

Lateral vision: Juxtaposition as a method

Nyiri Pál

Vrije Universiteit, The Netherlands

Ethnography

14(3) 369–383

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1466138113491677

eth.sagepub.com



Abstract

This article reflects on the methodological challenges and opportunities of 20 years of research on Chinese migrants abroad against a shifting background of global politics and academic institutions. It suggests that, while ethnography is always implicitly comparative, juxtaposition rather than comparison in time and space, within and outside the 'field', may be a better way of describing the cumulative working of ethnographic research. I reflect on three ethnographic moments whose significance only became clear in hindsight, with the benefit of juxtapositions with other experiences, both academic and non-academic.

Keywords

ethnography, juxtaposition, migration, globalization, China

It is by now almost a cliché that anthropological research into many contemporary processes requires multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995), because the life-worlds of many people are constructed from elements that are not confined to a single geographical setting. This is certainly true in most instances of research that involves migrants, and indeed it is becoming increasingly standard practice even for dissertation research – which tends to be methodologically conservative – to involve multiple sites. Criticisms of such studies as falling short of anthropology's disciplinary standards have not entirely disappeared, but they are becoming less mainstream. The increasing popularity of ethnography outside anthropology adds impetus to this change. Indeed, one of the most engaging arguments for an 'ethnography for present situations', very much premised on the idea of travelling along with the issues at hand, comes from a professor of law (Westbrook, 2008).

Corresponding author:

Nyiri Pál, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit, De Boelelaan 1081 HV, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: p.d.nyiri@vu.nl

Westbrook argues that anthropology's conceptual eclecticism combined with the centrality of ethnography as a method makes it particularly suited for untangling the complex issues of the contemporary world – the untangling that Molland and Xiang, borrowing a term from Ulf Hannerz (2006: 24), call 'studying through' in their articles in this issue. In Westbrook's view, this eclecticism – what he terms the porosity of anthropology's borders – is an asset rather than an embarrassment. Yet he is also aware of the difficulty of establishing scholarly authority – traditionally associated with the researcher's extended residence in the village, the proverbial hut built by the natives – in research of 'present situations' (Westbrook, 2008). Although serendipity has always been important for anthropology (cf. Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007), meticulously recording the life of a village for five years substantiated the ethnographer's claim that what he recorded was not accidental but representative, indeed exhaustive. In multi-sited ethnography, the role of accidents becomes obvious. The researcher still looks for structure, patterns, and regularities. But instead of, or in addition to, repeated, long-term stays at a particular location, she faces choices about which of the many trajectories of her informants to follow within the constraints of time allowed by university teaching schedules. If James Watson's study of the Man lineage (1975), perhaps the first transnational ethnography of migration, was largely restricted to two (broadly conceived) locations, Vanessa Fong's (2004, 2011) research on the lives of a cohort of Chinese high-school graduates, which like Watson's promises to be a longitudinal project, has taken her to numerous countries spread over four continents. As research subjects make rapid moves, predicting and controlling the progress of the research project becomes more difficult, even as universities and funding institutions ironically demand *more* control and almost complete predictability.

In such situations, keeping in touch with one's informants remotely, by phone, email, online chat and/or Facebook becomes essential, not only in order to maintain a sense of what is happening to the people one is studying, but also because these media become instruments of group formation and maintenance, of narrating migrants' experiences and constructing their subjectivities. Online (components of) ethnographies are thus bound to become more mainstream. But there is more at stake. For one thing, as Xiang Biao pointed out (2011), the line between academic and extra-academic engagement blurs further as researcher and informants try to make time for each other in their schedules and, in a different way, as the researcher's choice between different locations and lines of inquiry is influenced by current affairs interpreted in the light of his world view and political engagement. For another thing, taking the influence of online and other media in informants' lives seriously requires an engagement with text and image, which points further beyond anthropology's disciplinary boundaries. (Witness, for example, the centrality of videos in the maintenance of a transnational Hmong identity in Louisa Schein's [2002] work, or of radio broadcasts in the Christian conversion of Vietnamese Hmong by diasporic co-ethnics in Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm's [2011] dissertation.)

