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# Situated researcher: a critical autoethnography on migrant researcher's mobility, positionality, and agency

*Chercheur situé : une auto-ethnographie critique sur la mobilité, la positionnalité et l'agentivité des chercheurs migrants*

Cai Chen

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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## Introduction

Still feeling so traumatized when I think of a professor's comment on my fellow doctoral student's abstract: *Le texte est tellement mal écrit et truffé de fautes d'orthographe...* [The text is so badly written and full of spelling mistakes...] Vicarious suffering? (The author's quote tweet, 20/07/2023)

- 1 Above is my comment, added to a tweet sharing an article published on *The Conversation* by Australia-based Japanese scientist Tatsuya Amano (2023). This tweet quotes a passage from the article:

Compared to a fellow PhD student who happens to be a native English speaker, you'll need 91% more time to read a paper in English. This equates to an additional three weeks per year for reading the same number of papers.

- 2 This article for the general audience sheds light on the extra effort that non-native English speakers must invest to survive and thrive in globalized academia. However, as Amano points out, such efforts to overcome language barriers have been expected to be made by individuals, rarely with the support of the scientific community. As a non-native speaker of English nor French myself, my academic writing in both languages usually relies on the kind reviews of my friends, colleagues, and supervisors, language editing tools, or professional editing services, for which I have often confessed to a colleague that "I feel like a 'disabled' researcher!" Despite many efforts, the 'self-consciousness' of linguistic inadequacy, sometimes combined with straightforward and inconsiderate comments from peers and senior researchers, constitutes a psychological burden for young scholars receiving academic training abroad, undermining their confidence and creativity in knowledge production.
- 3 However, language barriers were only one of the inequalities faced by migrant researchers, particularly those from the Global South. In their edited volume *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*, Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (2023) bring together the autobiographic and autoethnographic narratives of 21 migrant academics, showing different forms and levels of precarity that they experienced in the European academia as well as their resilience. On the one hand, migrant scholars, like other people on the move, are confronted with multiscalar "regimes of mobility" (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013), which refer to various levels of regulations and administrations affecting individual mobility, and subsequently experience multiple tangled forms of (im)mobility (e.g., spatial, social, legal, and academic) across time and space (Fresnoza-Flot and Liu-Farrer, 2022). On the other hand, as transnationals, migrant scholars are subject to dual, even plural, frames of reference, that is, their internalized norms and codes in terms of academic training and thriving (Guiheux and Wang, 2018), which has implications for their ways of doing research and producing knowledge. In addition, the process of knowledge production by migrant researchers is (re)shaped by their social location, geographic origin, gender identity, sexuality, nationality, and 'race' (Haraway, 1988). Migrant researchers are often othered, racialized, and even excluded, which informs their "vision" or "embodied objectivity", in Donna Haraway's terminology (p. 581), of society. This is particularly the case in social sciences, where researchers' reflexivity work – focusing on the positionalities of researchers and research participants and the dynamic field relations between the two – has been widely discussed (see e.g., Fresnoza-Flot and Cheung, 2023).
- 4 This special issue invites both contributors and readers to rethink Belgium as a *place* of knowledge production and its implications for research on China. Drawing on Doreen B. Massey's (2005) relational approach, place, as social and material construct, is understood here as "spatio-temporal events" (p. 130) and a mobile space of flows of people, goods, ideas, and knowledge. Furthermore, places and mobilities co-constitute each other (Salazar, 2023). Belgium represents, in the present essay, not only a *place* of study, research, and residence, but also a *space* of social relations and emotions in the academic realm and beyond, and is ultimately contingent on different forms of *mobilities*. In line with this argument, the present essay aims to critically analyze, through an autoethnographic approach, my experience as a PhD researcher<sup>1</sup> originally

from China, receiving academic training in Belgium and conducting research in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (or 'Congo' hereafter). It delves precisely into the ways in which the researcher's mobility, positionality, and agency shape the knowledge production process.

- 5 Despite some critics assuming that research should be neutral, impersonal, and objective, autoethnography emerges as one of the approaches that accommodate the positionality and emotionality of researchers and critically examine the subsequent influence on the research *per se* (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, traditional ethnography includes key components of autoethnography – for instance, the reflexivity of the ethnographer. Autoethnography is a *process* in which researchers retrospectively write about their own experiences to illustrate cultural experience, and also an aesthetic and evocative *product* that brings readers to witness such experience (Ellis, 2004). With an emphasis on reliability, generalizability, and validity, the autoethnography narrates in the pages that follow: first, how I, as a migrant scholar, navigate different mobility regimes – including those of Belgium, the Schengen area, and others – and their impact on my ways of conducting research fieldwork and being an international student; second, my self-refashioning process of surviving and thriving in Belgian academia – in particular during my PhD training; finally, my fieldwork experiences in Congo as a Chinese researcher based in Belgium and how I exercise my agency to negotiate my positions and field relations with both Congolese and Chinese interlocutors.

