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Conceptualising cities and migrant ethnicity

The lessons of Chinese London

Laura Henneke and Caroline Knowles

Introduction: new departures

On 10 April 2017 the first UK to China export train pulled out of the newly constructed London Gateway port to a set piece political send-off with a full cast of Chinese officials and a wave from Greg Hands, the then Minister of State for the Department of International Trade, who called the departure ‘another boost for global Britain’ as he proclaimed the new (post-Brexit) era. The railway terminal is a component of ‘one of the biggest privately funded infrastructure projects the UK has ever seen’.

The departing freight train connects London and the Chinese city of Yiwu with 7,500 miles of rail track through the Channel Tunnel, France, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, and China. The route makes part of the China–Europe rail corridor, a fast-growing network of railway connections and a poster child for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The departure of the train signals the need for another departure – a departure from imagining that Chinese London is a clearly marked neighbourhood in Soho’s Chinatown, or that it is simply inscribed in bodies and businesses that bear its iconic markers. A departure in how to think about the ways in which (Chinese) ethnicities, migrations and other circulations co-compose cities on the scale suggested by the infrastructure developments implicated in the BRI’s route through London and its emerging consequences.

This chapter sketches in some of the realities on the ground when it comes to the emerging cartographies of Chinese London. We argue that it is no longer appropriate just to focus research and analysis on the small-scaled migrant-led ethnic marking of places that currently hold sway, such as in London’s Chinatown, not least because this has a bigger context in large-scaled capital-intensive Chinese infrastructural projects in construction that connect places. Urban, migration and ethnicity scholars alike have paid little attention to these often subtle, less visibly ethnically marked, but ultimately, as we will argue, more dramatic manifestations of Chinese ethnicities embedded in large-scale infrastructure projects. We describe what happens when classic tropes of migrant bodies moving small-scale capital to create Chinatowns (Anderson, 1919) are recalibrated, and large volumes of capital instead move...
migrant bodies and enterprise into a highly networked version of place making. This paper explores the implications of a vastly different scale of Chinese influence on the ways in which we think about cities, ethnicity and migration. It speculates on the consequences for London of becoming part of the complex dynamics of Chinese economic growth (The Economist, 2015), processes which are not necessarily confined to London and Chinese influence, but which may have broader resonance in our understanding of the ways in which ethnicity and migration produce cities.

Thinking through ethnicities and migration

Migrants to the UK, and, by extension the migration processes landing them on the shores of the island nation, have always been made conceptually and empirically visible through the interconnected social categories of race and ethnicity. Thereby race, ethnicity and migration have become inextricably intertwined in UK academic, policy and political discourse over the last half century (Alexander and Knowles, 2005; Bloch and Solomos, 2009; Gilroy, 1982; Rex, 1981; Rex and Moore, 1967; Solomos, 2003; Solomos and Wrench, 1995). This is at best an uneven process. Academic research and policy intervention have rendered some migrant ethnicities hyper-visible, while obscuring others (Knowles, 2013; Vertovec, 2007).

The Chinese, one of the world’s great diasporas (Skeldon, 2011), were excluded from the racialised anxieties that problematised African, Caribbean and South Asian migrants in the UK, conceptualising the Chinese instead as a small and successful minority, and thereby revealing the ‘social problem’ framework within which migrant ethnicities are understood as socially underachieving, failed examples of integration.

While Chinese sailors, predominantly from Hong Kong and the Chinese Province of Fujian have lived in London, Liverpool and Cardiff for over a hundred years, in 1945 there were only 5,000 Chinese people in the UK. By the time of the 2011 census the recorded UK Chinese population had risen to 379,530, equivalent to a city the size of Bristol today, with London forming the centre of Chinese Britain. This increase coincides with a shift in the character of the migrant population itself (Pharoah, 2009); in the past it was predominantly the result of colonial connections with Hong Kong and long settled. Two thirds of Chinese people in the UK today are new, mainland-born migrants, with the resources to navigate the new architectures of immigration control, which favour ‘exceptionally skilled’ and ‘investor’ migrants. Visa applications by aspiring Chinese migrants over the last few years have massively increased. This coincides with the rising significance of China as a global force and the eagerness of successive UK governments to do business with China – the biggest single export market on the planet – and, as we will argue, an important source of foreign direct investment (FDI).

