

Digital Technology, Physical Space, and the Notion of Belonging among Chinese Migrants in Japan

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how, among Chinese migrants in Japan, the notion of belonging is constructed and modified by their use of digital technology, by presenting digital technologies as a continuum of physical and digitized life experiences.

Drawing on interviews with 55 Chinese migrants in Japan, this paper argues that Chinese migrants are increasingly engaged in digital spaces that combine the online and offline and permit their presence at a transnational scale, through a collectively imagined 'Chinese' identity. However, because of the influence of physical spaces on Chinese migrants' transnational, diasporic experiences, this transnational engagement does not lead to the construction of a transnational or a relatively static nation-state sense of belonging. Instead, for Chinese migrants in Japan, the notion of belonging can be based on the situation and context, and it can switch between the home and host countries.

Keywords

belonging – China – digital migration – Japan – online/offline interaction

1 Introduction

With the rise of digital technologies, the existing literature indicates how these technologies help in the construction among migrants of a sense of belonging to home and host countries. However, as Leurs and Ponzanesi (2018) point

out, these discussions often take place in a binary between online and offline social lives. Because of the technological revolution, digital tools are widely accessible, becoming the physical basis of the contemporary globalized society (Castles 2017: 338), in which digital technologies are continuous with and embedded in the social structure (Miller & Slater 2000: 5). This makes the connection between the online and offline 'not disengaged and separate but intertwined in daily practice and event' (Ponzanesi & Leurs 2014: 11). Presenting digital technologies more as a media environment that incorporates the online and the offline and as a continuum of physical and digitized life experiences (van den Boomen et al. 2011), this article illustrates how Chinese migrants in Japan construct and modify their sense of belonging, using digital technology with a transnational lens.

Despite the efforts made in Sino-Japanese diplomatic normalization over more than 45 years, relations between these two countries are still largely defined by the historical conflicts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (He 2007). As a result, perceptions of the other in Japan and China by their respective populations are complex and heavily characterized by historical discourses (Schneider 2016). The Chinese migrant population, as the largest foreign resident group in Japan (MOJ 2019a), serves as a unique entry point for describing the complexity of transnational historical and cultural affiliations, the multiple spatiality of belonging, and the merging of online and offline social lives in the context of the contemporary digital era.

Drawing on interviews with 55 Chinese migrants in Japan between 2017 and 2019, this article considers how digital technologies shape the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants, illustrating migrants' agency in the use of these technologies, with an appreciation of the growing intersection and interdependence between digital and physical spaces (Willems 2019: 1193). Despite earlier calls in the literature to reject digital-physical dualism, recent studies on the digital diaspora continue to emphasize the role of digital space in shaping migrants' sense of belonging. Scholars propose that contemporary migrants live in a 'transnational habitus' (Nedelcu 2012), 'media repertoire' (Hasebrink & Popp 2006) or 'polymedia environment' (Madianou & Miller 2012), with belonging constructed throughout their connected (Diminescu 2008), mediatized (Hepp et al. 2012), and digitized (Everett 2009) daily experiences. Although these authors claim otherwise at a conceptual level, the importance of the physical environment is empirically undermined in many of these studies. A focus on the digital aspects helps to make sense of migrants' digital engagement with and involvement in transnational activities (Levitt 2004), however, this article argues that the physical space is as important as the digital domain in the construction of migrants' sense of belonging.

This empirical study of Chinese migrants in Japan finds that they are increasingly engaged in a digital space that combines the online and offline and enables their presence at a transnational scale (Levitt & Schiller 2006; Tsagarousianou 2019), in a collectively imagined 'Chinese' identity. However, this transnational engagement does not lead to the construction of a transnational or a relatively static nation-state sense of belonging. Furthermore, by highlighting Chinese migrants' digital/physical interaction, this article argues that a sense of belonging can be based on the situation and context, and it can switch between the home and host countries.

Overall, the main objective of this article is to better understand how digital technologies, alongside physical spaces, mutually influence the process of constructing a sense of belonging among migrants using the case of Chinese migrants in Japan. The next section details the existing critical academic debates. The following section clarifies the methodologies employed and justifies the analytical focus on Chinese migrants in Japan. The final two sections provide our analysis and conclusion, making sense of this construction process and highlighting the potential policy implications.