## Border crossing: navigating mobility regimes and migrant scholar life

- 6 Born in a small lineage village in rural China, where people bear the same surname, share a common ancestor, and occupy a well-defined territory, I grew up very poor but studied very hard, as my parents always told me: “Education is the only way out!” I was the first generation to have graduated from high school in our family, and the first who ever went to study abroad from the Chens’ village, let alone pursue a PhD. International education interplays with social class: on the one hand, studying abroad remains a privilege for urban middle-class families in China; and on the other, international student migration is seen as a pathway to upward social mobility (Xiang and Shen, 2009). Despite the poverty, I still dreamed of studying abroad and breathing the “air of freedom” in the West, especially after discovering my homosexuality in my teens (see Ponce and Chen, 2023). Deprived of any support – both financially and emotionally – from my uneducated parents, I went to work in West Africa after completing my undergraduate degree in French Studies in a second-tier city in northeast China, hoping to earn the first pot of gold to support my overseas studies in France. I did not make a fortune in Africa, but my dream came true thanks to an Erasmus Mundus scholarship supported by the European Commission. Furthermore, this experience led me to conduct my Master’s research in transnational migration on the interplay between sexuality and migration among Chinese gay students in France.
- 7 My studies abroad did not (yet) lead to the so-called upward social mobility, but plunged me into a ‘twofold trans-life’ – transnational (Vertovec, 2001) and transclass (Jaquet, 2014). Nevertheless, my spatial mobility is far from an end-to-end trajectory (i.e., from China to Belgium), because academic mobility kept my life constantly mobile since I arrived in Europe (i.e., Erasmus mobilities to Romania and Spain for my Master’s

studies and multiple mobilities to Congo for my PhD research). In this section, I draw on two ethnographic vignettes to reflect on my life as a migrant scholar across various mobility regimes and the complex interplay between class and mobility.

### Weak passports: the predicament of academic mobility

It was an unusually sunny day in Brussels in May 2023. Around 1 pm in the communal room of our laboratory, several colleagues – most of them were PhD students like me – and I were chatting during the lunch break. There was a colleague who had just returned from a month of fieldwork in South Asia and some time in her home country (an EU member state). People were asking with concern how her fieldwork was going and so on. She shared that it was complicated for her to get a visa for X (country name withheld). She had to present an original letter of invitation, which meant that she had to ask the host institution to send her the original document, and it would take a long time. She did it twice, because on the first invitation letter, they wrote her research topic very specifically, and she was afraid that this topic would not please the officials and might have a bad influence on the visa application. [...] Moreover, when she arrived, she was obliged to go to the immigration office to register as a foreigner, but it was impossible to get an appointment in time (i.e., within 14 days of arrival). When she went there, it was a total mess: people were not in line, and one had to push others to get closer to the window to talk to the agents. Helpless, she cried. Other European colleagues expressed their sympathy and agreed that it was unpleasant to go through visa bureaucracies. A few minutes later, people went back to work. On my way to the office, I commented on the discussion we had to a French colleague who did research in China: “Ah, the European colleagues, now you can understand the burden of crossing borders. I had used up the pages of an entire passport for visas and stamps in just 4 years!”

- 8 International academic mobility – here referred to the spatial mobility of students,<sup>2</sup> researchers, and faculty members – is usually seen as a key to upward social mobility, career development, or academic excellence, which is especially true for individuals from the Global South (see e.g., van der Wende, 2015). Mobile academics or students may find themselves in privileged positions in the (academic and non-academic) labour market after spatial mobility due to their transnational capital accumulation and conversion (Waters, 2009, 2010). However, they may face multiple inequalities on the move, due to their underprivileged positions – for instance, migrant status, social location, and social markers (gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, etc.) – in the host societies (Bilecen and Van Mol, 2017). As a third-country national, I have had to deal with a lot of paperwork over the past five years to obtain a student visa and two residence cards for my stay (first as a student and then as a jobseeker) in France (2019-2022), a student visa and a residence card for a five-month Erasmus exchange in Romania (2020), a residence registration certificate (as a resident of another EU member state) for a four-month mobility in Spain (2020-2021), and a student visa and, to date, two residence cards for my PhD studies in Belgium (2022-2024). In addition, as a resident of Belgium with a Chinese passport, I have, to date, gone through three times (and more to come) the Congolese visa application process to carry out my fieldwork during short stays.
- 9 The immigration bureaucracy requires not only a large number of documents but also a great deal of time and patience. The Erasmus + programme may be a promising scheme that makes it easier and beneficial for Europeans to study abroad (see e.g., Engel, 2010), but it also turns out to be a burden for third-country students to cross borders repeatedly. The plural, intersecting, and multiscale “regimes of mobility” (Glick