City-thinking

While cities have long been recognised as de facto territories of ethnic migrant habitation, they are predominantly seen as microcosms of larger scales of activity generated by states (Alexander and Knowles, 2005). A clearer focus on urban scales offers new insights into the co-construction of ethnically marked migration and city life, in the context of an emerging framework in which the agency of cities in generating the processes they also ground is increasingly acknowledged. More than points of entry, exit and transit, more than places of long and short-term residence (Smith and Eade 2008:5–7), cities are key social spaces grounding transnational practices routing connected mobile subjects. Translocal migrant
ethnicities are imbricated in urban space through everyday bodily encounters (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Swanton, 2010) and through personal urban cartographies (Knowles and Harper 2009). To paraphrase Swanton, (2010:450) this takes migration into the very fabric of the city and its visual economy, making a more fluid, emergent and provisional mapping of new migrant ethnicities and cities possible. Cities condense the challenges we face in ethnicity and migration sociology: as places where lives are generated; where traces of elsewhere are registered in architectural and other surfaces of emergence, as well as in bodies in motion on the journeys of everyday life. Human and non-human trajectories converge on cities; and tracing these reveals ethnic-migrant lives, journeys and activities. These factors make cities the appropriate scale at which to develop an analysis of migration.

Acknowledgements of the agency of cities stress continuous city making, emergence and composition (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Swanton, 2010); interactions between (migrant and ethnic) material and human fabrics (Boutros and Straw, 2010; Ingold, 2000) and the understanding that cities are constituted in the multiple mobilities (of ethnic migrants and materials) that converge upon them (Amit, 2007; Clifford, 1997; Ingold, 2004); making cities best conceptualised as junction-points in a shifting matrix of local and translocal routes, plied everyday by people (sometimes as migrants), materials and objects (Knowles, 2014). Quite how these more fluid conceptions of cities work alongside migration and ethnicity remains to be fully explored. Thinking about this constellation of concepts through infrastructure might provide some leads.

Cities and ethnicities

When it comes to understanding the connections between cities and ethnicity it is difficult to keep pace with emerging realities of contemporary urban life on the ground: people are inherently mobile, albeit on different scales, and cities are always expanding, remade and reconfigured. Lived versions of ethnicity on the ground are equally motile, hybridised and emergent, especially around youth cultures as Parker and Song (2006) show in relation to the young Chinese online presence. The Chinese character of London in particular challenges the ways in which we might think about Chinese ethnicities co-composing urban landscape. Chinese London may hold wider ramifications for other migrant ethnicities and the cities they help make. London, of course, is not just a Chinese city, it is a Middle Eastern city, a Russian city and many other cities too, but these insights involve excavating beyond the visible optics of race and ethnicity and its more obvious inscriptions in urban space (Massey, 1994, 2004)\(^9\) in order to establish sources of capital investments and materials.

Despite recent developments in thinking about cities that acknowledge their fluid and emergent properties, consideration of ethnicity and urban landscape remains dominated by classic conceptions of ethnic enclaves (Farrar, 1997). This is derived through empirical studies dating from the early years of the 20th century in the Chicago School of urban sociology, which identified ethnicities in spatial terms as, for example, Chinatowns and Little Italys (Burgess, 1967). These formulations and their contemporary derivatives are underpinned by visibly marked commercial surfaces, in the case of Chinatown iconic images of Chineseness in red lanterns, Chinese food, the presence of Chinese people and (maybe) waving cats, staples in marking Chinatowns worldwide as well as in London.

