

AMY H. LIU

The Language of Political Incorporation. Chinese Migrants in Europe

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Amy Liu is an Associate Professor at the Department of Government and codirector of the Politics of Race and Ethnicity (PRE) Lab at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research and teaching focus on the intersection of ethnic politics, language politics, and migration politics. Her book, *“The Language of Political Incorporation: Chinese Migrants in Europe,”* looks at the linguistic networks of Chinese migrants and the implications of their engagement with local authorities in Europe.

Amy Liu’s research is quite timely considering that the past decade has witnessed an increase of Chinese migration to Europe.¹ This has happened in the context of an open European Union to refugees and migrants, and as part of the Beijing policy on the Chinese Diaspora, the famous Belt and Road Initiative.² This program connects and capitalizes on the presence of Chinese around the world, in deficient democracies.³ Beijing regards the periphery countries as a gateway for investments of Chinese companies, for discussions with their governments regarding the implications of China’s growing activism in their countries, and for cultivating friendly voices in almost every country.

Although several official documents have been published on China’s influence in Central and Eastern Europe, since 2016 the Strategy on China remains the cornerstone of the EU engagement, followed by the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation.⁴ Liu’s volume focuses on networks and the ways in which the Chinese immigrants manage to integrate in the host

¹ Piotr Plewa and Marko Stermšek, *Labor migration from China to Europe: scope and potential*, International Labour Organization and International Organization for Migration, China, 2017, https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/country/docs/china/r2_labour_migration_from_china_to_europe_en.pdf.

² This is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organizations. The world Bank, *Belt and Road Initiative*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>.

³ Erik Brattberg, Philippe Le Corre, Paul Stronski and Thomas De Waal, *China’s Influence in Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 13, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-southeastern-central-and-eastern-europe-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85415>.

⁴ *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*, European Commission, March 12, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

countries, as well as the connections they develop with the local authorities. Migration literature shows that networks play a critical role in mobility patterns. The volume by Sarah Dolfin and Genicot Garance constitutes an illustration, analyzing migration-specific social networks and the way in which migration is linked to finding a job on arrival, showing the importance of three benefits provided by networks: information on border crossing, information on jobs, and credit.⁵ Migrating alone or with the help of a border smuggler, Dolfin and Genicot chose undocumented Mexican migrants to the United States to explain the phenomenon.⁶ In her book, Amy Liu illuminates the theory about languages and migration networks and presents the historical evolution of Chinese migration to Europe; she also describes the political context in the host countries from a pluri-disciplinary approach. According to Liu, her research “examines the political incorporation of migrants and argues that those who use a lingua franca are more likely to be in diverse bridging networks, which are often associated with greater political incorporation” (5).

The book is structured into ten chapters and includes qualitative as well as quantitative analysis. Amy Liu collected data on Chinese migrants in five countries: Romania, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Croatia.

“Four of the five countries are in the European Union (...) while Hungary is the only one in the Schengen Zone (the area of borderless travel), to date none of these countries is a member of the Eurozone (the monetary community where the euro is the common currency)” (64). The surveys were conducted (...) over a three- year period between 2014 and 2016: Hungary (spring 2014, January 2016, and spring 2018); Romania (fall 2015 to January 2016, August 2016); Serbia (summer 2016); Bulgaria (spring 2014); and Croatia (summer 2015)” (64).

Additionally, in all the chosen cases studies, the Chinese communities that were analyzed are found around the capital-city – Chinatowns, which facilitates the researcher’s identification of the target group.

The conceptual contribution of the book targets migrant networks, as the author focuses on the language of the migrant networks underlying the way in which “different languages that a migrant can speak allows them to join different networks” (11). The theoretical contributions are linked to the way in which these networks vary, and Amy Liu writes about co-ethnic brokers and neighbors’ services, an interesting addition to the existent literature. Another theoretical contribution of Liu’s book is to show the relationship between the Chinese migrants and other migrants, as well as between them, brokers, and the local authorities (12). Liu discusses how migrant networks respond to government policies that target migrants. The empirical contributions reveal a

⁵ Sarah Dolfin and Genicot Garance, “What Do Networks Do? The Role of Networks on Migration and ‘Coyote’ Use,” *Review of Development Economics* 14, no. 2 (May 2010): 343-359, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9361.2010.00557.x>.

unique approach to the Chinese community as a new migrant community in Central-Eastern Europe with a national (Chinese) origin and ethnicity that are constant, which gives Liu the opportunity to do a never-before-seen analysis.