Schiller and Salazar, 2013) – the nation-state, the Schengen area, and the European Union in my case – have constantly shaped my academic mobility trajectories and lived experiences within and beyond Europe.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, I expected that international academic mobility in the form of international education, Erasmus exchanges, conference participation, and research stays would become an asset for my academic career advancement. On the other hand, compared to those with passports from the Global North, applying for a visa or residence permit became a necessary burden for me, just like for other migrant scholars with ‘weak passports’ from the Global South.

- 10 The status of migrant scholar also informs my ways of conducting empirical research that requires geographic mobility for fieldwork. Compared to my European colleague in the vignette above, my fieldwork plans were largely restricted by my migrant status in Belgium. For my first fieldwork in Congo, I paid an extra 104 euros for the extremely urgent procedure of applying for a Belgian residence card to be able to apply in time for a Congolese visa as a resident in Belgium. For the second, I had to shorten my stay in Congo to return to Brussels before my one-year renewable residence card expired. In addition, I should not leave Belgian territory for more than six months at a time – for more than 12 months consecutively for important reasons – over five years if I do not wish this to affect my potential application for permanent residence in the future. As the consequences of mobility regimes and migration policies, the citizenship and migrant status of transnational researchers could become a barrier to academic mobility.

### Rich students: intersecting class and mobility

On 3 July 2023, I travelled to Warsaw to attend the 20<sup>th</sup> IMISCOE (International Migration Research Network) Conference, the largest annual event for migration scholars in Europe, where I was to give a presentation on my past Master’s research. After the meeting of the Standing Committee Gender and Sexuality in Migration Research, I skipped the opening plenary session scheduled for 6 pm to enjoy a drink and nice conversations on the left bank of the Vistula River with a small group of scholars I had just met. To break the ice, a senior researcher based in the UK sitting next to me asked what my PhD was about and what my funding source was. I was often asked the same questions by different people I met at the event. I always felt uncomfortable telling them: “I have a one-year funding at the moment, and I will be a self-funded PhD student from autumn 2023.” The senior researcher then asked why my funding was only for one year and how the research funding system works in Belgium. I further explained: “My first application for a PhD research grant was unsuccessful. However, I managed to get a one-year (Seed Money) grant to start my doctoral research and then apply again the following year. Unfortunately, the second attempt was still unsuccessful.” As the conversation continued, I complained: “As an international PhD student, especially from China or other non-EU countries, we should be rich enough. Because of the selective Belgian migration policy, I have to open a blocked account at our university and transfer the necessary amount of money [9,618 euros including 150 euros administrative fee] in advance for the expenses of my next year in Belgium to renew my residence card as a self-funded international student. Or I need to find a guarantor, who must be a Belgian citizen or a permanent resident in Belgium, to support me. The second option is almost impossible for international students who don’t have family in Belgium.”

- 11 Much of the existing research documents that international student mobility is closely linked to social class. International education is perceived as a pathway to upward

social mobility for middle-class or elite families in China, and social class background is a key determinant of who can move and how one moves (see e.g., Kajanus, 2015; Martin, 2022). In Belgium, specifically at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), tuition fees for Bachelor's and Master's programmes are three times higher for Chinese students than for their European counterparts. In the highly unequal field of higher education, the most socio-economically privileged families reproduce social advantages through an internationally marketized education system (see e.g., Leung, 2017; Waters, 2010; Xiang and Shen, 2009). Coming from a modest rural family, my study abroad – both Master's and part of PhD studies – was dependent on scholarships or research grants. The lack of economic capital, especially after failing to secure a further PhD grant, (re)shapes my intersecting social positions and identities. I was obliged to do casual unskilled work to make ends meet, which I call “contradictory social mobility”.

