what I would look at. But then the government might just take our product off all the shelves. Because it’s too sensitive. You have to, like, self-censor in China, you have to be smart enough to know what will push it too much. And you have to find the balance. Is it worth it? And, of course, usually it is worth it because it is such a huge opportunity. You have to make a sacrifice here and there.

However, subjects express a critical stance towards information control in China. They feel most strongly impaired by the ‘Great Firewall’ – the restricted access to social media and Internet sources. Many interview partners and their companies use a virtual private network (VPN) solution to evade these restrictions. Yet, Internet censorship causes feelings of being exposed to interference and uncertainty, as one person elaborated:

I need to be cautious with what I say, especially on social media. [...] You never know, if I write ‘Tiananmen’,⁹ then maybe somewhere, somehow a red light will flash up. [...] It happened to a client of mine who had his mobile phone blocked because he had written something. [...]

I am careful about these things. [...] It is influential. Also, that I cannot access my company's Facebook profile easily to quickly run an update or post an answer. [...] Or if I look up something online [...] the results are different. [...] It is also not always easy [...] to advertise on google. [...] There are all sorts of implications.

At the same time, China's regulatory and judicial apparatuses are seen as creating unreliable conditions for doing business and some interviewees are under the impression that as a foreigner, they might be subjected to limited legal protection and greater institutional control.

ANALYSIS: ENTREPRENEURIAL SELVES ON THE QUEST FOR NEO-LIBERAL SELF-DEVELOPMENT

As my ethnographic exploration has shown, a leitmotif running through Swiss professionals' migration aspirations is to 'become' (Collins 2018), to develop as a person through migration and to lead a more satisfying, purposeful life shaped by self-realization. Even though framed in a language of individualism and personal development, my interviewees' aspirations and imaginaries should be understood as existing at the 'intersection of personal, collective and normative dimensions' (Carling and Collins 2018: 915).

As I have argued elsewhere together with Seraina Müller (Camenisch and Müller 2017), my interviewees' striving for a distinct, dynamic trajectory is embedded in collective imaginings of migration and mobility as a transformative and liberating act (see also Collins 2018; Salazar 2016) and facilitated by conditions inherent in their Swiss background. They are equipped with passports that render international mobility easy and with internationally acknowledged human capital, and (often) considerable savings in a strong national currency. Moreover, Switzerland, with its stable economy and tight-knit net of health and social insurance, is a safety net when living abroad, a safe haven to go back to if needed.

This described emphasis on individualistic self-development reflects broader discourses in the current era of 'second', 'reflexive' or 'fluid' modernity¹⁰ in which 'people are condemned to individuality' (Beck 1993: 152). Swiss professionals' rationales for migration resemble those of 'second-modernity emigrants' aiming 'to realize action orientations geared towards self-realization' (Scheibelhofer 2009: 21) and refer to neo-liberal¹¹ norms that imply the moral obligation to 'develop a better version of herself' (Türken et al. 2016: 34).

I thus find that how my interview partners frame their aspirations and their imaginative geographies of China is embedded in western neo-liberal discourses and related 'new conceptions of what it means to be an individual' (Gershon 2011: 538). Consider Max, who reflects on his experience as follows:

It's something which I have learnt here, which I wasn't familiar with from home. It's kind of an entrepreneurial thing. What do you want to do with your life? Because today it's [...] about what you make of your experience.

With their emphasis on hyper-individualism, self-reliance and risk propensity, my interviewees' narratives reflect ideals of what has been framed as typical of 'neo-liberal' or 'entrepreneurial selves' (Bröckling 2016; Gershon 2011; McGuigan 2014; Wrenn 2015). Their narratives also reflect ethnographically how, like neo-liberal economies, entrepreneurial selves are 'driven by a need for expansion' (Bröckling 2016: 196).

10. According to Beck (1993), and Beck et al. (2014), this era is shaped by the disappearance of traditional patterns of socio-economic stratification and predetermined life-courses. This leads to an enhanced individual freedom of choice but also leaves the responsibility to author his or her biography to the individual while novel normative and economic structural pressures remain hidden.

11. I use Mc Guigan's understanding of neo-liberalism as 'a catch-all term for a complex amalgam of ideas and policies' centring around assumptions about free-market rationality, deregularization and the homo oeconomicus (2014: 227).

Note the centrality of leaving one's comfort-zone, exposing oneself to challenges and risk and thereby fostering self-development in my interviewees' narratives. Ulf, looking back at his decision to study in China in the early 2000s, describes himself as a risk-taker because there was 'no employment market' for western people with a Chinese university diploma at that time. Interviewees also emphasize how they overcame limitations and grew personally, as they developed and proved skills of flexibility, agency and resilience, and put them in relation to their imaginative geographies of China. Recall Charlotte, who says that she discovered her creative and fighting sides in China, and note how Carol (42), running a growing import and retail chain, declares: 'You need to be a survivor in this country. You need balls, it's just like this. It is really tough and intensive'.