But these essentialised and static versions of ethnic place-making are not only challenged by the more fluid conceptions of cities outlined above, they are disrupted by the heave of everyday city life as Chinese people make their way through London on myriad journeys with different intentions and outcomes, and, crucially, they are challenged by rising rents,
rates and property values, forcing Chinese businesses to move from London’s (Soho) Chinatown. Chinatown – as an indoor-outdoor museum commemorating Chinese London – remains visible in its stereotypical rendering, which many young Chinese people find objectionable (Knowles, 2015). But much of its commercial and residential vitality has moved to other parts of the city and a great deal of it is hidden. The dynamism co-composing cities’ ethnic texture is poorly captured by these static mappings of space. While cities are now conceptualised in more dynamic, mobile and emergent terms, little thought is given to how ethnicities – which are equally dynamic, mobile and emergent – are configured through these changes and through the routes that populations marked by ethnicity tread through them as they go about their everyday lives and business.

There are further complications too, complications which shift the analytic focus from places, even from emergent conceptions of places, to particular kinds of connections between places. We refer to infrastructure – something that is, we argue, particularly important in thinking about Chinese London. Little consideration is given to these subtler, less visibly ethnically marked and ultimately, as we will show, more dramatic manifestations of Chinese ethnicities embedded in large-scale infrastructure projects. What happens when the classic formulas of migrant bodies moving small-scale capital (Anderson, 1919) are reversed and large volumes of capital instead move migrant bodies and enterprise into place-and-connection-making? This paper focuses on thinking about urban ethnicity with a different scale of Chinese influence and the consequences of this. It is about what happens when London becomes a part of the complex dynamics of state and private sector Chinese economic growth (The Economist, 2015). How then should we think about the relationship between cities, ethnicity and migration?

**Urban infrastructure**

Ethnic migration, while still an active agent in city making, co-exists with large-scale capital movements, sometimes accompanied by the bodies of migrants, sojourners, temporary residents, distant and visiting investors, interlocutors, students and those who are passing through the city in the slipstream of Chinese capital from various private and state sources and its invisible as well as its visible manifestations (Knowles and Burrows, 2018). What happens when we shift the focus from the visible ethnic character of city making – in architecture, commercial surfaces, ethnic residence and so on – to include the city’s main arteries, the conduits through which people, objects and materials navigate movement within and through cities? What happens to thinking about ethnicities, migration and cities when infrastructure becomes a central analytic focus?

Amin and Thrift, (2017) note the essential and machine-like character of the ‘infrastructural entanglements’ that allows cities to stay in working order. Infrastructures constitute the loose vectors along which materials and objects move, forming complex assemblages with ethnic migrant bodies, capital and its human agents, also elements of infrastructure and vital components in city making. Infrastructure is what holds cities against the fragilities of collapse; infrastructure makes cities work – albeit often in ad hoc and circumscribed ways; infrastructure grinds a lens onto cities’ multiple possibilities. Of course we intend infrastructure in its broadest sense. Infrastructures are a matrix of urban fabrics – material, virtual, human – often combined in unexpected and creative ways in meeting everyday needs. Infrastructures are a fast emerging set of technical possibilities that interface with human ingenuity and creativity. Infrastructures are a practical tool in city making which at the same time provides a way of thinking about cities and the relationship between cities and the ethnicities co-composing them.
Departures – the train

On 10 April 2017 the first UK to China export train pulled out of the newly constructed London Gateway freight terminal, ‘one of the biggest privately funded infrastructure projects the UK has ever seen’ and yet it is unseen – described by one journalist as a megaport ‘you didn’t know existed’. Much urban infrastructure lies hidden beneath the surface of cities as pipes and cables but a megaport is hard to conceal. Its underpinning – in all of its giant sky scraping crane materiality and its 230 hectare business park, silt dredging that has refashioned the three kilometres of the Essex coastline near Stanford-le-Hope and the financial structures on which these giant construction stands – is hardly concealed. What are concealed are associations with other nation states and ethnicities’ financial and other city-making interests. That this £1.5 billion infrastructural investment was built by a Dubai company called DP World is invisible. Capital does not necessarily declare its national and ethnic associations explicitly; these must be excavated through registers of commercial interests and land ownership. No one looks at London’s Shard, for example, and intuits that it is a congealed pile of oil – the Qatar Sovereign Wealth Fund – but it doesn’t take long to work this out.