- 12 My academic mobility has an immeasurable impact on my class positions across time and space. Maggi W. H. Leung (2017) conceptualises class formation “as a process that involves constant contestations, rather than an objectively delineated factor or outcome of geographical mobility” (p. 2709). Indeed, in a subjective sense, my spatial mobility for educational attainment has not yet resulted in upward social mobility, albeit with accumulated social, cultural, and human capital, as the conversions among these different types of capital may take longer and occur only in the process of return migration (see Xiang and Shen, 2009). The imbalance between my cultural and economic capital along with my ongoing academic mobility implies the interconnection of multiple concurrent and uneven conditions (material and non-material), or “complexion” in Chantal Jaquet's (2014) terminology, in which I, as a “transclass”, am constantly found trapped in the sentiments of not only “transferring” (or not) from one class to another, but also “betrayal” of my social origin.<sup>4</sup>

## Self-refashioning: looking for a legitimate place in Belgian academia

- 13 On 7 October 2022, as a new PhD student, I attended the annual meeting of our laboratory, which began with a round-table introduction of each person. I introduced myself as follows:

Hello, everyone! I am honoured to be a part of you. My academic trajectory is atypical compared to most of you. After obtaining a Bachelor's degree in French Studies in China, I worked in West Africa for three years. In 2019, I went back to university and started an interdisciplinary Master's in transnational migrations in Europe. After a short stint as a social worker in Paris, I will be, from now on, conducting doctoral research on the ethnoracial power dynamics among Chinese-Congolese couples living in the DR Congo. Thank you!

- 14 Our research unit specializes in the social and cultural anthropology of contemporary worlds. I had never received any systematic training in anthropology, although I conducted a Master's research with an ethnographic approach. I am aware that with such a background I would never be admitted to a PhD programme in anthropology in China. I felt lucky to be able to do so at a relatively more tolerant and open Belgian university, where interdisciplinarity is a keyword. Nevertheless, I was pessimistic about my academic career development for many reasons, such as the barrier of academic languages (i.e., English and French), the lack of solid academic training in a specific

social science discipline, and the competitive academic evaluation systems overvaluing publications and their metrics. In addition, I tend to self-evaluate my academic development through the different frames of reference and academic norms that I have internalized through my multinational educational experience in China and across Europe. In the second section, therefore, I reflect on the impact of scientific socialisation (see e.g., Guiheux and Wang, 2018) on my self-evaluation of academic performance and my ways of surviving and thriving in Belgian academia.

### “Am I doing enough?”

- 15 The globalized academic job market – from doctoral fellowships to tenured professorships – and the competition for research grants are overwhelmingly based on the criterion of publication and its metrics (e.g., impact factor, journal quartiles, and citation index). In Chinese universities, especially prestigious ones, there is a tendency, albeit sometimes unwritten, to set a minimum number of publications as a condition for graduation or thesis defence, applicable to both Master’s and PhD students.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, at least one peer-reviewed publication is also a prerequisite for PhD students in Flemish universities in Belgium. However, for those enrolled in French-speaking universities in Belgium, as in France, publishing in peer-reviewed journals is not mandatory for obtaining the degree. However, without a certain number of publications, it would be difficult for any PhD holder to secure a postdoctoral fellowship or a tenure-track position. This is sometimes the case even in the competition for doctoral fellowships. During my previous attempts at applying for PhD grant, my promotor kept telling me: “If you have publications, you have a better chance of getting the grant.” Unfortunately, the publication process usually takes long and my three publications from my Master’s thesis were not accepted until the end of the first year of my PhD and had thus played a limited role in my latest PhD grant application.
- 16 Belgium is a multilingual country and the working languages of the ULB are French and English, which differs from many higher education institutions in France. Influenced by the hegemonic place of Anglo-Saxon academia in knowledge production, publications in English are generally more valued for their potential to reach a wider audience, something I am also aware of. As such, I chose to write both my Master’s and PhD theses in English. However, the mastery of French as an academic language is also important in francophone countries, where researchers are expected to be familiar with the academic traditions and debates of both worlds. While privileging English, I insist on publishing also in French to reaffirm the place of the French language and higher education in my academic trajectory and self-refashioning as a transnational researcher. However, academic writing styles are different in these two languages, and the literature and academic dialogues that researchers engage with also depend on the language they use. As non-native speakers of both languages, migrant researchers like myself have to spend much more time and energy than our native colleagues in learning and publishing in both languages – let alone in their mother tongue<sup>6</sup> – to compete in the academic job market. When I received the proof of my first journal article in French, I was very surprised to see the number of edits and corrections that the editor had made to my manuscript. I panicked and immediately asked an experienced colleague whose mother tongue is French: “Is it normal that the journal editor made so many edits and even rewrote some sentences in my accepted



manuscript?” I was relieved to learn that this was also happening to native researchers.

- 17 Being a researcher does not only mean researching and publishing. In my pitch presentation for several PhD interviews, I always said: “A good researcher should not only know how to do research but also acquire many other peripheral skills.” To gain experience and increase the chances of a successful grant application, apart from publishing, I was actively involved in several research networks, provided unpaid academic services to senior researchers (albeit sometimes abusive) and research units, organised events for scientific or general audiences, participated and presented my research in scholarly events, etc. Nonetheless, I often felt frustrated, disappointed, discouraged, and self-denying when I did not meet my achievement goals such as securing a grant for my doctoral research. I kept asking myself: “Am I doing enough?”, trapped in the criteria of academic excellence.