Such research practices also disrupt the routine exercise of 'following one's field': reading, citing, and compiling bibliographies. I have stumbled across a

number of 'fields' and texts, both academic and non-academic – from articles in advertising journals to feature films – that influenced my work; just as often, I have tried to store away some minute events I had just witnessed in one of my mental compartments, vaguely aware that it was relevant but not quite knowing for what. Such sensations cannot be new or unusual for anthropologists. Nonetheless, the sheer variety and density of such impulses beg the question: how do we discern patterns of significance in the wildly varied array of 'data', located – as the Comaroffs (2003) wrote about the difficulties of capturing the relationship between the encroachment of global markets and the rise in zombie sightings in South Africa ethnographically – 'on an awkward scale'? The solution: 'in part [by] paying careful attention, in part [by] inspired guesswork, in part [by] theoretical and philosophical predilection' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003: 166); in other words, the way many anthropologists have long gone about their work. But by what means do we convince our readers that such eclecticism – or in Jeroen de Kloet's term, 'disciplinary promiscuity'¹ – can do anthropology's most important job: gaining insight into global social processes through the lives of a few individuals?

The Comaroffs (2003: 164) describe the figure of the zombie in late 1990s South Africa as 'a focal point at which the preoccupations of the period had taken tangible shape'. 'When and how', Xiang (2011) asks in an e-mail to me about this chapter, 'does an apparently accidental scene become a window? It is through hindsight, side-sight, instead of gaze, that we can detect the ever more complex and dynamic trends of changes?' Indeed. Lateral vision has always been an important, if not always proudly acknowledged, element of ethnographic curiosity: eavesdropping on the people sitting at the next table can suddenly make the pieces of the puzzle fall into their places. But there is more to it. Anthropology can help uncover the relationship between seemingly trivial changes in local practices and global structural processes: the proverbial relationship between the flap of a butterfly's wings and a hurricane halfway around the world; or, to cite the Comaroffs again, 'large forces . . . whose existence may be inferred only through their effects [that are] impossible to grasp at only one site [and] elude proof by ordinary means' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003: 158). In the contemporary research context – with new epistemological and methodological challenges produced both by the world under investigation and the academic world producing the investigation – lateral vision is central to noticing the flap.

Closely related to this is another long-noted characteristic of anthropology (e.g. Gay y Blasco and Wardle, 2007: 13): it is always implicitly comparative, because its power to make the familiar look strange (Scheper-Hughes, 1990), and thereby to reassess its meaning, lies in juxtaposing it with the unfamiliar. Indeed, juxtaposition is perhaps a better term than comparison, for anthropology is far better at *rendering* situations comparable across place or time, thus forcing a change of perspective, than at actually comparing them. Clifford Geertz (1988: 106) saw ethnography as a practice of juxtaposing what he called 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts. Drawing on Geertz, George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986: 123) saw parallels between the work of anthropologists and French

surrealist collages: they pointed out that both achieve their effect, and are able to function as cultural critique, by juxtaposing elements that seem shockingly disparate and so serve to defamiliarize the quotidian. Indeed, much of the best anthropology works through evocation, like art, as much as through argument: a point that may have uncomfortable epistemological implications, but one that is nonetheless important if anthropology is to regain its public relevance.

But juxtaposition, though accident also plays a part here, is not random: what we choose to juxtapose with what is evidently informed by our theoretical, political and personal predilections. In this sense, as Xiang (2011) notes, juxtaposition can be seen as a method: not a methodology, not a method of fieldwork or writing, but an embodied method of thinking that informs the time 'in the field' as well as outside it. For instance, watching actress Zhao Tao's latest Italian-made film about a Chinese migrant in Venice (*Io sono Li* by Andre Sagre, 2011) while on a return visit to Chinese garment workers in the Tuscan town of Prato, or reading the Hungarian prime minister's latest remarks about China during fieldwork in Cambodia, triggers juxtapositions that might not occur to me in my home setting where I am supposed to concentrate more on juxtaposing different cases.

In what follows, I describe three ethnographic moments in my work on migration that have, in hindsight or side-sight, been revelatory: the way the appearance of Chinese traders in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s seemed a kind of fluke at the time but, in hindsight, turned out to herald a new global movement with profound implications; the way a student demonstration in Sydney and its online hinterland offered a new perspective on the debate on civil society in China; and the way interactions between Chinese managers and local workers in poor countries may be the sprouts of some new cosmopolitanism. Juxtaposed, but perhaps also layered over each other, these instances reveal something about the benefits of lateral vision to generate insight into the larger workings of the world through engagement with migrants.