The freight train is part of the China-Europe rail corridor – sometimes called the New Silk Road in order to establish its long historical antecedents – that connects Yiwu in the eastern Chinese province of Zhejiang with 7,500 miles of rail track through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany, Belgium, France and now London. Trains departing from Yiwu head for nine different destinations across the Eurasian continent, including Teheran, Riga, and Madrid. Madrid perhaps provides a glimpse of London’s future, deeply textured with imported pound shop styled Chinese products and traders, a vibrant hive of commerce on the edge of the Spanish capital. More of this later.

The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China’s grand strategy to expand its influence by means of ambitious infrastructure projects across its border and into territories beyond (CPC, 2015, 2016; Leverett and Wu, 2017; Summers, 2016; World Bank, 2016). By establishing alternative trade routes, stabilising China’s border regions, increasing trade with neighbouring countries, integrating them into quickly evolving Asian value chains, and by promoting economic development in BRI countries, the intention of this initiative is to create a more connected, wealthier Asia (Kratz, 2017). London is just a small part of a grander plan. This interconnected Asia will have China as its core and have stable links to Africa and Europe. The increase of Chinese outward FDI has been observed for several years but only recently did China’s president Xi Jinping brand this as the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. In this he folded a number of existing or planned schemes into the grand narrative while claiming it to be his contribution in the quest of rejuvenating the ‘empire’ (Miller, 2017, p. 34).

The BRI has two main prongs: one is called the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ (the Belt) and the other the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’ (the Road)” (CPC, 2015). Contrary to what the metaphor suggests, the expansion of ‘the Belt’ is not limited to China’s neighbouring countries. It reaches as far as to South East Asia, West Africa and Europe, criss-crossing Central Asia, which forms a focus of the initiative. The region was largely neglected by international investors after the Soviet Union fell apart and today, Central Asian governments are especially open to contracts with Chinese developers who want to build highways, transport hubs and other supporting infrastructure to enable the circulation of goods in the most remote areas of the Eurasian continent. ‘The Road’ on the other hand, refers to a sea route
linking China’s southern coast to East Africa and the Mediterranean mainly in terms of investment in geostrategic harbours such as the Greek port of Piraeus, the Gate to Europe, purchased by Chinese state-owned COSCO\textsuperscript{11,12} when Greece privatised many of its assets as austerity measures in 2016.\textsuperscript{13}

The BRI is financed through a complex funding mechanism. To begin with, Beijing established the $40 billion ‘Silk Road Fund’ in December 2014 to support investments as part of the initiative, gathering resources from the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, the China Investment Corporation, the Export-Import Bank of China, and the China Development Bank (Guluzian, 2017, p. 136). Another important funding body is the $100 billion China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). This is a development bank allocating funds for infrastructure construction projects as part of the New Silk Road and is constituted of 57 members including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Russia, but not the United States. However, the estimated price tag of the Belt and Road Initiative is $1 trillion. To bridge the gap, international and regional development banks (such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank), host governments, and private-sector actors are also providing financing (ibid.).

A dense infrastructure network

According to the Chinese government, the BRI will run through 67 countries; however, a clear definition of what it is is not provided. It is commonly agreed, however, that BRI is a network of trading routes influenced by the competing demands of geography, commerce and geopolitics (Frankopan, 2018; Macaes, 2018; Miller, 2017; Nolan, 2017; Summers, 2016). Chinese firms will build new roads and railway tracks, linking mines with power plants, factories, wholesale markets, and new mushrooming cities wherever they can find willing partners (Miller, 2017, p. 31). London is but a small node in a vast networked infrastructure project centred on China – the new, fast emerging Chinese London.

At a summit in Beijing on 15 May 2017, China was hoping to give global legitimacy to Xi’s signature initiative through the endorsement of all participating countries. However, the European Union refused to back a statement on trade because several EU member states raised concerns about the lack of commitments to social and environmental sustainability and transparency.\textsuperscript{14} Thereby the EU made it clear that it would not be the willing partner of Xi Jinping (yet). The UK, however, on its way out of the European Union, will (Henneke, 2017, p. 118). Processes that began under the Cameron premiership continued under May, and were repeatedly emphasised by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond; the strengthening of economic ties with China stands at the forefront of the current UK strategy on its global reach. From the summit in Beijing Hammond tweeted ‘Britain is ready to work with all OBOR [One Belt One Road] Partners’ (Hammond, 2017).