### **“I don’t want to be a ‘secondary’ PhD student!”**

- 18 “What about inviting senior scholars to talk about their failures in academia?” suggested one participant in a discussion on how to deal with “imposter syndrome” among several dozen fellow PhD students at the IMISCOE conference I attended. That was the first time that I had heard the term “imposter syndrome”. It refers to the condition of feeling anxious and lacking confidence or competence, despite demonstrating high performance in external and objective measures. However, I believed that I had been suffering from it or similar self-doubts, albeit unconsciously, for quite some time. Indeed, it is rare for people to talk about their failures in academia. As one of my colleagues used to say: “Getting tenure or research funding also depends a lot on luck and the popularity of the topics you are researching.” I tried from the beginning to find my legitimacy as a PhD researcher in Europe from a non-English-speaking or French-speaking country by publishing in both languages. However, I lost the legitimacy that I had not yet achieved after my second failure to obtain a grant from the Belgian national funding scheme. I blamed myself for not doing enough in the face of the repetitive failure. I also felt out of place in our laboratory, while most of my colleagues received various types of funding and enjoyed better research conditions.
- 19 The day when I found out that my application had been rejected again, I desperately confessed to a friend on WeChat (Chinese social media application):
- Even though no one is going to tell me: “You’re probably not cut out for a PhD!”, I saw my cumulative failures as such a sign. I can just quit and do a proper job. I don’t need the title of Doctor. Without funding, I will be like a ‘secondary’ PhD student. As an unfunded PhD student at our university, I’ll lose my own office; I won’t have a valid badge to enter the office building outside working hours; I won’t qualify for many mobility or conference grants, not even to conduct my fieldwork in Congo.
- 20 Coping with academic failure is something that every researcher has to go through. I realized that it was just the beginning for me. Moreover, academic precarity (e.g., lack of funding) is a persistent problem for early career researchers – migrant or not – especially in human and social sciences. Academia is not a meritocracy. While the publication-centred academic evaluation system may appear to be meritocratic, it fails to be fair to students, researchers, and academics from minority or underprivileged groups who do not have the same privileges as their peers. As a migrant scholar, I have been constantly negotiating the academic self, my achievement goals, and perceived

academic failures at the interface between the belief in meritocracy deeply rooted in East Asian culture and the competitive and unsatisfying Belgian research funding system. In addition to self-compassion, however, the invaluable support and assistance from my promotor and colleagues, especially those who share a migrant background, serve as crucial driving forces that propel me forward.

## Position shifting: negotiating field relations with Congolese and Chinese interlocutors

- 21 As a place of knowledge production, Belgium (re)shapes the ways in which researchers design, conduct, and output their research, not only for those *in situ* but also for those at a distance. As a socially and materially constructed place, Belgium can impact, on the one hand, researchers' standpoints or perspectives on their research subjects and, on the other hand, participants' imaginaries of and relations with the researcher, whether originally Belgian or not. The latter is particularly true in the cases of countries with historical links<sup>7</sup> to Belgium, such as Congo. Because of the colonial legacy, the Congolese have ambivalent feelings about Belgium and people and everything related to the country: they resent it for the painful history of colonization, but at the same time admire the life of Belgians and elite Congolese who were able to travel, study, or live there. As a Chinese PhD student and resident in Belgium, I was also confronted in different ways with the challenges of complex field relations with my interlocutors – both Chinese and Congolese – in Congo.
- 22 While many researchers have discussed the impact of their own identities, trajectories, social locations, and positionalities on their research, and in particular on field relations between ethnographers and research participants (e.g., Fresnoza-Flot and Cheung, 2023; Ponce and Chen, 2023, p. 229), less, yet growing, attention has been paid to the ways in which researchers' geographic locations shape field relations and the process of knowledge production (e.g., Livingstone, 2003 and this special issue). In the final section, therefore, I reflect on how Belgium, as my place of study, residence, and knowledge production, informs my interactions with my research participants in Congo, providing a critical understanding of the insider/outsider positions dichotomy as well as researchers' agency.