Chinese migrants in Hungary, 1991

As a master's student in 1991, back from my first Asian trip with fresh impressions of Malaysia, I started doing what I later learned to call ethnographic research among Chinese migrants in Hungary. I was expecting that these migrants, entrepreneurs who had left mainland China after 1989 to sell consumer goods in Eastern Europe's newly opening markets, would become Hungary's 14th recognized national minority with a localized version of being Chinese à la Malaysia, and set out to chronicle, but also to assist, their construction of communal institutions. Hungary, like China, inherited its catalogue approach to national minorities from the Soviet Union, but this did not prevent me from envisioning a role for it in a liberal future. Contraction of real incomes had already made for bad economic mood in Hungary, nationalism was on the rise, and borders were beginning to close again. But all that appeared to be passing setbacks in a fundamentally accommodating society that still prided itself on its former status as the 'merriest barracks on

the Socialist bloc', now converted into top-of-the-class standing among the European Community's new apprentices.

Yet as time passed, it became clear that the purpose of Chinese organizations in Hungary was creating business and political links with China, rather than making claims to rights or recognition within Hungarian society (Nyíri, 1999). Neither successive Hungarian governments that both generated and followed a rising wave of xenophobia nor Chinese migrants themselves appeared interested in what nowadays is called 'integration'. Instead of developing a localized form of being Chinese, migrants continued to depend on businesses with China for their livelihoods, made more trips to China as they became more prosperous, extended their retail networks to neighbouring countries as the markets they operated in became saturated, left their children at home with their parents or sent them to English-language schools rather than Hungarian ones, and when satellite television and the internet became widespread, their participation in a global imagined community of mainland Chinese migrants became ever stronger.

What I observed fit perfectly in the conceptual framework of migrant transnationalism, made popular just at that time by Nina Glick Schiller and her co-authors (Basch et al., 1993). But at the time, this migration wave seemed to be tied to a very particular, historically unique set of conditions in both countries: a brief window of liberal immigration policies, the emergence of a poorly regulated free market, and demand for cheap consumer goods in Hungary; inflation combined with an overproduction glut, layoffs at state enterprises, and fears of a roll-back of economic reforms in China. While these conditions applied across Eastern Europe, Hungary was at the time seen as the forerunner of economic reform and, during a brief period, went farthest in liberalizing its immigration policy by lifting the visa requirement for Chinese citizens. The result was a brief 'Hungary fever' in 1992–3, when tens of thousands of Chinese entered the country each year.

It was some 15 years later, when Chinese migration to Africa began attracting first media and then scholarly attention, that what I had found in Hungary began looking less like a historical curiosity and more like an early instance of a worldwide conjuncture, in which migrants from mainland China emerge as indispensable actors in a global transformation of consumption and labour practices, linking an expanding Chinese economy to post-structural adjustment markets and decaying welfare regimes. Economic and social practices, family lives or media consumption of newly arrived Chinese businessmen and -women who opened shops across Cape Verde (Østbø Haugen and Carling, 2005), Namibia (Dobler, 2009), Mali (Bourdarias, 2010) or Senegal (Kernen, 2010), but also Peru (Lausent-Herrera, 2009) or Suriname (Tjon Sie Fat, 2010), exhibit a number of similarities to the patterns I had observed in Hungary. (In fact, some Chinese entrepreneurs in Hungary were among the pioneers of garment imports to Africa and South America, as they discovered that unsold stocks from the northern hemisphere summer can be sold there.)

The picture that emerges from these studies is one of a global entrepreneurialiat, linked by multifunctional business networks, high mobility and dense flows of

capital, goods and information, while retaining a marginal social status within local societies. Their media consumption, including social media, is dominated by content originated in China. As local Chinese-language schools and media are increasingly manned by teachers and journalists who come from China, these too are beginning to acquire the character of global networks with considerable internal cross-border labour mobility. When I encountered new Chinese migrants in Cambodia and Laos in the 2000s, my familiarity with Chinese entrepreneurship in Eastern Europe enabled me to understand their life-worlds in a way that neither local Chinese nor researchers of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia did. I felt right 'at home', for instance, talking to leaders of new Chinese organizations, editors of newspapers or stall keepers at markets, situations in which local Chinese interlocutors felt somewhat alienated or at least out of place. Since I felt already familiar with the logic of many transactions taking place around my interlocutors, it took less time to identify meaningful directions to pursue in my fieldwork – but at the same time anchored it even more strongly in the optic of new migrants rather than that of local populations. This sense of familiarity was not simply expedient for fieldwork, however: it retrospectively marked what happened in Hungary in 1991 as historically significant, and suggested that relevant frameworks for conceptualizing it may have to do with global changes to the political economy rather than only with migration systems that connect particular localities.