The royal albert dock – large scale urban remaking

A little to the West of the London Gateway port another giant building project at the Royal Albert Dock, adjacent to London City Airport, is keen to be seen as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.\textsuperscript{15} The Royal Albert Dock Development is in the hands of a China-based property group called ABP. ABP announced that the Royal Albert Dock is London’s ‘new business heart’\textsuperscript{16}, and at the time of accepting ABP’s bid in 2013, the then Mayor of London Boris Johnson proclaimed that ‘creating a third financial district in the capital, this
development will act as a beacon for eastern investors looking west, bringing with it tens of thousands of jobs and billions of pounds of investment for the UK economy’.

Completed in 2019, phase one of this £1.7 billion development was built by Chinese state contractor Citic Construction and Multiplex, comprising public realm, roads, infrastructure and a total of 460,000 square feet of office space. ABP’s CEO Nancy Xu’s vision for the entire 4.7 million square feet development of the Royal Albert Dock includes a cyber park attracting the best Chinese high tech companies with ABP operating as ‘an agent between China and the UK’ in what is intended as an ‘Asian business port’ in the heart of London’s Eastwards extension. This is no ethnic enclave! It is a reconfiguration of the commercial vitality of the city, its continued eastwards extension and the opening of new rail and air routes between London and China.

Compared to numerous other Chinese investments in London’s property and infrastructure, the Royal Albert Docks present a novel scenario with uncertain, yet exciting and potentially far reaching outcomes. Aimed at Chinese small- and medium-sized enterprises, it goes beyond the monetary level of capital investments, possibly marking the beginning of a new, giant, highly networked Chinatown. Time will tell. Most likely it will be accompanied by an indispensable transnational migration of Chinese entrepreneurs who may eventually transform the social and material fabric of London’s East (Henneke, 2017).

As Ms Xu’s aspiration hit the ground, the local professionals at the ABP East London office, including some from the Greater London Authority who are in charge of the project, seemed to know little about Chinese business, how the development of the site would actually unfold, and what the impact of this giant Asian business port on the neighbourhood might be. However these processes of urban remaking unfold, they seem a long way from the history of Chinese London; Royal Albert Dock, of course, is near Limehouse and London’s first Chinatown in East London before it moved to Soho in the central London borough of Westminster. There are, of course, many East Londons and this is only one of them. And yet these Chinese infrastructure developments also align perfectly with recent transformations in this part of London.

Building on the past

In the 1980s East London’s Docklands, now the site of the new heart of London with Asian business properly at its centre, was emblematic of ‘the physical decline of the inner city’ according to Michael Heseltine, a minister in the Thatcher government. Physical decline was a deliberate and highly visible argument for this area’s redevelopment, away from its historical image as a place of dock labour unloading the spoils and military hardware of empire. As Schwarz, (1991:85) points out, London’s East End had always been an imperial international enclave linking the Atlantic economies to the Indian subcontinent, a connection that only became visible in the 1950s and 1960s when Indians and West Indians came to live in the area. In the 1880s Chinese businessmen started to settle here because of the convenient maritime connection (Seed, 2006, p. 59), and by the 1920s Limehouse had become London’s first Chinatown. Limehouse became ‘the most cosmopolitan district of the most cosmopolitan city of Britain’ (ibid.). In fact, ever since goods circulated globally by locomotives and steamboats, the London Docks became an ‘arrival quarter’ for migrating entrepreneurs (Gidley, 2017). During the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century ‘migrants were not just immigrants but rather part of larger networks of circulation. Arrival quarters were not just gateways to particular nations but nodes in these larger circuits’ (ibid.). Such quarters are described to ‘provide social networks, mutual aid and linguistically
accessible economic niches as a way of integrating people into the city’ (Saunders, 2011). Aerial bombing during World War II mostly destroyed the Limehouse Chinatown and its population was dispersed further west. In the 1960s the once-prosperous Docklands were allowed to decay as they outlived their original purpose. Freight transport was containerised and larger vessels were demanding more accessible ports further downstream on the River Thames.

