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Integration and insularity: The diversity of Chinese immigrants in France

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While immigration flows from China to France have dwindled in recent years, France still has Europe's fifth largest Chinese immigrant population. Using data from the first quantitative survey of immigrants born in China and living in the Paris region, Isabelle Attané and Giovanna Merli describe the social and labour market integration of Chinese economic migrants and former international students who remain in France after completing their education.

Chinese immigration⁽¹⁾ to France surged in the 1980s as China began to open up its economy and ease its emigration policy. In 2021, around 6 million Chinese immigrants were living in OECD countries, representing around 13% of their total immigrant population.⁽²⁾ Three in four lived in just five countries: the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea (Table 1). Between 2006 and 2021, after Australia and New Zealand, Europe became the continent where their presence increased most rapidly. In 2021, there were at least 1.2 million Chinese immigrants across Europe as a whole. With 116,000 Chinese immigrants in 2021⁽³⁾ (less than 2% of its total immigrant population), France ranks 5th in Europe, behind Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany.

An estimated global Chinese diaspora of 40 million

Chinese immigrants in these countries represent only a fraction of the Chinese diaspora, which also includes the descendants of immigrants and all people of Chinese descent living outside China. The Chinese diaspora in France was estimated

(1) A Chinese immigrant is defined as a person born in China, with Chinese nationality at birth, who has lived in France for at least 1 year, whether or not he or she has acquired French nationality.

(2) OECD, 2024 (<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org>).

(3) This OECD figure is higher than the INSEE estimate of 110,000 Chinese immigrants in France in 2021 (https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2381755#tableau-figure1_radio1).

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Table 1. Estimates of the Chinese immigrant population and diaspora in the OECD countries where they are most numerous

Country or geographical region	Chinese immigrants			Chinese diaspora (thousands) Circa 2011	
	Numbers (thousands)* [OECD]	Mean annual growth (%)			
		2006	2021	2006–2013	2013–2021
United States	1,357	1,953	4.0	1.1	4,160 [2]
Japan	560	750	n/a	n/a	675 [2]
Canada	467	716	2.4	3.3	1,511 [2]
Australia	252	596	8.0	4.1	755 [2]
South Korea	n/a	528**	n/a	n/a	24 [2]
New Zealand	78	133**	1.9	5.1	149 [2]
Italy	119	259	7.0	3.9	202 [2] 330 [4]
United Kingdom	80	245	5.5	9.8	401 [2] 630 [4]
Spain	105	176	6.3	1.2	140 [2] 170 [4]
Germany	66	153	1.6	9.5	92 [2] 170 [4]
France	75	116	4.9	1.2	442 [2] 540 [4]

* These estimates are not comparable because they are based on definitions that vary across countries.

** In 2017.

n/a = not available.

Sources: OECD, [2], [4].

at around half a million in the early 2010s, slightly more than 1% of the world total (around 40 million) [2]. It encompasses people of Chinese origin repatriated after the decolonization of Indochina, and refugees of Chinese origin from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, some of whom had lived there for several generations, who fled the Communist regimes in the 1970s [1]. These estimates, based on data collected by the Taiwanese government, should be viewed with caution, however. They cannot be verified based on French statistics, which only record country of birth and nationality (census) or the parents' nationality at the child's birth (vital records), and which therefore identify immigrants and a share of their descendants [3], but not all individuals of Chinese descent.

A slower increase in Chinese immigration

In France, between the 1982 and 1990 censuses, the Chinese immigrant population grew 5 times faster (around 10% each year on average) than the population of all other immigrants. This growth has slowed considerably since then and is now below that of all other immigrants (respectively, +1.2% and +2.1% annually in the second half of the 2010s). This relative slowdown—also observed in several other OECD countries (Table 1)—is due partly to political developments after Xi Jinping became president of China in 2012. Since that time, the Chinese regime has strengthened its ties with the diaspora and ramped up its policy to encourage return migration, especially Chinese students who graduate abroad. It also reflects a certain disenchantment among Chinese immigrants in France, probably linked to their difficulties in obtaining French nationality [3] in a context of tighter restrictions on immigration.⁽⁴⁾ Preferred destinations now include Germany, whose policies are more liberal, and the United Kingdom, which remains attractive for international migrants and Chinese students.