In a review of a later book that summarizes my research in Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe (Nyíri, 2007), Terence Gomez and Gregor Benton (2011: 872) ask: 'Can a general theory be spun from data about migrant communities so strongly shaped by transitory, contextual and exceptional circumstances?' They answer in the negative and suggest that the diversity of Chinese migrants' experiences across classes, generations and places is poorly served by a transnational optic. Indeed, any generalization runs the risk of oversimplification, as anthropologists well know. But as Bunzl (2008) warns, anthropology must retain some capacity for generalization if it is to remain relevant for understanding the world. Indeed, we must remain attentive to the ways in which the current generation of Chinese entrepreneurs around the world, and in particular their local-born or (semi-)local-raised children, will interact with diverse local societies and with China. It is very likely that the experiences of this generation will prove unique. Yet the circumstances that appeared 'transitory, contextual and exceptional' have proven to be more persistent, and indicative of a larger transformation that Chinese migration is undergoing in tandem with the changing configurations of world economic power and political fashions, including the cooptation of transnational politics into states' political arsenals. In the year 2011, just as Hungary adopted a new constitution that defines the nation as a single whole that reaches across state boundaries, I was told about a third-generation Chinese baby in Hungary who was being sent back to China to be raised with great-grandparents, suggesting that 'training for transnationalism' can persist across generations.

Chinese students in Australia, 2008

If the above example illustrates how ethnographic knowledge accumulated in a more or less ‘classical’ way acquires new significance in hindsight, the following is one of ‘side-sight’ –produced by analysing a single event using an unorthodox combination of research methods and leading to conversations largely outside anthropology, in the very particular field of scholarship and political engagement that focuses on Chinese media, the internet, and civil society. In 2008, Zhang Juan and Merriden Varrall, then both my students, and I joined what its organizers named the Sydney Chinese Grand Patriotic and Peaceful March and another, similar event in Canberra, in a ‘collaborative event ethnography’ (Brosius and Campbell, 2010).² Both events were attended almost exclusively by mainland Chinese who were studying or had graduated from Australian universities – the turnout at both events was estimated at around 10,000 – and intended to protect the relay of the Olympic torch from possible sabotage by Tibetan or human rights activists and to protest Western media portrayal of the recent riots in Tibet. Our interest did not spring from a sustained engagement with Chinese students or professionals in Australia: it was an ‘empirical conjuncture’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003: 151). On my part, it came from a puzzlement with what I felt were kneejerk reactions to perceived slights by Chinese nationalists on the internet, which I had discussed in a long semi-academic text I ended up posting on the internet under a pen-name (Third Tone Devil, 2007); and it wasn’t hard to persuade my two students, who were themselves curious about the demonstrations, to join. The political stances from which the three of us engaged with the demonstrations were palpably different – although we avoided discussing them in detail – but this posed no obstacle for observing the events in concert.

What I think intrigued all of us was what moved masses of seemingly apolitical and apparently rather well-heeled Chinese undergraduates – as well as some secondary-school students and a number of older professionals – from all over Australia to turn out in such large numbers at two political rallies that, as it turned out, involved highly emotional and occasionally violent scenes (in Canberra, a Chinese demonstrator was arrested for attacking a man with a Taiwanese flag). We had been used to seeing these students on our own campuses, keeping to themselves and staying away from public events. Had it been mobilization by the Chinese embassy that brought them out to demonstrate? If so, why had it succeeded? Or had it been economic calculation, or else genuine patriotic sentiment?

The demonstrations in Australia took place within a chain of similar events that spanned the globe and roughly followed the relay of the Olympic torch from Europe to North America to the Asia-Pacific, although some protests were ‘off course’. Online discussion forums popular in Mainland China, such as Tianya – of which Zhang Juan was a regular reader – were instrumental in linking these local events and turning them into a global spectacle followed by millions of vicarious participants. As the torch made its way around the world, organizers learned from and competed with each other. Trawling through thousands of pages of online

comments, we tracked in real time how events and emotions unfolded on the web. We then placed our observations and interviews during and after the Sydney and Canberra demonstrations, as well as their local media coverage and afterlife, in the context of this global story (Nyíri and Zhang, 2010).

Against the predominant explanations of these nationalistic demonstrations as either orchestrated by the Chinese government or rationally arising from a sense of humiliation and injustice, neither of which matched the atmosphere in Sydney's streets, we were primarily interested in coming up with an adequate rendering of what sort of nationalism it was that went so well with Louis Vuitton bags, a constant snapping of photos, and even with an online beauty contest of demonstrators. We concluded that beyond the cathartic emotional experience of belonging to a world-wide community the 2008 demonstrations offered, displays of 'hip nationalism' also provided 'an opportunity for individual demonstrations of middle-class sophistication, creativity, passion, youthful power and cosmopolitanism. For young demonstrators overseas, these attributes represent[ed] not only an ideal self but also the new, "real China"' (Nyíri and Zhang, 2010: 27) which they embodied. We suggested that these multiple emotional rewards arising from the experience itself – combined with the possibility of socioeconomic rewards of media celebrity status – were at least as important for understanding successful mobilization as the usual explanations, which focused on the *content* of nationalist discourse.³