The London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was set up in 1981 by a Conservative government to usurp plans already underway by three London boroughs – Tower Hamlets, Newham and Southwark – to develop the area (Schwarz, 1991:84). The LDDC appropriated public land and sold 5,000 acres and 55 miles of waterfront property to the speculative capital of private developers, with the Toronto-based company Olympia and York, who had successfully regenerated large areas of New York, initially taking a leading role before it went bankrupt. The state funded Docklands Light Railway (DLR) – another railway albeit on a smaller scale – underwrote the all-important publicly funded infrastructure investment in the area, which both expanded the geographically constricted square mile of the City of London to its eastward riverside extension as London’s financial institutions and deregulation opened it up to global capital on a more speculative and profitable basis than ever before. The infrastructure investments of ABP are perfectly consistent with this area’s recent history and its direction of development. Its Chinese credentials are not visibly marked. Local people would have no means of identifying the source of its capital and even its building process is only subtly marked as Chinese.

While the impact of this massive Chinese infrastructure project on East London is yet to unfold, earlier infrastructure projects associated with Chinese investment and which are now included in the narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative are already impacting other European cities and may serve as a harbinger for what is to come in London (Henneke, 2017, p. 122).

**Will London resemble Fuenlabrada?**

One is Fuenlabrada, a municipality at the southern fringes of Madrid, where Chinese traders from Zhejiang Province have settled since the 1990s (Nieto, 2003) transforming the adjacent business park, Cobo Calleja, into one of the biggest and most important distribution centres for Chinese imported small commodities in the European Union. When small businesses around Spain faced bankruptcy during the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Chinese entrepreneurs kept busy. Their low-cost commodities were in higher demand than ever and the influx of new traders arriving from China continued due to relaxed visa regulations designed to attract foreign investment. In the 2016 census, Madrid’s Chinese community accounted for 55,784 people, signalling the highest influx of new arrivals compared to any other migrant group (Comunidad de Madrid, 2016). Many of the Chinese migrants live in the southern fringes of the city, perhaps unsurprisingly close to the warehouses that belong to the economic zone of Cobo Calleja (Henneke, 2017).

Just as we expect for East London, the recent formation of Madrid’s China Pequeña in the city’s south is not marked by red lanterns or other stereotypical decorative and architectural features. Yet, Chinese migrants have gained visibility due to their concentration in specific neighbourhoods where Chinese restaurants as well as supporting services in Mandarin flourish and events such as the Chinese New Year are celebrated publicly (Henneke, 2017, p. 119). Furthermore, urban development projects such as Plaza de Oriente, an addition to the existing industrial zone of Cobo Calleja with 40,000m$^2$ exclusive to Chinese entrepreneurs\footnote{22} show the municipality’s support for Chinese businesses and the people who arrive with them.
Fuenlabrada’s ongoing effort to endorse Chinese businesses by implementing supporting infrastructure was rewarded in 2014 when the first freight train from Yiwu reached Madrid, laden with products destined for the warehouses in Cobo Calleja. In fact, the business park is a mini version of Yiwu’s wholesale market and serves as a distribution centre for low-cost commodities such as shoes, textiles, toys and household goods which are sold in bulk and distributed around the country to shops of different types, but all informally called El Chino: one type sells everything imaginable, the other type are typical corner shops with long opening hours run by Chinese migrants. The establishment of the Yiwu-Madrid rail connection is the result of reciprocal business interests between China and Spain. Since the Chinese middle class has developed a taste for Mediterranean cuisine, the containers that bring the small commodities from Yiwu to Madrid return to China filled with crates of wine, olive oil, and Spanish jamón. The connection between producers in Spain and bulk buyers in China’s Zhejiang Province is made through the dense networks and strong family ties the Chinese migrants of Fuenlabrada keep with their home towns.

Or Tbilisi?