This trend continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, with dwindling inflows and an increase in return migration to China [5]. In France, the number of Chinese nationals holding a first residence permit halved between 2013 and 2021; in the space of 8 years, China fell from 3rd to 8th place in the ranking of countries whose nationals are admitted for residence.⁽⁵⁾ Chinese nationals are the second largest immigrant group of

Asian origin, however, behind Turks. International students—with a high school diploma obtained abroad and entering France to study for a tertiary qualification represent a large share of these regular migration inflows: in 2017, two-thirds of Chinese nationals who obtained a residence permit were admitted to France for educational reasons, compared with just 28% of other foreign nationals of all origins [3]. An indeterminate share, which we refer to as 'former international students', remain in France after completing their education.

A heterogeneous population

Two-thirds of the Chinese immigrants counted in the French census live in the Paris region (Île-de-France), where they have a strong presence in certain economic sectors such as restaurants, bar-tobacco shops, and wholesale trade [3]. Certain districts of Paris and the Seine-Saint-Denis department have a high concentration of these Chinese-run businesses that mainly employ Chinese economic migrants who come to France to find work, a large majority of whom are from south-eastern China, with almost half coming from the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang province (see online appendix: <https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.0bfc228p>). They are generally low-educated—57% have no qualifications or a lower secondary diploma—and have a limited command of French, with only 21% reporting that they speak French 'well' or 'very well' (Table 2). They also tend to socialize among themselves: people of Chinese origin make up 84% of their social network.

These economic migrants have little in common with the other main group of Chinese immigrants made up of former international students who came to France to study and stayed

Table 2. Respondents' characteristics

	Economic migrants				Former international students
	Wenzhou	North-east	South-east (excluding Wenzhou)	Total	
Median age	46	50	51	49	34
Share of women (%)	54	16	71	55	63
Has acquired French nationality (%)	11	3	14	13	10
Time since first settlement in France (years)	24	6	17	18	14
No qualifications or lower secondary diploma (%)	68	90	32	57	0
Speaks French 'well' or 'very well' (%)	28	0	23	21	84
Chinese origin within social network (%)	87	83	81	84	59
Works in the 'ethnic' labour market ^(a) (%)	75	97	47	67	18
Employed by a Wenzhou ^(a) employer (%)	59	32	45	49	6
Manual worker or equivalent, first job in France (%)	75	97	70	76	37
Manual worker or equivalent, current or most recent job (%)	56	95	45	58	6
Share of survey respondents (%) ^(b)	21	8	18	47	36
Numbers	66	19	63	148	224
All percentages are weighted.					
(a) Percentages are calculated among economically active individuals in their current or most recent job.					
(b) The remaining 17% are international students still in education.					
Source: ChIPRe survey.					

(4) Especially with the tightening, in 2011, of the rules for remaining in France and obtaining French nationality (<https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/20162-chronologie-les-lois-sur-la-migration-depuis-1974>).

(5) https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/data/france/immigration-flow/residence-permits-by-nationality

after graduating. Migrants in this latter group come from diverse regions of China, are younger on average than economic migrants (34 years vs. 49 years), with a larger majority of women (63% vs. 55% of economic migrants), and, by definition, all hold a high school diploma or higher. They generally have a good command of French (84% report speaking 'well' or 'very well') and socialize more widely outside the circle of Chinese-speakers, at work especially.

The 'ethnic' labour market

Chinese economic migrants in the Paris region have a massive presence on the so-called 'ethnic' labour market, i.e. their employer and the majority of their colleagues are also Chinese (or the majority of the employees for the business owners), and the language spoken in the workplace is Mandarin or a Chinese dialect. Overall, 67% are in this situation, although the proportion varies considerably by Chinese region of origin (Table 2) and sex (89% of men and 50% of women). The women in this group, more educated, on average, than their male counterparts and speaking better French, find work more easily on the non-ethnic labour market.