What had drawn me to study the demonstrations was a search for a better understanding of Chinese nationalism. It is true that they marked a turn in Chinese transnational politics, which in the preceding period had largely been marked by interactions between the Chinese state and overseas organizations that had endorsed state nationalism and, on the other hand, by the oppositional activism of the Falungong and some dissident organizations. Compared to these relatively marginal phenomena, the student demonstrators managed to attract national attention and to shape nationalist discourse *inside* China. As on many occasions in the past, the figure of the overseas migrant again captured centre stage in Chinese imaginations of national modernization. Nonetheless, rather than a *sui generis* experience, the overseas events organized on Mainland China-based online portals and in front, as it were, of breathless millions of virtual spectators in China served as a proxy for studying nationalist mobilization in China itself, where such demonstrations are not allowed. Ultimately, the main analytical thrust of our study was to offer a corrective to the debate on 'civil society' in China and the role of transnational spaces in its construction, which has long been fraught by a double – technological and political – determinism. In this debate, civil society is still so often equated with liberal democratic goals that observers fail to recognize the dynamics of even fairly large-scale non-state social organizing when it does not pursue an agenda of resisting the state.

Chinese managers in Cambodia, 2011

Beginning in 2007, I have been going back to Laos and Cambodia to talk to new migrants coming from China and visit the sites at which Chinese investment was

changing these countries: hydropower plants, real estate projects and rural land concessions. This migration started in the mid-1990s and gained scale in the 2000s. Beyond the familiarity that I experienced when encountering small businessmen who flocked to Cambodia and Laos to trade at markets and set up shops, just like their predecessors in Eastern Europe 15 years earlier, I wanted to engage with the emerging public debate in the West on China's 'overseas expansion' in the 'developing world', including large-scale investment, aid, and migration. That debate, centring on Africa, was gaining volume; but most pronouncements were based on politicians' statements, trade figures, or news articles. It was generally assumed that various activities of Chinese investors and managers were all part of a concerted plan and amounted to a conscious application of a 'Chinese model of development'. The main thrust of the debate was whether that model, or which elements of it, were beneficial or harmful to the countries involved and, more generally, to the future of the world. Yet there was next to no knowledge of whether and how 'the Chinese presence' was impacting the societies in which it was emerging.

Deciding vaguely that I wanted to introduce an ethnographic corrective to this debate and that I would try to do so from Laos and/or Cambodia, countries I liked and that were easier for me to access than Africa, I was fairly sure that ideas of the good life – whether they changed or not – would be central to whatever I come up with. As I do not speak Lao or (despite repeated efforts) Khmer, I was limited to focusing on the perceptions of Chinese managers and businessmen. Did they see themselves as a vanguard of modernization, in line with the Chinese media discourse that I had earlier encountered in Eastern Europe, or did they develop some appreciation for alternative desires and pleasures? How much did the very different historical, political and economic situation of these countries, compared to Eastern Europe, matter for the way in which the lives and economic activities of new Chinese migrants articulated with local society? What was the place of the 'old' overseas Chinese in this process? Did the migrants reinforce the hegemonic narrative of Chinese modernization in their daily practices? Did that narrative dislodge previously distinct local self-perceptions of what being Chinese meant, or did the heterogeneity of migrant and settled Chinese populations create a more complex picture? Implicitly, what drove this undertaking was the hope that it opens a window on the changing ways in which various – largely middle-class – segments of Chinese society engage with the world and position themselves within it.

I ended up focusing on two aspects of Chinese-local interactions: two territorial concessions granted Chinese investors in the north of Laos, promoted as model spaces of modernization – and vaguely reminiscent of the real estate projects growing out of Chinese trade centres in Eastern Europe – but so far consisting mainly of casinos, and interactions between Chinese managers and local workers in factories and at construction sites. Both tracks were, to some degree, informed by the hindsight of trends I had been observing in Hungary, but led to different directions. The first focus led me to the historical genealogy of enclaves in the China-Lao-Burma borderland, with a legacy of armed resistance struggles and drug trafficking tied in various ways to political and personal interactions with China that was being

transformed into a new logic of representing Chinese modernity while still maintaining the allure of the 'free zone'. The results of the second line of inquiry were more predictable: Chinese managers and businessmen did largely see themselves as instilling labour practices essential for modernizing Laos and Cambodia, and were reporting modest successes.