2 Transnationalism as a Frame: Conceptualizing Chinese Migrants' Sense of Belonging through the Lens of Digital Technologies

Digital technologies, such as smartphones, social media platforms, and apps, have been discussed extensively in the literature in terms of their use by migrants to remain in touch with their home country and to form new connections in their destination countries (Madianou & Miller 2012; Retis & Tsagarousianou 2019). Contemporary migration, through the lens of digital technologies, characterizes contemporary migrants' lives as shaped by 'multilocality' and 'accessibility' (Georgiou 2011). Although 'multilocality' indicates that, because of the ease of digital communication (Levitt 2004), migrants increasingly find themselves engaged in social lives across national boundaries, which locates them inextricably in a transnational context (Castles 2017; Vertovec 1999), 'accessibility' suggests that migrants' transnational practices are largely realized through digital technologies (Tsagarousianou 2019: 84). New digital technologies provide a socio-cultural environment in which migrants live their everyday migratory experiences (Misa 2014), allowing them to re-construct, re-ground, and transfer social, economic, and political practices and meanings from specific geographic and historical homelands to remote locations (Beck & Cronin 2014). Migrants have the potential for co-presence in multiple localities, without the need to physically travel between

the homeland, destination countries, and elsewhere (Candidatu et al. 2019). Therefore, digital technologies are crucial for understanding the life trajectory of migrants through a transnational lens.

In addition, this new, globally popular technology plays a crucial role in illuminating how migrants collectively interpret and understand national identity. In his book *Imagined Communities*, first published in 1983, Anderson (2006) illustrates the role of printing, or, as he calls it, 'print capitalism', as a powerful medium that enables people without face-to-face interaction to imagine the nation. He illustrates how the medium of print can bring the imagined community of contemporaries to life through a depiction of identifiable characters, expressions, and activities, while also indicating how the rapid spread of print technology magnified existing ties and social imaginaries (Calhoun 2016). Taking his concept of 'imagined community' as inspiration, this study looks at the implication of digital technologies—a modern medium for information transmission and communication—for social and cultural imagination in globally dispersed populations.

At the same time, we are fully aware of the criticism of Anderson's approach to studying the nation and its 'cultural roots'. For instance, some scholars argue that Anderson's discussion of the census, map, and museum in the second edition of *Imagined Communities* (2006) tends to over-emphasise the material underpinnings of cultural imagination and overlook the way in which ritual behaviours and symbols contribute to the construction of group affiliation (Breuille 2016). Indeed, various anthropological works, such as Turner (1967) and Cohen (1985), indicate a close relationship between rituals/symbols and the formation of existential meaning, emotional attachment to the nation, and sociality in a given community. However, from the perspective of investigating how a community is imagined and, through this imagination, given shape and solidarity (Calhoun 2016: 12), we argue that the anthropology of ritual behaviours in social life does not undermine Anderson's argument about making imagined communities. Although he uses print capitalism as an example of real material conditions to demonstrate that the imagination of community, nation, solidarity, and identity involves remembering or agreeing to forget shared symbols, he also indicates that the formation of a collective identity goes beyond communication, symbols, and public rituals (Anderson 1992). In this sense, we employ Anderson's idea of an imagined community to explore the circulation of shared symbols and emotions in the contemporary digital era and its impact on Chinese migrants' sense of belonging, while taking into the account the influence of ritual behaviours, physical engagement, and the complex relationship between Japan and China, which is characterized by historical discourses.

This article examines Chinese migrants in Japan because they comprise one of the most suitable diasporic populations for observing the role of digital technologies in constructing and shaping a sense of belonging because of both its size and the rate of digital device use. Chinese migrants represent the second-largest migrant population in Asian countries after those from India (UNDP 2017), totalling approximately 10 million people. Moreover, as shown in Table 1, among the top five destinations of Chinese migrants in 2017, Japan ranks third, if not second, given the fact that Hong Kong is a Chinese territory.

As shown in Table 2, with regard to the latter, Chinese migrants have the highest average use of information and communications technology (ICT)

TABLE 1 Top five countries or areas of destination for Chinese migrants

Destination country/area	Number of mainland Chinese migrants in 2017
United States	2,422,998
Hong Kong (PRC)	2,343,868
Japan	741,022
Canada	711,555
South Korea	614,012

SOURCE: UNDP (2017).