### “You are a developed Chinese!”

- 23 I spent a month in Lubumbashi between December 2022 and January 2023 as part of my pilot fieldwork in Congo. I stayed in a “semi-open” hotel run by a Chinese woman called (elderly) Sister Liu<sup>8</sup> from Wenzhou, who has been in Congo for almost two decades. As she was currently more interested in investing in the “much more lucrative mining business”, her hotel – land and house are her property – only received regular customers, or new ones referred by her friends passing through Lubumbashi and arriving at or departing from Lubumbashi airport. I was able to get a room for a month, thanks to the referral of Brother Li, who was from the same municipality as me. Brother Li had lived there for more than a year before he started his own Chinese vegetable farm. As he was a close friend of Sister Liu, he used her place as an “office” during the day and ate lunch with other guests. There were three other Chinese men from the same province as Sister Liu who rented a room on a long-term basis. Every

evening, two more migrant merchants from the hometown of Sister Liu joined the dinner. Apart from these “permanent” residents, there were many others who stayed there from one night to a week before moving on to other cities in Congo or returning to China. There were also several Congolese who worked there every day: two domestic workers, a guardian, up to six drivers, and sometimes vegetable vendors and transporters.

- 24 My research at the time involved Chinese-Congolese couples, and I always relied on my relations with other Chinese or (sometimes) Congolese to reach potential informants. Therefore, these people with whom I interacted daily became my key interlocutors. However, the fact that I was a PhD researcher who came from Brussels to “interview” people initially complicated my relationships with some Chinese. On the contrary, I was accepted more quickly by my Congolese interlocutors, and they were more willing to share information and their thoughts with me, simply because I spoke good French and was “not like other Chinese”. I still remember the first day I arrived at the hotel. When I greeted one of the Congolese domestic workers and spoke to her in French, she was surprised and asked, “Aye, how come you speak French so well? Are you French?” “No, I’m Chinese like others here and this is a place for the Chinese, isn’t it?”, I replied. She explained: “Because you can speak French and the other Chinese here only speak broken Chinese-style Kiswahili.”
- 25 Likewise, the Congolese workers in that courtyard would later explain to each other and to visitors that “This Chinese is different: he speaks French; he greets and talks to the Congolese; he studies in Brussels!” On other occasions, my Congolese interlocutors praised me as a “developed Chinese” compared to others whom they perceived as “poorly educated, badly dressed, speaking neither French nor English, and always ignoring people when they greet them”. They always highlighted that I was studying in Belgium, suggesting that it was the reason why I was different from others. A business partner of Brother Li once said: “He studied in the countries of whites [referring to Belgium and France] and has adopted the mentality of white people. That is very good!” She then addressed me: “In Belgium, it’s not like here in Congo. You should stay and live there.” I had to explain to her that it was not simply a “white mentality” that I internalized, but that I may appear different simply because there are many Chinese and they are not all the same. Nevertheless, to those who saw me on the street and shouted “*Chinois* [Chinese]!” at me, I was just another Chinese like thousands of others in Congo.
- 26 Although I shared the same nationality, ethnicity, and phenotypical traits with other Chinese, my Congolese interlocutors perceived and treated me differently because of my French ability and residence in Belgium. In some circumstances, they even accepted me, albeit a total foreigner, as an insider with whom they could discuss the perceptions – usually negative – that they had of their Chinese bosses and Chinese people in general, and to whom they could ask questions about the “mysterious” life of the Chinese, such as “What is that drink on the table that all the Chinese here drink every day? Is it tea? Is it their secret of not ageing?” Field relations could be shaped not only by the multiple identities of researchers (e.g., national, social, ethnic, and racial), but also by the materially and socially constructed place to which they are attached as residents, researchers, or students.