The other city that showcases a possible scenario for the future of London’s Royal Albert Dock is Tbilisi in Georgia (Henneke, 2017, p. 119). This is a major location for Chinese investment from one source in particular: the Hualing Group, which has its headquarters in Urumqi, Xinjiang Province. The Hualing Group became involved in Georgian infrastructure projects during the preparations of the 2015 European Youth Summer Olympic Festival, where shortly before the start of the games accommodation was still missing. Coming to help at the last minute, the Hualing Group provided an immaculate Athletes’ Village situated between Tbilisi’s city centre and the airport. Once the Youth Games were over, the buildings were returned to the investor’s real estate portfolio (Shepard, 2016). The master plans as well as the architectural features of the so-called ‘Hualing Tbilisi Sea New City’ strikingly resemble modern neighbourhoods in China. The greenfield development site consists of about 20 ten-storey-high apartment blocks. The apartments have richly ornamented facades and roofs, which imitate a mix of European styles and respond to current Chinese tastes. Clustered in a gated community, the buildings are connected through neat greenery, walkways, and ponds. They could not differ more from the adjacent grey-on-grey neighbourhood (Henneke, 2017, p. 120). Hualing’s successful project has whetted Georgia’s appetite for more. Within sight of the former Athletes’ Village, which is now inhabited by well-to-do homeowners, the Chinese investor is building a wholesale market that will serve as distribution centre for Chinese imported commodities. The goods arrive by train through the China-Turkey corridor operated by DHL and launched in late 2015. Additionally, the ‘Hualing Kutaisi Free Industrial Zone’ is built near the city of Kutaisi to facilitate imports from China. Hualing Group is not only leaving a footprint with distinct architecture but also naming the developments after the company (Henneke, 2017, p. 120). These are all potential scenarios for East London.

Manifestations of economic uncertainty

These projects – the Royal Albert Docks in London, Cobo Calleja near Madrid and the Hualing developments in Georgia – have at least two things in common: First, the Chinese investments were accepted in a moment of economic uncertainty. Like most Western European countries, the UK used to stop Chinese developers from building large infrastructural
projects locally. This changed when local investors pulled out of ongoing projects in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In the case of the London Docklands, the almost ten years of stand-still in the highly-valued stretch of land prompted the City of London to finally agree to Chinese investment to transform the urban landscape between the O2 Arena and London City Airport. The next step – to agree on plans for a Chinese business park – is a good example of the UK’s increasing interest in strengthening economic ties with China and what are now described as ‘post-Brexit trade deals’. 26

Secondly, in all three cases Chinese FDI is finding its way through large infrastructure projects on locations along the newly established train routes. These projects inevitably expand the transportation networks on the Eurasian continent in favour of spreading Chinese influence and soft power based on goods and the means by which they circulate (Henneke, 2017, p. 120). As in the South of Madrid, traders and entrepreneurs migrate to where the goods go, bringing new, expanded hyper-Chinatowns on a scale previously unknown. As in the times of the ancient Silk Road, they bring not only merchandise but also their cultures, languages and architectural designs. Even though remarkable parallels can be found in the cities of Madrid, Tbilisi and London, we acknowledge the vagueness of anticipating the outcomes of future projects such as the Royal Albert Docks through a simple comparison. Each case of Chinese investment encounters very diverse preconditions and local regulations. The impact of the large infrastructure projects on sociospatiality also depends on the collaboration of the investor and the receiving municipality. After all, it is migrating individuals animating the area that we assume will have the biggest impact on everyday life in the city of investment – London – in the long run.

With the plans to erect a business park for Chinese entrepreneurs on the site of the Royal Albert Docks – within a stone’s throw of the former Limehouse Chinatown – it could be that a new arrival quarter is underway. Of course, the type of businesses that are expected to operate in the Chinese business hub at the Royal Albert Docks are different to the importers of small commodities in Fuenlabrada or Tbilisi. We argue that the type of businesses is of secondary importance for the emergence of new Chinatowns. Following Massey’s idea that the formation of the ethnic character of a place is a product of interactions (Massey, 1994), we expect that individual entrepreneurs will establish dense social networks within a globally connected urban structure that combines work with living and leisure. Surrounding neighbourhoods will likewise see an influx of Chinese migrants as well as supply services and facilities such as kindergartens, schools, medical institutions or homes for the elderly operating in Mandarin. Having all those services locally available will make the Chinese entrepreneurs independent from the inner city and thereby contribute considerably to the budget of the surrounding areas (Henneke, 2017, p. 121).