TABLE 2 Comparison of the rate of smartphone ownership and the rate of ICT use by population and age group (in each group, $N = 1,000$)

Population and age group	Rate of smartphone ownership (percentage)	Rate of ICT use (percentage)
Japanese citizens		
Average	60.2	54.0
20-29	87.0	63.3
30-49	66.5	59.3
50 and above	44.5	45.8
US migrants in Japan		
Average	78.6	73.6
20-29	92.5	87.8
30-49	88.8	80.0
50 and above	60.0	51.3

TABLE 2 Comparison of the rate of smartphone ownership and the rate of ICT (*cont.*)

Population and age group	Rate of smartphone ownership (percentage)	Rate of ICT use (percentage)
UK migrants in Japan		
Average	82.3	70.8
20-29	95.5	81.0
30-49	88.8	76.7
50 and above	67.8	58.3
German migrants in Japan		
Average	82.3	65.6
20-29	97.5	74.5
30-49	90.0	68.3
50 and above	68.0	55.9
South Korean migrants in Japan		
Average	96.6	80.9
20-29	100.0	83.9
30-49	96.5	84.2
50 and above	94.3	74.6
Mainland Chinese migrants in Japan		
Average	98.3	86.8
20-29	98.5	92.0
30-49	99.0	88.2
50 and above	97.3	80.9

Notes: In the source, the age groups are listed as: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60 and above. To increase the readability of data, age groups from 30 to 49 as well as 50-59 and 60 and above were combined. The rate of smartphone ownership is calculated based on data in the source. In the source, ICT use consists of 13 categories: social media, online shopping, information search, news, online videos, music and audio, maps and navigation, e-books, online banking, ticket reservation, cloud storage, multiplayer gaming, and online gaming. To obtain a general understanding of the rate of ICT use among different populations and age groups, in this article the rate of ICT use is calculated by a cumulative average of the 13 categories. It is worth to mention that about 80 percent of the so called 'South Korean migrants in Japan' population are 2nd, 3rd and 4th generation Zainichi Koreans (Lee 2012). They were born and raised up in Japan, but still legally categorised as foreign residents. While in this sense, they cannot really be considered a 'migrant population' in Japan, I still included this population group in the table as there are no clarifications in the source regarding whether Zainichi Koreans are included in its data pool.

SOURCE: MIC (2016A).

among the major migrant groups in Japan, higher than that of local citizens, in terms of the possession of smartphones and the use of various ICT services, such as social media, internet shopping, online banking, and gaming (MIC 2016b: 165-167). In addition, the rate of ICT use is relatively high across age groups, thus a focus on Chinese migrants in Japan allows an investigation of how the arrival of digital forms of communication may have changed the way in which migrants position themselves between their homeland and their destination country (Sun 2019) by comparing migrants' experiences before and after the emergence of digital technologies.

Furthermore, choosing Tokyo as a research site facilitates understanding of how digital technologies, as a social condition of globalization, are manifested in the Asian context. Although studies on the intertwined impact of migration, connectivity, and digital mediation have accelerated in recent years, especially in the global north, such as Europe (Leurs & Smets 2018), an increasing number of scholars are adding Asian countries to discussions on the dynamics between online and offline interactions. For instance, in the context of Vietnam, Duong (2019) discusses how Facebook has become a critical tool for local citizens seeking uncensored information and a means of expressing their political opinions, leading to the formation of a social network that reflects the local needs and conditions of the Vietnamese people. Furthermore, in her observations of Japanese cellphone users in urban Tokyo, Sneep (2019) illustrates how these devices reconfigure interpersonal connectivities and the potential of virtual space to effectively influence the city. Although these studies focus on non-migrant populations, they inevitably highlight the impact of digital technologies on the formation of social networks and notions of spatial belonging. In this sense, the research focus here on Chinese migrants in Japan enables us to take a transnational perspective in discussing digital spatialities and physical realities in the context of the global south.

Understanding of migrants' self-positioning between the home and host countries has moved from a nation-state-centric form to arguments that emphasize transnational communities and cosmopolitanism (Diminescu 2008; Faist 2000; Lash 2002; Portes 2010). Following the shift of analytical focus from assimilation and integration to multiculturalism and then to transnationalism (Castles 2017: 335-336), emergent digital technologies, as well as means of transport, are increasingly seen as crucial to these processes. By focusing on migrants' use of digital technology, scholars often perceive their sense of belonging as fluctuating or transnational, and the primary loyalty of the transnational community involves multiple cultural boundaries (Beck 2000; Georgiou 2013; Urry 2000) or being based on a common ethnicity (Ang 2004;