What I found more interesting, however, were the hesitations and deviations from this narrative. A young manager at one of the concessions laments that local Lao farmers are now demanding cash for what used to be a display of hospitality and says he therefore likes to remind Chinese investors that what they bring is in fact a decrease of locals' happiness. A senior manager at a hydropower construction site expresses his preference for single-storey colonial townhouses to the real estate boom that will ensue if his company's developmental visions materialize. Although both make it clear that, whatever their personal feelings, they see the development they are ushering in as both inevitable and, on balance, positive, there is a note of hesitation that echoes the more ambivalent attitudes to development that have emerged among China's young urbanites. An increasing number of young urban Chinese are ending up staying around Tibetan monasteries or in ethnic minority villages for months or years, some of them opening backpacker bars, others making documentaries, teaching English to novice monks, or even founding educational NGOs (Blumenfeld, 2011). This type of desire for, and sometimes identification with, the 'authentic' (in Chinese, the term 'primitive' (*yuanshi*) is still in use, and can have a positive connotation) first arose among Western travellers who followed, and sometimes worked for, colonial expansion. Peter van der Veer (2002) calls it 'anti-colonial cosmopolitanism', although it was not so much anti-colonial as anti-developmental.

Unlike their colonial predecessors, Chinese 'spiritual seekers' are so far largely limited to domestic travel, but – aided by an emerging volunteer movement – are bound to appear soon in countries like Laos, Nepal, and farther afield. Since international aid and volunteering are becoming part of China's diplomacy, the relationship between the roles of development agent and spiritual seeker is going to be as complex as in colonial times, and it will involve an increasing number of Chinese. Places like Laos and Cambodia will therefore be good places to watch shifting Chinese subjectivities in relation to progress and China's place in the world. Nitnoi Faming's (2011) account of how the emphasis in conversations with Chinese language teachers, enlisted as paid volunteers in Laos on a government programme, moves from professional pride in having been selected to the enjoyment of massage and other creature comforts as they spend more time in the country, offers a taste of what is to come. There already are signs of a confrontation between Chinese corporations seeking cheaper labour and laxer regulations than in China on the one hand, and a growing handful of critical Chinese journalists, environmentalists and volunteers abroad on the other, for example around the issue of the Myitsone dam, Southeast Asia's largest planned hydropower station whose construction by a branch of State Grid, a Chinese company, was recently stopped by the Burmese government (Yang, 2012). This confrontation may have

implications for the public sphere in China itself. What I learned in Cambodia thus points to the need of following different and perhaps competing groups of new globetrotting Chinese elites.

The Hungarian state, 20 years on

Above, I hope to have provided three examples of ‘sites and moments where links between individual activities and structural forces are most visible’, as the editors of this issue asked. While I was working on this brief reflection, in early summer 2011, another such moment occurred and struck me with particular personal force. China’s premier, Wen Jiabao, visited Hungary and announced a spate of state and corporate investments and loans, ranging from a railway rehabilitation project to a European logistics base and, possibly, the buying of some of Hungary’s sovereign debt. His Hungarian counterpart, who had just finished a term at the head of the European Union’s rotating presidency, hailed China as an important new ally with a ‘shared vision of the future’.⁴ China’s terms, according to the government, were preferable to those of the World Bank, with which Hungary had shortly before ended its compliance. On the day of Wen’s visit, a Saturday, Hungarian immigration authorities summoned Tibetans living in the country to their offices (ostensibly to check their residence documents), while police tackled and detained a handful of Hungarian protestors with Tibetan flags. Before and after the visit, Hungarian media aired a series of reports praising the industry and resourcefulness of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs.

It was as if all the directions of my research had come together in this event. For the lives of Chinese entrepreneurs in Hungary and their children, such an injection of Chinese capital stood to be both a new opportunity for subcontracts and brokering and, to an extent, a recognition of their status as the mainstay of Eastern Europe’s Chinese economy. The appeal of ‘the Chinese development model’ – interpreted in this case as one in which the state can mobilize and restrain labour and capital unfettered by legal constraints on such intervention – has widened enough to count the prime minister of a European Union member state among its converts.⁵ The mayor of Budapest, for his part, announced that he wanted to follow China’s example in ‘bringing more discipline into the city’s life’ during his visit to Beijing in 2011.⁶ The way in which government supporters, seemingly unbothered by the contradiction between its strong anti-communist ideology and its compliance with the perceived sensitivities of its communist guests, now accused critics of the police action of being unpatriotic was reminiscent of the emotional experience of Chinese nationalism. Twenty years earlier, Chinese entrepreneurs had settled in Hungary in a time of the liberalization of everything, surrounded by a vague halo of being victims of a more repressive party-state than the one that had just been eased out of existence at their destination. This garnered them no popular sympathy. Still unwelcomed and ‘unintegrated’, today they are at last included as useful aliens in a discourse of national development with which they are familiar from the country they left behind: one officially based on a

Declaration of National Accord, in which the possibility of individual dissent is discounted.

