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a Chinese immigrant walks his daughter to school in Budapest, September 2016. (Photo: Reuters)

Why Middle-Class Chinese Are Moving to Hungary

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Significant media attention has been paid to the fact that wealthy PRC immigrants have become the biggest foreign buyers of real estate in Canada, Australia, and the United States. While some of them replicate the experience of 1990s Hong Kong "astronauts" (□□□ , who dropped their wives and children abroad and returned home to do business), others move abroad with their families for a healthier environment, better education for their children, and a more relaxed lifestyle. In a 2017 survey of Chinese millionaires, 47% said they were considering emigration. The U.S. was their favorite destination, followed by the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and EU member states with so-called "golden visa" programmes that offer residency in exchange for investment, including Greece, Portugal, and Spain, as well as Ireland.

Major English-speaking countries have long been desirable destinations for successive waves of Chinese migrants. But Southern Europe's appearance on the list was unusual. Does it reflect a shift in the way well-to-do Chinese engage with the world, away from a focus on economic and educational opportunities and towards lifestyle consumption? Or are these countries merely seen as gateways to further migration?

Together with Beck Fanni,[1] an anthropology PhD student at Central European University in Vienna, I conducted interviews with around 20 families who paid €300 to 350 thousand to move from China to Budapest under Hungary's "golden visa" scheme between 2013 and 2017. More than 18,000 PRC citizens received residence permits under that scheme. Despite the suspension of the programme in 2017, this makes Hungary the top destination of Chinese investment immigrants in Europe so far, with Portugal and Greece in second and third place.

We found that while some “golden visa” recipients only invested in them as a form of insurance for the future and others are considering moving to other European countries (notably Germany) in the longer run, many have relocated to Hungary with their families and have no short-term intention of leaving. Considering that, since 2015, the Hungarian government has made headlines worldwide with its hard-line stand against immigration and multiculturalism, this seemed surprising. (Although Muslim and African migrants were the main targets of government rhetoric, in a 2016 survey, 53% of Hungarians said they did not want to have Chinese neighbors.)

Why did well-to-do Chinese move to Hungary? All those we talked to named concerns with the environment and food security, school pressure on children, and an excessively competitive society as reasons for leaving China; some also mentioned increasingly intrusive government surveillance. The relative cheapness and simplicity of Hungary’s immigration scheme attracted them once they had made up their mind to leave. Some had considered other destinations or even made arrangements to go elsewhere. A few had applied to immigrate to Canada under the Business Immigration Programme but were left empty-handed when that programme was abruptly cancelled in 2014. Several had considered Spain but decided against it, either because they found the immigration process too complicated or costly or because they worried that Spain would be “messy” ( ), a term often associated with strikes, demonstrations, unemployment, and/or non-white immigration.

Most are satisfied with their choice and perceive Hungary as offering cost-effective and safe access to a “European lifestyle” that involves, among other things, a green environment, cultural sophistication, and child-centred education. Over half of those we talked to live in detached houses with gardens in the leafy Budapest suburbs; they emphasised the fact that they now owned a *bieshu*, a “villa”, surrounded by greenery, which would have been unattainable in China. Others live in apartments in the central districts of Budapest, often chosen based on proximity to bilingual state schools. (Since 2016, Chinese citizens have been the top non-EU buyers of Hungarian real estate.)

In one of our interlocutors’ words, the Chinese who ended up in Hungary wanted a quiet life, away from the ill-gotten wealth and vulgarity he associated with some of the rich Chinese migrants in North America. Another, a partner in a technology

company in Beijing who decided to leave China mostly because of the polluted air, told us they had first considered New Zealand but decided against it because there were too many *nouveau riche* (□□) Chinese immigrants there; they also rejected the idea of moving to the US because it had too many guns and drugs. By distancing themselves from the *nouveau riche* and corrupt officials, middle-class migrants emphasize good taste and moderation, values that others with more money may lack.

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All of the migrants we spoke to were college-educated professional couples in their 30s or 40s, almost all with a young child. They had lived middle-class lives in major Chinese cities and either worked in the private economy or at a university. Some continue to own businesses and properties in China or have savings and investments that could provide for many years of comfortable living. In some families, the husband continues to work in China to provide for the family while the wife and child live in Hungary, but in many other cases the nuclear family stays in Hungary together. Affectionate and close parenting, as opposed to the constant rush in China, is a frequently mentioned gain associated with the move to Hungary.

What of the Hungarian government’s anti-immigration rhetoric? Along with its tough line on law and order, curtailing the right to strike and criminalizing homelessness, it appears to strike a chord with many well-to-do Chinese immigrants. Senior Hungarian government figures and government-controlled media blame immigration for crime, terrorism, and loss of cultural identity in Western Europe. This is in line with Chinese media portrayals of Western Europe as unsafe, which, too, often link the issue to migration. Echoing right-wing tropes in the West, social media in China often portray Chinese migrants as either threatened by or disadvantaged compared to “less deserving” migrant groups who are privileged by misguided liberal politics. The Hungarian government, while vocally rejecting liberal values, has facilitated the immigration of the wealthy. In a 2017 speech, Prime Minister Orbán Viktor said: “We do accept real refugees, those who are fleeing political correctness in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and France.” Three of our interviewees specifically pointed out the absence of Africans in Budapest as enhancing their sense of safety in contrast to cities in Western Europe. One said: “I like Orbán. Because he managed to keep out

the riffraff. Because he knew that if he let bad people in, good people like us wouldn't come."[2]

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Apart from considerations of safety, the preference for whiteness seems to stem from a desire to consume "European lifestyle" in a pure, unadulterated form. In an article for *Vice China*, a youth magazine, a Chinese student in England wrote: "Europe is someone's luxurious and beautiful living room; we have come a long way to this land of manners and brought our money…. Suddenly, a bunch of uninvited guests break down the door, have no appreciation for the display in the living room, and pay no heed to us, who are sitting with stiff backs on the sofa." Europe's perceived cultural wholesomeness—in contradistinction to the supposed materialism of both China and North America—was integral to our interlocutors' ideas of a European lifestyle.

Counterintuitively, our study thus suggests that well-do-do Chinese migrants who pursue cosmopolitan taste in Europe may be helping buoy local nativist politics even as some of them reject their own autocrats.

Notes

1. This article is based on a longer article by the author and Beck Fanni, forthcoming in the journal *Diaspora.*

2. Similarly, Zhang Chi has noted the favourable reception of U.S. President Donald Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric among Chinese in China and the U.S.

Tags

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