Vertovec 2003). The latter is extensively associated with discussions about globalization, digital technology, and Chinese migrants' sense of belonging, with empirical evidence demonstrating that Chinese transnationalism and diasporic belonging are at the heart of their feelings about their co-ethnics in the homeland and destination societies (Sun 2019; Wong 2003). Although these studies do not necessarily aim to determine how to define 'Chineseness' or what 'Chinese ethnic ideologies' entail, they illustrate that features of digital technologies might offer an alternative conceptualization of 'Chinese ethnicity' that accommodates transnationalism and produces a new sense of global connectivity among Chinese diasporic populations. Specifically, Dirlik (2004, 2013) and Duara (1993) highlight that globalization and transnationalism allow Chinese populations in remote locations to develop a sense of belonging to the Chinese national identity through the practice of language as well as through historical and cultural heritage. In this sense, from a transnational perspective, Chinese ethnicity more closely resembles a mobile notion of homeness than one of disconnection and homelessness (Dirlik 2013).

Although these studies are essential for clarifying the process of building a sense of belonging among migrants in the digital era through a transnational lens, they have two problems. First, they give insufficient attention to the difference between transnational ways of being and belonging in a social field (Levitt & Schiller 2006). Whereas previous researchers have portrayed the formation of a sense of belonging by illustrating Chinese migrants' use of digital tools to engage with and maintain transnational social relations and practices (Ju et al. 2019; Sandel et al. 2019), they do not sufficiently demonstrate how these practices signal or enact identities with a particular conscious connection to a particular territory or multiple countries (Levitt & Schiller 2006).

The second problem is related to the analytical focus on digital technologies. Although recent media and communication studies increasingly examine questions concerning the intersection between online and offline domains (Gillespie et al. 2014; Packer & Wiley 2013; Willems 2019), contemporary debates in migration studies over the impact of digital technologies on migrants' transnational lives largely underestimate the interdependence of digital and physical spaces. It is important, in the information era, to study the process of building Chinese migrants' sense of belonging with a digital lens. However, by considering that the process of building a sense of belonging takes place almost exclusively in the digital domain, they fail to appreciate the increasing integration of the digital and physical spheres. Furthermore, some studies understand migrants' sense of belonging by observing their use of one particular social media platform (in the context of Chinese migrants, e.g. Weibo or WeChat) or digital device. This approach might overlook the fact

that migrants use different forms of digital technology in the course of their daily engagement with digital spaces (Ponzanesi & Leurs 2014).

In this article, the analytical focus is the interdependence of the online and offline, digital and physical spaces, as well as the link between transnational digital practices and the sense of belonging signified by these practices. To this end, we approach digital technologies as a communicative environment, rather than as 'a catalogue of every proliferating but discrete technology' (Madianou & Miller 2012: 169).

3 Methodology

This article reports the findings of in-depth face-to-face interviews with 55 Chinese migrants residing in Japan, conducted between June 2017 and August 2019. The individual-level analysis reveals the divergent subjectivities in the participants' sense of belonging (Fauser 2017). The interviewees were identified through personal networks, using snowball sampling. The group comprises 30 women and 25 men, which corresponds to the gender ratio in the Chinese migrant population in Japan (MOJ 2019b). As shown in Table 3, the interviewees live in three prefectures in Japan: Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Saitama. These areas are the most densely populated by Chinese migrants in Japan and therefore were the focus of recruitment of interview subjects (MOJ 2019b).

In selecting interviewees, we controlled for educational attainment (higher education and above), income (economically independent),¹ language skills (N1 level certificate on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test),² and years of residence in Japan (at least three years). The rationale for these control measures was the need to collect insights from migrants who were economically independent and had stable living conditions in Japan, thus the use of digital technologies is the only dominant variable in the research.

In addition, all interviewees signed a consent form before their interviews, acknowledging their autonomy in this research. To protect their privacy and ensure their anonymity, no identifiable information, such as their real name and residential/work address, was collected. Instead, each interviewee was asked to provide a pseudonym. Thus all the names that are used in this paper are aliases.

1 The lowest income bar was calculated based on the 2018 average monthly earnings in Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Saitama, as published by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/youran/roudou-nenpou/03.html> (accessed 29 April 2020).