Low-educated Chinese immigrants who speak poor French find work primarily on the ethnic labour market, as do undocumented migrants, for whom there is no other alternative. In their first job in France, three-quarters of economic migrants (76%) work as manual workers or equivalent, mainly in the garment trade, catering, and construction. For the job held at the time of the survey (or most recent job in France), the share drops to 58%, suggesting the existence of a certain upward social mobility for some. But their situation remains generally precarious, as almost half of all employees (45%) on the ethnic labour market do not have a work contract.

Migrants from Wenzhou—the main economic power holders who own most of the shops, restaurants, and garment import-export businesses in the Paris-region ethnic labour market—employ half of all economic migrants, with a slight preference for those from Wenzhou. Compared with other economic migrants, migrants from the north-east are more likely to hold a manual job regardless of whether it is their first or most recent job (Table 2).

Former international students have very different trajectories. While slightly more than a third (37%) have held an unskilled job in the ethnic labour market to top up their income after arriving in France, their educational capital and their readiness to develop non-Chinese social networks give them greater access to the non-ethnic labour market. As employees, executives, or business owners, they hold positions as office workers, IT specialists, engineers, teachers, or interpreters, translators, etc. For their labour market integration, they depend much less heavily on their Chinese social networks than economic migrants, those from Wenzhou especially, among whom more than two-thirds were helped by a family member or a Chinese friend to find a first job in France (Figure 1).

Insularity—up to a certain point

The popular representations whereby Chinese immigrants prefer to remain among themselves, with a strong reliance on within-group support, require further qualification. While

Box 1. The survey on Chinese immigrants in the Paris region (ChIPRe)

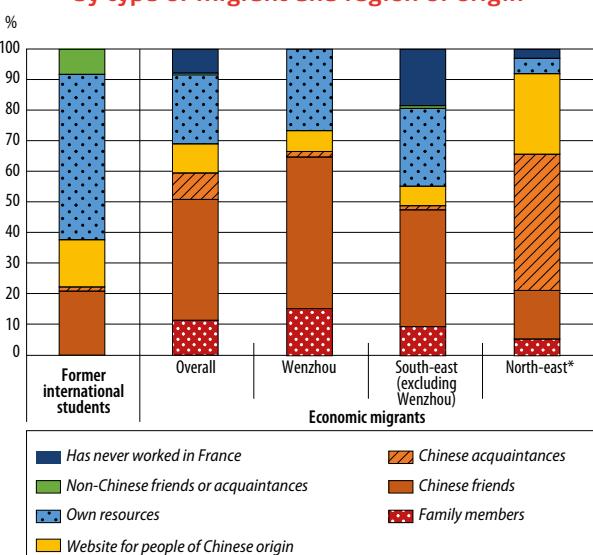
The ChIPRe survey, the first quantitative survey focusing on Chinese immigrants in the Paris region, was conducted in 2020–2021 on a sample of 501 respondents aged 18 or older who were born in China with Chinese nationality. The network sampling with memory[6] method was used, and the sample was adjusted on the basis of three variables of the 2018 census: age, sex, and department of residence in the Paris region. A qualitative follow-up survey provided details about the processes at play (35 interviews).

The survey looked at six dimensions of Chinese immigration: (a) trajectory characteristics by Chinese region of origin; (b) social and labour market integration in the host society across these different trajectories; (c) relations between and within different Chinese origin groups, insularity and solidarity between members; (d) factors of social and economic stratification; (e) perceptions of discrimination and racism; and (f) links with country of origin.

The survey was conducted by a joint team of French and US-based researchers (Duke University and University of North Carolina) and received funding from the French National Research Agency (ANR-18-CE41-0001).