Conclusions

Returning to conceptual dimensions of these new departures in how we might think about ethnicity, migration and cities, it is apparent that what we describe is on a massively bigger scale than anything hitherto imagined either for Tbilisi, Madrid or London. The emerging cartographies of Chinese London exceed the imagination of even those who are intimately involved in their development. Instead of an emphasis on ethnic place we propose a framework that stresses connections between places as the engines of ethnic place making. Infrastructure is one of these generative connections, a conduit that is intimately connected with large scale circulations of Chinese capital on the one hand, and, potentially, circulations of Chinese bodies on the other. Crucial questions then arise: which Chinese bodies,
materials and objects will circulate through London with Chinese capital? How will those ethnic migrant bodies, lives and objects operate as part of the emerging city?

On what conditions will they operate as part of a dense transnational network of infrastructural mobilities? And in what ways will they become instantiated into the fabrics of this city-in-the-making?

We suggest that in future Chinatowns will take on new meaning and heightened significance in their impact. No longer residual inner city neighbourhoods in which ethnic migrants take refuge in seeking familiarity; Chinatowns will be on the leading edge of urban development and regeneration. Unmarked, or subtly marked infrastructure projects only reveal their national and ethnic alignments with probing efforts. They may in fact be the bridgeheads of substantial ethnically marked commerce and occupation. Or not. Either way, we need new frameworks that admit the simultaneous emerging dynamism of cities and migrant ethnicities as co-productions of some significance, and not the marginal inner city markings of long-term ethnic occupation. Chinese London is a living and vibrant development, which may be in the process of radically transforming a neighbourhood near you and the city as a whole.

Notes

1 A small part of this chapter was published in: Laura Henneke (2017) ‘Belt and Road Initiative: China’s Rising Impact on Socio-Spatiality in European Cities’ Mapping China Journal 1(1): 116–123.
3 Oliver Wainwright ‘Inside the London Megaport you didn’t know existed’ Guardian 15/09/2015.
4 BRI is China’s grand strategy to invest in infrastructure projects across Eurasia, Africa and beyond to build an interconnected trade network with China as its core.
5 See Caroline Knowles (2013) for a fuller discussion.
6 We understand that the term Chinese is contentious and use it here to refer to Hong Kong and Taiwanese Chinese who are engaged in an ongoing struggle for autonomy from the Chinese mainland, to people from the Chinese mainland and to the substantial Chinese populations in Malaysia and Singapore.
7 For an expanded account of this see Knowles and Burrows (2018) and Knowles (2017).
8 These (2008) changes were fully implemented in 2011. They prioritise wealth and elite connection and close traditional avenues of migration, for example into the restaurant trades, leaving migrants with fewer resources with only illegal channels of entry, often with disastrous consequences.
9 Doreen Massey’s work, especially World City, is exemplary in this regard.
10 Oliver Wainwright ‘Inside the London Megaport you didn’t know existed’ Guardian 15/09/2015
11 China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) is a Chinese state-owned shipping and logistics services supplier company
12 This acquisition also illustrates how in fact, China expands the transportation networks also in favour of spreading influence and soft power based on goods. In the year following the strategic purchase of Piraeus, Greece used its veto to prevent the European Union from officially condemning China’s human rights records at the UN — a procedure that was common practice in precedent years (Smith, 2017).
13 Kerin Hope ‘Greece picks China’s Cosco in port deal’ Financial Times 21/01/2016.
14 Tom Philips ‘Philip Hammond calls China a ‘natural partner’ as he seeks post-Brexit trade deals’ in Guardian 04/11/2017.
15 Laura Henneke’s field notes from a visit and interview at ABP Offices 07/04/2017.
16 http://www.abp-london.co.uk/
17 Reuters ‘Chinese firm to develop London’s third financial district in US$1.5b deal’ South China Morning Post 30/05/2013.
18 http://https://www.building.co.uk/buildings/projects-royal-albert-dock-london/5102109.article

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