2 For an explanation, see Japan Foundation (2012).

TABLE 3 Basic demographics of interview subjects

	Female	Male	Total
Age group			
20-30	20	12	32
31-40	7	10	17
41-55	3	3	6
Residential area			
Tokyo	18	15	33
Kanagawa	6	5	11
Saitama	6	5	11
Length of residence in Japan			
3-5 years	11	6	17
5-7 years	12	16	28
7 years and above	7	3	10
Educational attainment			
Undergraduate degree	24	13	37
Master's degree	5	9	14
PhD and above	1	3	4
Monthly income level			
JPY 200,000-300,000	8	6	14
JPY 300,000-500,000	20	13	33
Above JPY 500,000	2	6	8
Total	30	25	55

Note: The lowest income level was calculated based on 2018 average monthly earnings in Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Saitama, as published by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/youran/roudou-nenpou/03.html> (accessed 29 April 2020). At the time of writing, 100 JPY were equivalent to 0.94 USD.

The interviews were semi-structured and guided by the literature review. They were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and all extracts in this article were translated into English by the author. Discussions in the interviews focused on the following: (1) how migrants use digital technologies in their daily lives (i.e. the purpose of obtaining digital technology and frequency of use); (2) how digital tools shape their daily interactions with people from their homeland or in the host country, both digitally and physically; and (3) whether their perceptions of their homeland/host society had changed because of their use of digital technologies.

4 Findings and Discussion

Although this article rejects the notion of a dichotomy between online and offline interactions in the context of Chinese migrants' sense of belonging, we begin this section by clarifying the role of digital technologies in Chinese migrants' everyday diasporic experience. We use this approach for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that a comprehensive set of digital tools provides the basis for Chinese migrants' engagement with a transnationally imagined Chinese community, thereby enabling their transnational ways of being. Second, we consider the relationship between digital technologies and Chinese migrants' transnational way of being empirical evidence to exemplify that digital technologies alone are insufficient for explaining how and why Chinese migrants describe their sense of belonging based on constantly changing online/offline dynamics. By demonstrating that Chinese migrants' diasporic experience is made up of both digital and physical engagement, we show that their involvement in various transnational ways of being does not necessarily lead to a transnational sense of belonging.

4.1 *Digital Technologies and the Transnational Way of Being among Chinese Migrants in Japan*

Chinese migrants in Japan present a paradigmatic example of how divergent digital technologies are comprehensively used to create a transnational social field that connects not only home and host societies but also the local and the global, in which Chinese migrants actively seek links with their co-ethnics both in their local communities and elsewhere in the world. In this way, Chinese migrants cultivate short- and long-distance relationships that are valuable for the identification and formation of a transnational 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006) subject to shared emotions and co-ethnicity. For instance, forty-year-old Qinhui, who has lived in Japan since the 1990s and works as a banker, was one of many who indicated that his daily use of digital technologies is multi-dimensional. Qinhui uses email for business communication, WeChat to maintain contact with his contacts in China, and LINE for 'everyday chitchat' with his Japanese friends, reads news on his iPad, and uses online banking and Google Translate on his iPhone for business. He also employs the remote surveillance system on his computer to ensure that his home is secure while he is travelling. Qinhui offers an illustration of a Chinese migrant making use of a range of digital tools in his daily practice in different social and emotional contexts (Madianou & Miller 2012), and this was echoed by other interviewees. For example, Yuxuan, a twenty-eight-year-old entrepreneur, explained, 'I ... definitely feel that the world today is totally digitized.'

I use various [digital] tools seamlessly and simultaneously, like email, video calls, and news feeds.... What cannot be achieved with one app can always be accomplished with other apps'.

All the interviewees indicated that they use digital technologies daily for various purposes, including communications and remittances, which is unsurprising, given that 78.4% of Chinese migrants in Japan employ digital technologies on a daily basis (KDDI Research Institute 2005; MIC 2016b). What is more noteworthy is that their overseas life experience is rearticulated in a broader, global context based on the recognition of fellow Chinese communities in East Asia and beyond. The life story of Chinese migrants living farther afield, for instance, in East Asian regions, including Hong Kong, is often generalized and integrated into the narratives of those who were interviewed, leading to the construction of a collectively interpreted Chinese identity that extends beyond the homeland and destination country to multiple territories. For example, Xuefen, a forty-seven-year-old businesswoman who has lived in Japan for 26 years, discussed her use of various social media platforms (i.e. Instagram and Weibo), and she touched on the ongoing 2019-20 Hong Kong protests against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill (USCC 2019). She expressed her sympathy for the Chinese migrants and their children living in Hong Kong:

I have been following news about the protest on Weibo, but I didn't know how disastrous the situation is, until I saw pictures on Instagram. It seems as if when protesters find someone who is not a local citizen but a migrant from mainland China, they will intolerably insult that person ... even a child. I feel so bad for them [mainlanders] because of how they were treated. As an overseas Chinese from the mainland just like them, their experiences really remind me about how we [Chinese migrants in Japan] were severely discriminated against by right-wing Japanese nationalists back in the 1990s.