The survey (chapter Four) plays an important role in the book's logic, representing the largest part. The one-page questionnaire has been developed in Chinese, in English and in the local language, as the author's intention was to give the choice to the interviewee (65). Amy Liu chose the snowball method, and she offered an additional bonus to the respondents for bringing her other participants. This sampling method implies using virtual networks to study hidden, "hard-to-reach" populations.⁷ The methodological descriptions allow the reader to understand the difficulties of the author in carrying out the research.

"I took out ads in the local Chinese newspaper(s). I also posted on church bulletins, university student forums, Chinese restaurant boards (the ones where the patrons are predominantly Chinese), and WeChat (Chinese equivalent of Facebook) with the location finder turned on. In each of these instances, I advertised for survey respondents—with a nominal payment for participation" (66).

Among the experiences in each country, Amy Liu evokes that she was perceived differently by distinctive Chinese respondents—sometimes as an insider, sometimes as an outsider: "a government mole," "a man alleged that Beijing had sent me," "a woman was convinced that I had been sent by the local authorities to spy on their business activities," "an ethnic Chinese from the United States" or as "a nonlocal university professor studying the Chinese in Europe" (66). There were other issues due to her immediate ancestors not being from Zhejiang Province or China proper, but she received help from the Zhejiangese research assistants and brokers.

The author chose to study the political incorporation in Hungary amid Right-Wing Nationalism and considers Viktor Orban and his hostile statements against immigrants and the exceptional situation of the Chinese in his country. Amy Liu also focused on Romania, to analyze the political incorporation through the witnessing of a "natural experiment" – that of tax collections; during her research, the government changed the fiscal policy, which was "seen by the Chinese community as an ethnic attack" (79):

"very lax citizenship regimes coupled with loose regulations. This combination played an important pull factor" for political incorporation. "(...) a tax fraud sweep affected the Mandarin speakers disproportionately compared to their counterparts in the bonding non-Mandarin networks" (73).

⁷ Fabiola Baltar and Ignasi Brunet, "Social research 2.0: virtual snowball sampling method using Facebook," *Internet Research* 22, no. 1, (2012): 57–74, <https://doi.org/10.1108/10662241211199960>.

Another interesting comparative perspective integrated in the present volume regards the Chinese in Western Europe and the Muslims in Central-Eastern Europe. The author wanted to verify if the findings related to the Chinese in Romania are specific only to them and chose to compare them with the Muslims, because of their comparability to the Chinese migrants (not Arabs, but migrants from the Middle East and North Africa). Afterwards, Amy Liu tried to determine if the empirical findings are specific only to this region. To verify this, Liu chose Portugal because of two reasons; first, Portugal was also a country in the European periphery and secondly, its Chinese community is comparable in terms of size to those of Romania and Hungary (158).

It should be noted that Amy Liu does not deal with the electoral component of the Chinese in the five countries chosen for research but focuses on questions such as citizenship. For example, the last part of the book examines the way in which locals perceive the Chinese, and the author formulates three policy recommendations for governments to better incorporate migrants. Her recommendations include “promoting lingua franca among migrants, incentivizing dispersed settlements, and maintaining regularized, positive channels of communication with migrant community leaders” (183). In fact, for Liu national governments that care about “the political incorporation of migrants” should adopt policies that encourage the creation of “bridging networks” (188).

All in all, Amy Liu’s book is an up-to-date account of the issue, aimed at a large audience, that also offers prospects for future investigations. On the long term, the political involvement of the Chinese in Eastern Europe should be taken into consideration, with an emphasis on their connections with the mother country in relation to the international strategy for the Chinese diaspora, as practiced and/or influenced by Beijing. Moreover, as the number of Chinese is constantly growing in the analyzed communities, the ethnic Chinese involvement in local politics should be investigated, via the large, mainstream political parties. Another research perspective is linked to the linguistic and cultural aspects of the Chinese in these five Eastern European states. Therefore, the phenomena of assimilation or inclusion in countries with deficient and unconsolidated democracies can be related to the incidence of mixed marriages. In this way it can be identified how many generations it takes for the phenomenon to occur and the degree of openness to such marriages in the Balkans and in Eastern Europe. This would be a necessary update on the relationship between migration and multiculturalism, as Collier Paul has done for the Central and Eastern European countries.⁸

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⁸ Paul Collier, *Exodus: How Migration Is Changing Our World* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2013).