## “Are you reporting to the Belgian government?”

- 27 As a co-ethnic, I was initially very easily accepted as part of the Chinese community. However, this did not mean that I was accepted as a total insider to all the Chinese I met. The so-called Chinese community in Congo was very often divided into many sub-groups or circles according to their provinces of origin, such as between Brother Li and me, or between Sister Liu and her “permanent” residents. Even at the dinner table, those from Wenzhou (city) or Zhejiang province, would speak their dialect, while others could not understand a single sentence. The same dynamic could be found in other Chinese provincial (or hometown) social circles. Solidarity among members (e.g., information sharing, business partnership, mutual support) could also be observed at different levels: within provincial circles and then at the national level. Nevertheless, during my fieldwork, there were also instances of intra-communal conflicts and even killings when personal interests were at stake. Once again, the Chinese community in Congo is highly heterogeneous, not only in terms of geographical origin, social location, and linguistic groups, but also in terms of gender, age, and education attainment.
- 28 In the hotel where I stayed, all the Chinese that I met were either from working-class backgrounds or from rural areas of China. They had little education and could only communicate with the locals in basic Kiswahili. Like their peers, they came to Africa with the dream of “getting rich” and “climbing the social ladder” (see e.g., Driessen, 2015; Wang, 2023). Except for Sister Liu, the other Chinese living there were all men and self-driven entrepreneurs or traders. Those who were expatriated to Congo as managers, engineers, or contract workers (see Fei, 2023) usually stayed only one or two nights. I introduced myself as a PhD student in Brussels with previous work experience as a French translator in West Africa. The differences in cultural capital (i.e., education attainment and linguistic skills) between them and me rendered field relations difficult at first. For example, they tended to call me “*da xuesheng*” (college student) instead of my name or “*xiao chen*” (junior Chen). I understood that in China this was a positive way of addressing someone who had gone to college, as higher education is uncommon for the older generations who had not had such a chance. However, this social distance marked by cultural imbalance also created mistrust, suspicion, and assumptions between us, and consequently made me an outsider in my own ethnic community, which resonates with what Damien Trawalé (2023) calls “insider *minoritaire* (minority insider)”.
- 29 Some Chinese even criticized me for being too close to and talking too much with their Congolese employees: “You shouldn’t get too close to black people. Don’t trust them easily and tell them everything. They screw the Chinese behind our backs.” Although, people usually say: “You can’t trust anyone in Africa. It’s always the Chinese who swindle the Chinese.”, the Chinese in Congo expressed a fundamental mistrust toward not only Congolese but also other foreigners including Indians, Lebanese, and Europeans. As I confessed during my first lunch that I was receiving one-year doctoral funding from my university and that I would prefer to remain in Belgium after my studies, the boyfriend of Sister Liu immediately commented:
- How come the Belgian government is so nice to give you a scholarship? Did they send you to their former colony, the DRC, to investigate how we Chinese are having inappropriate sexual relations with black women? Are you reporting to the Belgian government?

- 30 I supposed that it was maybe because I preferred to stay abroad than return to China like them that they thought of me as someone who had been “bought off by foreign forces”. I hastened to explain to them what social enquiry is and how the privacy of involved research participants would be protected, and that it is common – nowadays, as a result of globalization – for foreigners to obtain a scholarship for a PhD in Europe without any stipulations.
- 31 Despite sharing the same national and ethnic identities with my Chinese interlocutors, my insider status within the community was cast into doubt due to my connections with Belgium, where I was studying, receiving funds from, and potentially setting up a long-term residence. Building trust is a lengthy process and requires specific techniques in the overseas Chinese community. Before returning to Congo for research in the summer 2023, I provided Brother Li with detailed explanations of my research project, why I was interested in this topic, and how I intended to protect the privacy of my participants through ethical considerations. Additionally, I requested him to share this information with his friends in preparation for my research trip. Endorsed by a reliable acquaintance, my connections with other Chinese markedly improved. Some even suggested introducing me to their friends who were married to Congolese or inviting me to visit their workplace.

## Conclusion

- 32 In this essay, I have drawn attention to the impact of migrant researchers' mobility, positionality, and agency on the ways in which they conduct research and thrive in globalized academia. Thinking of Belgium as not only a *place* but also a *space* and interwoven with various forms of *mobilities*, the essay sheds light on how the materially and socially constructed place shapes the knowledge production process, especially for researchers who come from a migrant background. Through the autoethnography of a Chinese researcher receiving anthropological training in Belgium but doing empirical research in Congo, it delves into the intricate links between the place of knowledge production, the researcher, and the research (research field and field relations in this case).
- 33 Drawing upon a series of autoethnographic vignettes derived from my personal experiences, this essay has undertaken three critical explorations. First, it has scrutinized migrant researchers' predicament of constrained academic mobility across varying mobility regimes. Additionally, it has examined the interplay between mobility and social class, depicting their intertwined roles in shaping academic trajectories. Second, this essay has offered an intimate glimpse into my process of self-fashioning, illuminating the arduous journey of carving out a legitimate place across different academic landscapes and navigating sore academic failures. My narrative unfolds as that of a Chinese transnational scholar who has been scientifically nurtured in diverse academic settings, both within and beyond the borders of Belgium. Finally, it has critically analyzed the dichotomy of insider *versus* outsider positions of researchers engaged in research within and/or beyond their own ethnic or national communities, and the role of researchers' 'Belgianness', or their relatedness to Belgium, in shaping their positionalities. Furthermore, it has provided a nuanced exploration of the agency exercised by researchers in managing intricate and multifaceted field relations.

- 34 To encapsulate, this essay underscores the multifaceted nature of migrant researchers' experiences within the context of globalized academia. It offers unique insights into their mobility, positionality, and agency, while also reflecting upon the role of Belgium as a place of knowledge production. The paper contributes to wider debates around the vulnerability and resilience of migrant researchers in the Global North and the role of the place of knowledge production in shaping both the experiences of the researcher and the research itself.