Xuefen's experience not only reveals the impact of digital technologies on Chinese migrants' sense of space but also illustrates how these technologies allow Chinese migrants to develop internalized grievances that are triggered by the negative experiences of fellow overseas Chinese in other regions. For instance, Peng, a forty-two-year-old technical director, said of Chinese migrants in the US who experienced the 2018 Alaska earthquake:

Their struggles after the earthquake, like the loss of loved ones or that completely puzzled feeling, really reminds me of what I experienced

during the 2011 Tohoku earthquake—the feeling that we are always waiting for help but don't know who's going to help us.... It's as if I can actually feel their real sense of loneliness.

Similarly, twenty-five-year-old Yuanjie expressed sympathy for Chinese migrants in France who suffered because of the 2018 Yellow Vest movement:³ 'It's very hard to explain why I feel this way, but when I see their suffering or outrage, violence, and resentment, I feel as if I am the one hurt by those rioters'. The compassion expressed by the interviewees reveals that, despite their diverse backgrounds, such as age, gender, occupation, and years of residence in Japan, they can integrate the narratives and experiences of other Chinese groups in distant locations, claiming a shared identity of 'overseas Chinese from the mainland' based on empathy. In this sense, the collectively manifested Chinese identity can be perceived as Chinese migrants' emotional attachment to the nation, in which membership is characterized by recognizable and interchangeable diasporic experiences to which Chinese migrants can commonly relate, despite living in different places, having different cultural practices, and becoming accustomed to different local conditions (Dirlik 2013). The interviews help to consolidate this argument. When describing their peers' experience with injustice and hardship, the interviewees rarely note the differences among Chinese diasporic communities depending on 'where they are based'; rather, the sense of belonging to the shared Chinese identity is built on 'where they are from'. Hence, their identification is undifferentiated by residence in Japan, Hong Kong, the US, or France; instead, they speak only of 'Chinese from the mainland'. Therefore, we argue that the construction of Chinese migrants' collectively interpreted identity is simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive (Duara 1993), because although digital technologies add transnational connectedness to this identity, it remains ethnically defined and thus constantly reinforces the ethnic boundary.

Although the goal of this article is not to investigate what a 'Chinese' identity entails, these interviewee perspectives indicate that, for them, digital technologies are salient. They enable personal experience with discrimination and hardship overseas to be mixed with similar forms of injustice and grief that Chinese populations in third countries share on social media. Hence, in

3 The Yellow Vest movement that began in France in October 2018 was initially motivated by rising fuel prices and a high cost of living, and later on widened to cover issues related to democracy, social and fiscal justice. Mass demonstrations began in November 2018, and the protests have involved the blocking of roads and fuel depots, some of which developed into major riots (Fansten et al. 2018).

this case, digital technologies connect Chinese migrants in Japan with ethnic Chinese communities in other regions, through a collectively interpreted 'emotion' and 'Chinese' identity, creating an 'imagined community', as Anderson (2006) once described it, on a transnational scale, which includes more than the home and host countries. As a result, this is a dominant part of how the interviewees form their sense of belonging.

4.2 *Imagined Communities and the Notion of Belonging among Chinese Migrants in Japan*

As discussed earlier, when interviewees such as Xuefen and Peng indicate an identification with Chinese migrants elsewhere, the basis of this identification is often events that took place in physical spaces, which illustrates the importance of interaction between digital technologies and physical spaces for understanding Chinese migrants' sense of belonging through a transnational lens. Indeed, for many interviewees, the mutual influence of online and offline interaction puts their diasporic lives into a global context. For instance, twenty-four-year-old Mili, who is originally from Shanghai and initially migrated to Tokyo when she was fifteen years old for secondary education and now lives in Osaka for postgraduate study, indicated that whereas divergent 'modern technologies' such as video calls, international banking, and remittances enable her to feel connected with family members back home, the similar physical environments of Osaka and Shanghai, such as 'the weather, the landscape and the Tosabori-gawa',⁴ help her to relate to her previous life in the homeland and adopt a transnational identity, in which she 'can feel at home while living abroad'. However, when Mili uses the word 'she is referring to Osaka more than Tokyo', as she explains that 'the two cities [Tokyo and Shanghai] are just so different.... So I [resided] in Tokyo, but never really *lived* there'. Although Mili could enact transnational ways of being in both cities using digital technologies, her sense of belonging differentiated the immediate physical environments in which she lived. Her experiences resonate with what Coates (2019) observed among his Chinese informants in Japan: they were 'at home in the world'. For Chinese migrants, a sense of 'belonging' entails much more than just 'being' in a 'place or group'; rather, it encompasses feeling 'the processes that constitute dwelling' (Coates 2019: 471-473) through their daily actions and interactions, both online and offline. In this case, the physical locality is a key factor in Mili's feeling that she belongs, thus validating her overseas life as meaningful and a point of reference, rather than as simply being physically located in a place.