These unexpected transferences signal how fast the world is changing: 22 years earlier, it was the current ruling party, then technically still illegal, that organized protests against the Tiananmen Square massacre in Budapest. It was the only such demonstration in still-socialist Eastern Europe (in those times, such feats were the source of our nationalist pride!), but a sense that the Chinese Communist Party was trying to stop an unfolding development that we shared with the students at Tiananmen was probably shared more widely in the region. I had not been opposed to the Hungarian party-state, but its 'peaceful evolution' towards an electoral democracy seemed both natural and emotionally and intellectually gratifying. In the second half of the '80s, Chinese and Hungarian students and reformist intellectuals had probably read, done, and thought more similar things than either before or after. Ten years later, the sense of shared historicity – probably more complex than simply an 'end-of-history' moment – was gone, replaced by a booming culturalist discourse on Asian/Chinese uniqueness. Ten more years, and the discourse of cultural uniqueness has been adopted by the Hungarian state, and there is far less shared sense of historicity even with the rest of Europe. The appeal to the government of a 'Chinese model' of hard work, patriotic capital, and a pastoral-paternal discourse of nationhood had nothing to do with a sense of shared destiny – its adoption is possible precisely because of China's presumed 'alienness'. Remembering how yesterday's history differs from today – that is, 'history from an anthropological perspective'.

Ethnographic and anthropological tools are needed to understand the complex web of human interactions and beliefs left behind as the tide of liberalism withdraws. In this fragile landscape we anthropologists, like so many Miss Marples, may recognize patterns that are familiar from elsewhere. This, too, is 'history from an anthropological perspective'. But are those similarities reliable? To avoid the curse of Borgesian maps, lateral vision will be important. Political stances and scholarly insights will probably become entangled in more ways than they have before. The task of maintaining analytical soundness while trying to develop a more effective way of engaging with political decision-makers is daunting.

Notes

1. Conversation with the author, 13 March 2011.
2. Event ethnographies in particular benefit from collaborations, as multiple participants observe the same event from several physical and subject positions. On collaborations in multisited ethnographies, see Matsutake Worlds Research Group (2009).
3. Yang Guobin (2011) has made a similar argument in the context of online mobilization within China. Cf. also Jeffrey Juris's (2008) study of anti-globalization activists.
4. Horváth Andor Márton, 'Éljen a nemzetköziség' (Long live internationality), community.eu, 27 June 2011. <http://www.community.eu/2011/06/27/eljen-a-nemzetkoziseg/> (accessed 9 March 2013).

5. The conversion seems to be more than a tactical move on the prime minister's part. Soon afterwards, the Hungarian government enacted a series of laws curbing labour rights and decreasing remuneration, including the compulsory draft of unemployed welfare recipients into mobile labour squads paid less than the official minimum wage. Simultaneously, it introduced one-off taxes that only apply to certain companies and decreed that some borrowers do not have to pay back the full extent of their loans to banks. Also in 2011, a government delegation visited China's General Administration of Press and Publications to 'exchange experience' before enacting Europe's most restrictive media law. Similar trends are in evidence in the new law on religious organizations, which effectively allows the government to determine what qualifies as religion, and the new cultural and educational policy that privileges 'patriotic' art and literature.
6. MTI, 'A kínai fegyelmet tartaná követendőnek a fő város életében Tarlós István' (Tarlós István considers Chinese discipline an example to follow in capital's life), origo.hu, 13 July 2011. Available at: <http://www.origo.hu/itthon/20110713-tarlos-istvan-partnervarosi-egymuttmukodest-kotne-pekinggel.html> (accessed 9 March 2013).