Wenzhou immigrants generally interact with their peers, they have little to do with Chinese immigrants from other regions, and when relations do exist, they are often limited to the occupational sphere. This community cohesion among Wenzhou immigrants is a strength for the development of their businesses, and their specific dialect reinforces their sense of belonging and mutual trust. They help new arrivals to find a first job (Figure 1) or to set up a business, for example, providing informal loans and assistance with administrative formalities.

Figure 1. Resources used to find a first job in France by type of migrant and region of origin

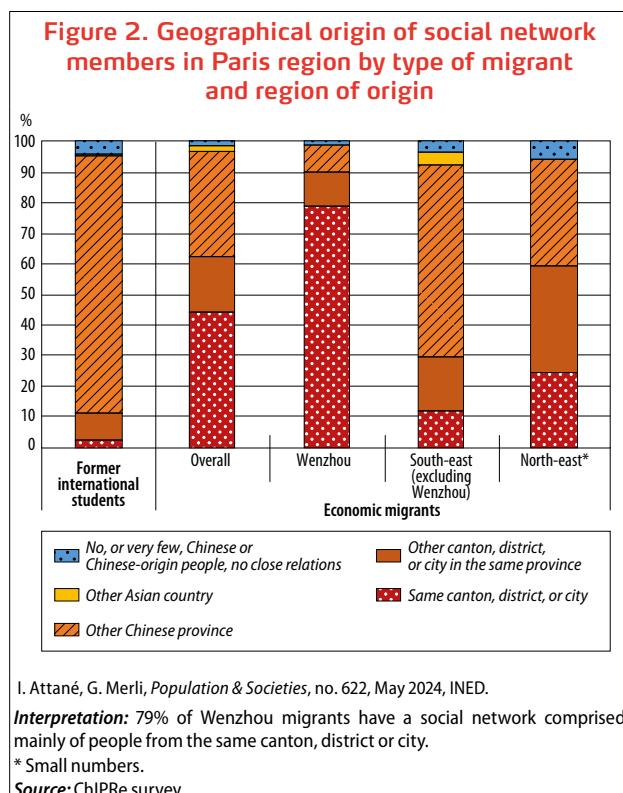


I. Attané, G. Merli, *Population & Societies*, no. 622, May 2024, INED.

* Small numbers.

Source: ChIPRe survey.

While Wenzhou immigrants have been in France for longer, on average, than economic migrants from other regions, their social networks in the Paris region are centred around the extended family circle and the community of origin: 79% have a social network mainly comprising other people from Wenzhou. The other economic migrants, held back by the language barrier and their presence on the ethnic labour market, also have few non-Chinese acquaintances (Table 2). Migrants from north-eastern China, in particular, are often isolated when they arrive in France as their support networks are smaller than those of the Wenzhou community, and they often live precariously (legal status, housing, income, health, etc.). Lacking the community and family support of the Wenzhou immigrants, their Chinese social networks are more open to immigrants from other regions of China (Figure 2).



Former international students, for their part, have more mixed networks (people of Chinese origin represent 59% of their Paris-region networks) not centred around a community of regional origin (Figure 2). With a better understanding of the host society's codes, acquired at university or in their subsequent employment, they have reached a more advanced stage of the 'convergence process' [7]. While also showing a certain preference for mixing with people of Chinese origin, they do not always see them as a potential resource for finding employment. Most find jobs on the national labour market.

Far from representing a close-knit and homogeneous group, Chinese immigrants in the Paris region display wide-ranging profiles, social networks, and diverse pathways towards integration into French society.

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Abstract

Totaling around 116,000 people, of whom two-thirds live in the Paris region, immigrants of Chinese origin represent less than 2% of the French immigrant population today. Economic migrants are older and less educated than immigrants who enter France to study and remain in the country after graduating. They speak French less well, and their social and employment networks are still centred around their community of regional or national origin. This is less often the case for former international students.

Keywords

China, immigrant, migrant, integration, employment, network, student, Wenzhou