4 Tosabori-gawa is a waterway that flows along the south shore of Nakanoshima, an island area in northern Osaka.

Castles (2017) notes that existing debates on the impact of digital technologies on migrants' notions of belonging often suggest that belonging to a nation-state has been replaced by a sense of attachment to a transnational digital space. This emphasizes the relevance of digital technologies to the construction of a sense of belonging. However, our interviews highlight the importance of a continuum between digital technologies and physical spaces, with both mutually contributing to the formation of a sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan. Another example comes from fifty-two-year-old Jiayong, who migrated to Japan 20 years ago and works as a real estate broker. He describes the tension as follows:

A part of my soul reminds me about my Chinese roots every time I chat with my family and friends back in China.... I feel as if chatting with them ... enables me to still be a Chinese. [However,] I also constantly realize the difference between those who are back home and me.... For instance, when I'm walking in the street and see all these 'welcome Chinese visitors' and 'discount for Alipay payment' signs, I know I'm no longer part of the country [China].

When asked why those signs made him feel separate from China, Jiayong elaborates:

Because [those signs are] hard evidence. Apparently, I'm not a Chinese visitor because my entire life is here [in Tokyo], nor do I use Alipay.... I wasn't even able to register an account [on Alipay] because I don't have a Chinese phone number or a Chinese bank account.... It's hard to tell which side I belong to—China or Japan.

Jiayong's case illustrates that whereas daily communication with those back home using digital technologies provides a space in which he can 'engage in regular imagining of being Chinese' (Sun 2019: 170), the physical surroundings act as a constant reminder that the fulcrum of daily life is in the host society: where Jiayong is physically located is the material basis for negotiating his digitized diasporic experience.

Furthermore, Jiayong finds it 'hard to tell' which nation-state dominates his sense of belonging, which indicates that digital technologies alone are insufficient for explaining how a sense of belonging is constructed by contemporary Chinese migrants in Japan, precisely because their digitized everyday lives are not only empowered by technologies but also are coupled with 'an ongoing material reality' (Ponzanesi & Leurs 2014: 11). Selective engagement with the

continuum of the online and offline environments by Chinese migrants in Japan illustrates that the sense of belonging can be based on the context or situation, so it is unattached to any particular social field or nation-state. This argument is confirmed by many of the interviewees. For instance, Nanxing, a twenty-two-year-old university student who migrated to Japan with her parents in 2003, describes the key role of offline engagement:

I was born in Beijing.... Now every time I go back, I need to use the navigation app, otherwise I will get lost.... And it's funny that sometimes when my Japanese friends ask me about the city, I turn to my Chinese friends back home.... And, yes, in terms of my passport, I'm still Chinese, but it's very hard to be related to places that you barely know about.

Nanxing's use of a map application to navigate her hometown illustrates the interdependence of digital technologies and spaces; this particular online-offline intersection validates her lack of familiarity with her homeland and thereby discourages a sense of belonging to it. At the same time, it also reveals that her digital engagement in transnational activities, such as communicating with both Japanese and Chinese contacts, does not necessarily lead to the construction of a transnational sense of belonging. The stories of Jiayong and Nanxing show that, for them, the use of digital technologies and the formation of an attachment to a particular nation-state or transnational social field is not linear or sequential, because of the impact of physical spaces. Rather, their sense of belonging oscillates between the home and host countries, depending on the situation and context.

Moreover, the interviewees' experiences indicate the multi-dimensionality of Chinese migrants' adoption of digital technology and its consequences. As demonstrated above, although migrants use different types of digital technologies in their transnational lives, doing so triggers multiple understandings of the sense of belonging. This may be due to differences in the functionality, affordance, and accessibility of technologies and in many ways can be articulated as how migrants perform different senses of belonging on various technological platforms, based on the physical environment in they are located. Hence, viewed through the lens of digital technologies, the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan should be interpreted with a focus on the interrelation between digital spaces and daily practices, emphasizing the relevance of both online and offline environments. Although digital technologies allow Chinese migrants to continue 'being Chinese' while performing transnationally through the deconstruction and reconstruction of a collectively imagined Chinese identity, physical spaces enable them to validate

their digital experiences and (re)confirm their sense of belonging, even when it is uncertain.