With respect to hyper-individualism and the need for expansion, most interviewees negotiate living and working in China as an unusual accomplishment for western migrants and highlight characteristics of their trajectory in China that they deem as outstanding and/or pioneering. This also appears in the way Colin (42), today a successful professional in law consultancy, frames his decision to do his postgraduate studies in China rather than a more 'mainstream' destination:

Most professionals in my field who do this kind of postgraduate degree go to the United States, some do it in the United Kingdom, some in Australia. [...] But China is of course something very different. I was the first Swiss to take this degree in China. [...] It's not something that is common.

Another, central aspect in the context of the neo-liberal discourse, with its emphasis on individual freedom of choice, is how Swiss migrant professionals link their imaginaries of China with finding room for self-development and personal freedom. Limits imposed on them by the restricted freedom of speech and the authoritarian political system seem to be outweighed by other kinds of liberating constellations that my interviewees encounter as foreigners in the booming, heterogeneous and still disorderly Chinese metropolises.

CONCLUSION: CHINA AS A 'NEW FRONTIER': PUSHING THE LIMITS AND FACING (NEW) LIMITATIONS

Max:

Life [in Europe] is wonderful. It is everything you could possibly wish for. But sometimes one doesn't want this, sometimes one is looking for drama. [...] That's probably, what it is about. [...] It helps to be in a different place anyway because you get a different perspective on things. But to be in a really crazy place like China is especially helpful. Because it is more intense, it is less comfortable. [...] It boils down to not to take the path of least resistance.

The trajectories of Swiss migrant professionals are embedded in biographical negotiations that go beyond mere economic calculations. The rationale is to overcome inner limitations and to develop as a person, something that was perceived as obstructed by various conditions, or outer limits, in Switzerland. The conceptual lenses of migration aspirations and imaginative

geographies have rendered visible the structural backdrop and the normative and 'relational' qualities (Thompson 2017: 79) of these rationales. Transnational, neo-liberally framed 'landscapes of desire' (Hindman and Oppheim 2014: 472) link Switzerland and China. Aspirations connected to migration and imaginaries of China crystallize in comparison to interviewees' imagined prospects in Switzerland. Where the home country appears as a constricting 'comfort-zone', the destination is perceived as the liberating (most) different 'other'.

These oppositional and 'othering' qualities of Swiss professionals' imaginaries of China may be orientalist in that they 'dramatize the distance and difference' (Said 1979: 55) to some extent. However, they are less about constructing, or maintaining a potentially superior collective sense of identity 'in relation to "locals"', as Coles and Walsh (2010: 1319) argue to be the case for Britons in the postcolonial context of Dubai. Rather, the aspirations and imaginaries of Swiss migrant professionals are aiming for individual transformation through pushing limits. Considering this sense of expansion and the parallels between China and the United States that my subjects often draw, I argue that their imaginative geographies of China are more succinctly captured as a 'new frontier'. The analysed narratives re-evoked the American frontier myth under the auspices of second/reflexive modernity. Devoid of the original ingredients of colonialism and militarism (Slotkin 1992), its essence as a brave expansion leading to new opportunities and the realization of individual dreams persists. China is negotiated accordingly as an economically booming country of extremes with an opportunity-rich atmosphere. This imagined new frontier then serves as a providing ground for challenges on which to thrive in a pioneering spirit.

At the same time, the new frontier in China is under transformation. Interviewees' projects of self-realization are constricted as conditions become too neo-liberal (competitive and money-driven) but also as too controlled (securitized and orderly) in their eyes. Even though the Swiss professionals I interviewed intend to stay on for a while longer, a growing sense of transiency is pervading their imaginaries of China as a migration destination. They present transient migration as a chosen strategy of their entrepreneurial life-courses and envisage moving to Switzerland or to another country at some point. However, my analysis has demonstrated that this is also a reaction to the shifting margin of manoeuvre for and the insecure legal status of foreigners in China. More broadly, as Bröckling (2016: xiv) reminds us, the neo-liberal condition in which 'the individual has no choice but to balance out in her own subjective self the objective contradiction between the hope of rising and the fear of decline, between empowerment and despair, euphoria and dejection' entails such conflicting feelings of impermanence and limitation. Thus, while they explore the seemingly boundless 'new frontier' in China, Swiss migrant professionals' projects for self-realization encounter new limits that may eventually take their journeys in other directions.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Aldina Camenisch is a social and cultural anthropologist currently based at the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies at the University of Neuchâtel and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Basel. Her research interests focus on how contemporary societies and individuals negotiate human mobility and (privileged) migration, especially in non-European destinations. In her ethnographic Ph.D. project, she investigates the trajectories and positionalities of Swiss migrant professionals in mainland China.

Contact: nccr – on the move, University of Neuchâtel, Rue Abram-Louis-Breguet 2, 2000 Neuchâtel, Switzerland.
E-mail: aldina.camenisch@unine.ch

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1441-7910>

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