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## NOTES

1. 'PhD student' and 'PhD researcher' are used interchangeably in the present essay due to the ambiguous status not only regarding administrative classification but also academic position within the higher education system. Specifically, 'PhD student' is employed to conflate my own experiences with those of other international students, while 'PhD researcher' is used to establish connections with the experiences of other migrant researchers.

2. See for example the special issue of the *Belgian Journal of Geography (Belgeo)* edited by Walter Matznetter: *International Student Mobility and Migration in Europe* (2010), 4, <https://doi.org/10.4000/belgeo.838>
3. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent social distancing and multiple lockdowns around the globe also had a major impact on my mobilities, both across countries and within national borders.
4. See also Pierre Bourdieu's (2004) concept of "*transfuge de classe* (class defector)".
5. For example, in the anthropology programme at Fudan University (Shanghai, China), Master's students must have at least one peer-reviewed article and PhD students must have at least two peer-reviewed articles published or accepted in reputable journals to fulfil partially the requirements of graduation.
6. Personally, I do not intend to publish in my mother tongue, Chinese, for several reasons. Firstly, my scientific training in social sciences has been entirely conducted in Europe, with courses taught in French, English, and a few in Spanish. Secondly, I face challenges in translating certain concepts and theories into Chinese, which may affect the clarity and accuracy of my work. Lastly, considering my previous research on gay Chinese migrants, which may be deemed sensitive in China, I am concerned about potential repercussions that could jeopardize my well-being both as a researcher and as a gay man. Likewise, I do not envision pursuing an academic career in China either.
7. The historical ties between Belgium and Congo also serve as practical reasons behind my selection of this particular country as my research field. Belgium has been a major site of knowledge production on Congo, with a significant number of researchers conducting research in or on Congo. This choice also bridges the location where I receive academic training, where I conduct research, and where I am from.
8. Chinese people, both domestically and abroad, employ gender- and age-specific kinship terms when addressing senior individuals, even if the person in question is not a member of their extended family.

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## ABSTRACTS

Drawing on a critical autoethnography, this essay explores the lived experiences of a Chinese migrant researcher in Belgium and the influence of Belgium as a place of knowledge production on both the researcher and the research itself. First, it highlights the challenges of academic mobility in Europe experienced by migrant researchers in the face of the multiscale mobility regimes, and underscores how geographic mobility intersects with social class. Second, it reveals the impact of the dual, even plural, scientific socialisation across borders on the self-refashioning and self-evaluation of researchers with migrant backgrounds. Last, the essay argues that the insider/outsider positions of researchers are not static but are constantly (re)shaped by their identities, social positions, and geographic locations – Belgium, in this case, as a place of study, residence, and knowledge production. It further emphasizes the agency of researchers in negotiating complex field relations. This essay contributes to a nuanced understanding of the vulnerability and resilience of migrant researchers in the Global North and sheds light on the role of the place of knowledge production in shaping their ways of doing research and being a researcher.



S'appuyant sur une auto-ethnographie critique, cet essai explore les expériences vécues d'un chercheur migrant chinois en Belgique et l'influence de la Belgique en tant que lieu de production des savoirs à la fois sur le chercheur et sur la recherche elle-même. Tout d'abord, il met en lumière les défis de la mobilité académique en Europe auxquels sont confrontés les chercheurs migrants face aux régimes de mobilité multiscalaires, et souligne comment la mobilité géographique s'entrelace avec la classe sociale. Ensuite, il révèle l'impact de la socialisation scientifique double, voire plurielle, par-delà les frontières sur la réinvention de soi et l'auto-évaluation des chercheurs issus de l'immigration. Enfin, l'essai affirme que les positions d'*insider/outsider* des chercheurs ne sont pas statiques mais sont constamment (re)façonnées par leurs identités, leurs positions sociales et leurs lieux géographiques, en l'occurrence la Belgique, en tant que lieu d'étude, de résidence et de production des savoirs. Il met également l'accent sur l'agentivité des chercheurs dans la négociation des rapports complexes sur le terrain. Cet essai contribue à une compréhension nuancée de la vulnérabilité et de la résilience des chercheurs migrants dans le Nord global et éclaire le rôle du lieu de production des savoirs dans la manière dont ils font de la recherche et deviennent chercheurs.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** migrant researcher, autoethnography, mobility, positionality, agency

**Mots-clés:** chercheur migrant, auto-ethnographie, mobilité, positionnalité, agentivité

## AUTHOR

### CAI CHEN

Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC), Institute of Sociology, Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Belgium

ORCID 0000-0001-5348-8263

cai.chen@ulb.be