5 Conclusion and Implications

By focusing on the interaction between digital technologies and physical spaces, this article puts Chinese migrants in Japan into a transnational context and reveals the role of online/offline engagement in the construction and shaping of a sense of belonging. Qualitative evidence collected from 55 Chinese migrants in Japan indicates that the daily use of digital technologies allows individuals to engage in a collectively manifested Chinese community on a transnational stage, both at home and in their host countries, as well as including those in third countries and regions. In this sense, digital technologies enable Chinese migrants to internalize and domesticate the narratives of other globally dispersed Chinese communities, making sense of the 'shared experience of grievance and injustice' in the construction of a 'shared imagination' of 'we' (Tsagarousianou 2019: 91). In effect, 'we are all overseas Chinese from the mainland'.

This article argues that, when speaking of Chinese migrants' sense of belonging from a transnational perspective, this notion should be expected to be polyphonic and characterized by collectively interpreted experiences. However, the transnational 'imagined community' constructed by Chinese migrants in Japan through their adoption of digital technology is still overwhelmingly focused on their common ethnicity. Hence, the transnational community shared by Chinese migrants in Japan can be perceived as a 'revalorization of exclusionary ethnic identity' (Castles 2017: 344), which echoes what Ang (2004) describes as 'transnational nationalism'.

At the same time, although the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan has shifted from a more essentialist, static notion of the nation-state (Castles & Davidson 2000), it remains predominantly influenced by physical spaces, with Chinese migrants' transnational, diasporic experience made up of a continuum of online and offline interactions. Whereas digital technologies enable Chinese migrants to narrate their sense of belonging as rooted in the homeland, host society, or somewhere in between, the physical environment that they see and experience is a source of validation and confirmation of their sense of belonging. Hence, although the interviewees might be involved in various transnational ways of 'being', this engagement does not necessarily lead to a transnational sense of belonging. The examples presented in this article do not show the 'patterns' or 'directions' in which digital technologies,

in combination with the physical environment, promote a sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in a particular social field. Rather, these examples support the view in this article that, for Chinese migrants in Japan, the sense of belonging is multi-dimensional and context dependent. Specifically, it is relationally constituted across platforms, territories, and spaces, through the continual intersection of online participation and physical reality. Therefore, this sense of belonging oscillates between the home and host countries, mutually influenced by digital and physical spaces.

My findings indicate the importance of altering the migration policy framework to correspond with migrants' increasing involvement in transnational practices and new notions of belonging. The experience of Chinese migrants in Japan illustrates that, from a transnational perspective, host country engagement and enduring homeland ties are not incompatible (Levitt 2004), though most Asian countries, including Japan and China, still fail to institutionally recognize migrants' multiple affiliations and senses of belonging (Castles 2017). Citizenship is still considered in a relatively static manner, based on the nation-state, and citizens have common cultural characteristics, ethnic homogeneity, and a shared heritage; migrants in these countries are expected to adapt or assimilate to them (Castles & Davidson 2000). This conflicts with the reality that migrants live transnational and multi-dimensional lives, which need to be taken into consideration in future institutional frameworks in Japan and China. Legal recognition of dual citizenship, for example, would give migrants more freedom to negotiate their transnational social ties.

Although such transnational frameworks could create new challenges regarding the rights and responsibilities of being transnational, such as determining which states are responsible for migrants' social welfare and political and civic engagement, policy makers should nevertheless recognize that migrants, like the local citizens, need 'political stability, economic prosperity and social well-being in their place of residence' (Breton & Reitz 2003: 228), with protection of their safety and dignity. In this sense, although this article focuses on Chinese migrants in Japan and the argument is based on findings from 55 qualitative interviews, which creates some specificity, the analytical lens of transnationalism and online/offline interaction could apply to other migrant populations. The examples presented in this research should not be viewed merely as a case study, as the use of digital technologies in relation to physical spaces is not a peculiarity or culturally unique behaviour by Chinese migrants in Japan but, rather, a common part of the digitized life for many migrant and non-migrant populations. This research sheds light on how migrants, as transnational actors, actively make connections, form networks,

and plant roots, through their engagement with daily digitized lives in an increasingly globalized society.

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