References

- Basch L, Schiller NG and Blanc CS (1993) *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. New York: Gordon & Breach.
- Blumenfield T (2011) *Educational NGOs and Cultural Branding in a Northwest Yunnan Tourist Zone*. Paper presented at the AAS-ICAS joint conference, Honolulu, 3 April.
- Bourdarias F (2010) Chinese migrants and society in Mali: Local constructions of globalization. *African and Asian Studies* 9(3): 269–285.
- Brosius JP and Campbell LM (2010) Collaborative event ethnography: Conservation and development trade-offs at the fourth world conservation congress. *Conservation & Society* 8(4): 245–255.
- Bunzl M (2008) The quest for anthropological relevance: Borgesian maps and epistemological pitfalls. *American Anthropologist* 110(1): 53–60.
- Cerwonka A and Malkki LH (2007) *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Comaroff J and Comaroff J (2003) Ethnography on an awkward scale: Postcolonial anthropology and the violence of abstraction. *Ethnography* 4(2): 147–179.
- Dobler G (2009) Chinese shops and the formation of a Chinese expatriate community in Namibia. *The China Quarterly* 199: 707–727.
- Faming M (2011) *Social and Cultural Mobility: Chinese Language (Volunteers) Teachers in Laos*. Paper presented at the AAS-ICAS joint conference, Honolulu, 3 April.
- Fong VL (2004) *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-child Policy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Fong VL (2011) *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gay y Blasco P and Wardle H (2007) *How to Read Ethnography*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Geertz C (1988) *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gomez ET and Benton G (2011) Transnationalism misapplied: Reconciling empirical evidence and theory. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34(5): 870–878.

- Hannerz U (2006) Studying down, up, sideways, through, backwards, forwards, away and at home: Reflections on the field worries of an expansive discipline. In: Coleman S and Collins PJ (eds) *Locating the Field: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 23–41.
- Juris JS (2008) *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kernen A (2010) Small and medium-sized Chinese businesses in Mali and Senegal. *African and Asian Studies* 9(3): 252–268.
- Lausent-Herrera I (2009) Tusans (*tusheng*) and the changing Chinese community in Peru. In: Lai WL and Tan CB (eds) *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 143–184.
- Marcus GE (1995) Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.
- Marcus GE and Fischer MJ (1986) *Anthropology as a Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Matsutake Worlds Research Group (2009) A new form of collaboration in cultural anthropology: Matsutake worlds. *American Ethnologist* 36(2): 380–403.
- Ngô TTT (2011) *The New Way: Becoming Protestant Hmong in Contemporary Vietnam*. PhD Dissertation, Department of Social Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.
- Nyíri P (1999) *New Chinese Migrants in Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Nyíri P (2007) *Chinese in Russia and Eastern Europe: A Middleman Minority in a Transnational Era*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Nyíri P and Zhang J (with Varrall M) (2010) China's cosmopolitan nationalists: 'Heroes' and 'traitors' of the 2008 Olympics. *The China Journal* 63: 25–55.
- Østbø Haugen H and Carling J (2005) On the edge of the Chinese diaspora: The surge of Baihuo business in an African city. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(4): 639–662.
- Schein L (2002) Mapping Hmong media in diasporic space. In: Ginsburg FD, Abu-Lughod L and Larkin B (eds) *Media World: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 229–245.
- Scheper-Hughes N (1990) Difference and danger: The cultural dynamics of childhood stigma, rejection, and rescue. *Cleft Palate Journal* 27(3): 301–306.
- Third Tone Devil (2007) *China Can't Stop Saying No*. Available at: <http://chinasaysno.wordpress.com> (accessed 23 October 2012).
- Tjon Sie Fat PB (2010) Old migrants, new immigration and anti-Chinese discourse in Suriname. In: Lai WL and Tan CB (eds) *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 185–210.
- Van der Veer P (2002) Colonial cosmopolitanism. In: Vertovec S and Cohen R (eds) *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 165–180.
- Watson JL (1975) *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage: The Mans in Hong Kong and London*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Westbrook DA (2008) *Navigators of the Contemporary: Why Ethnography Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Xiang B (2011) Email correspondence with author about this chapter; 6 and 9 May.
- Yang GB (2011) Wanglou shijian zhong de qinggan dongyuan (Emotional mobilization in online events), *Yiwuyishi* 19. Available at: <http://www.my1510.cn> (accessed 12 August 2011).

Yang M (2012) Zhongmian shuidian anzhan (Sino-Burmese shadow war over hydropower), *Bloomberg Businessweek* Chinese edition, 9 March. Reposted on <http://bluesbeijing.blog.sohu.com/206216460.html> (accessed 23 March 2012).

Author's Biography

Nyíri Pál is Professor of Global History from an Anthropological Perspective at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. His most recent books are *Mobility and Cultural Authority in Contemporary China* and, with Joana Breidenbach, *Seeing Culture Everywhere ... from Genocide to Consumer Habits*. His main current research interest is the nexus between Chinese overseas migration and visions of development, about which he blogs at MqVU.wordpress.com.