

“This isn’t contraband, I’m clean.”

A study of borders of incorporation and exclusion among Chinese immigrants in Pernambuco

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On Oct. 2, 2008 four Chinese immigrants were arrested and taken to the Immigration Police Post at the Guararapes International Airport in Recife, the capital of Pernambuco State, Brazil. They were found during a routine residence-visa check of foreigners in Recife. According to the Brazilian Federal Police (PF), three of them were in the country illegally and the other, Kiu Linin,² was fined for harboring the others. In addition to the fine, Linin was charged under Law 6815 of the Brazilian Foreigner Statute, for illegally bringing people into the country. The sentence for this crime ranges from one to three years, but he was released pending trial. In an interview with a local newspaper, Linin said that he came to Brazil in 2002 and arrived in São Paulo. Two years later he moved to Recife, where he bought a toy store in the São José neighborhood in downtown Recife.

This is not an isolated case. From 2005 – 2008, more than 300 Chinese immigrants were detained or interrogated by the PF in Pernambuco, all involved in issues such as illegal immigration, recruiting slave labor, contraband and falsification of documents. According to immigration records of the Federal Police, on Sept. 5, 2007, there were 658 Chinese immigrants working or studying legally in Pernambuco State.

This number does not include the immigrants who are naturalized, most of whom are second generation immigrants (those who have Brazilian nationality) and obviously those who are in the country irregularly: the “undocumented.” For this reason, the official data differ from those supplied by the

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2 All of the people mentioned in this article are given fictitious names to protect them.

Chinese themselves, who, when speaking of the community in Pernambuco, always refer to more than 2,000 people. The Brazilian constitution allows foreigners who reside in Brazil for more than 15 years uninterruptedly to request full citizenship and grants permanent visas to those who have a Brazilian spouse (as long as the marriage was celebrated more than 5 years ago), or who have a Brazilian child who is under their care and is their economic dependent.

Concentrated in the cities of Recife, Olinda and Caruaru, the Chinese immigrants in Pernambuco represent a heterogeneous community that can be divided into four groups: the naturalized citizens (most of whom identify themselves more with Brazil than with China), those from abroad (many of whom identify themselves as “Sino-Brazilians” or “Brazilians of Chinese origin”), the temporary ones (people who reside temporarily outside of Chinese territory, but always return and who often are identified as “global citizens”) and the members of the second generation, those who in this particular context are decidedly “transnational.” These immigrants have been expanding the scope of China’s economic and symbolic power and simultaneously revealing the importance that the more than 40 million Chinese living abroad have for the growth of that nation. This process is based on distinct and diversified actions, but they have in common the encouragement of interconnected networks that link the local realities of the host countries with those of the power of the Chinese government, creating a process of common nurturing of interests (Cesarín 2008: 12-13).

In recent years, a large portion of the Chinese community of Pernambuco has dedicated itself to popular gastronomy, in restaurants and luncheon counters. Unlike most of the Chinese who work in the intermediation and or sale of products imported from China, the Chinese who work with food appear to be seen by many Brazilians with “positive” stereotypes. Various Brazilian informants, upon speaking of the Chinese who work at lunch counters and restaurants, refer to elements such as “ties to tradition (Chinese cooking),” “commercial skills” and a “desire to work,” among others. In this way, the inter-ethnic relations exercised in these specific environments have particularities (in relation to the commerce of imported products) such as, for example, those that involve commercial partnerships between Brazilians and Chinese in the contexts of commercialization of products that are Made in China.

This article focuses on the sale of products that are Made in China. In informal discussions, four merchants and two Brazilian consumers accused

the Chinese of selling “junk;” products that break easily or that are not of good quality. Nevertheless, three Chinese merchants who work in this field say that they only import goods of lower quality due to the demand of the Brazilian market which, unlike that of Europe or North America, insists on very low prices, even knowing that the quality will also be very low. In addition to this issue of product quality, the main reason for discrimination that some Chinese immigrants allegedly suffer from local Brazilian society is the fact that they are seen by a significant portion of Brazilians (above all by their commercial competitors) as smugglers.³

An important point is that the different levels of knowledge of the Chinese immigrants about Brazil and of the Brazilians about China and Taiwan affect the inter-ethnic relations between “locals” and “outsiders.” In addition, some first generation Chinese emphasize the difference between what they understand as disadvantages and discrimination. They say that the disadvantages are related to the problems of cultural adaptation and with their related limitations such as, for example, linguistic deficiencies. Meanwhile, the discriminations that some of them suffer in Brazilian society are not related to racial issues (they argue that Brazil is not a racist country), but to socio-economic issues.

In this perspective, those who confront “disadvantages” appear to internalize the responsibility for the difficulties that they encounter, while the others raise the issue of socio-economic inequality as a determining factor in the establishment of the discrimination that some suffer. Thus, overcoming that inequality can promote the alleviation of the borders of incorporation and exclusion of these immigrants in the host society. As one Chinese immigrant made clear in a conversation: “Brazil is not racist, but there is considerable discrimination. Since I left Guarulhos Airport, I’ve only seen things, they only did deals with me that prove this. If you walk around with me some more you will see what I am saying: the police only see the Chinese who are poor as mafia, those who have money are all importers.”

Both in the São José-Santo Antonio region and in the Boa Vista neighborhood, there are more than 100 stores and stands owned by Brazilians that sell products Made in China. Nevertheless, when they do not sell directly to

³ This association intensified in 2004, when a Chinese who had earned Brazilian citizenship, Law Kin Chong, was arrested by the Federal Police in São Paulo and identified as the “the country’s largest smuggler,” in an event widely portrayed in the media.

consumers, the Chinese, in most cases, are those who supply the imported goods to the Brazilian merchants or the raw materials for specific products, such as falsified CDs and DVDs. Thus, even though it may seem contradictory, there are Brazilian merchants in the field who complain of the presence of the Chinese and of the unfair competition that they say is practiced, although five have admitted that they buy goods from these immigrants because “there are no options.” This indicates the fragility of certain dichotomic views held by some Brazilian merchants and that imputes characteristics of “illegal trade” only to the practices of the Chinese merchants, when the data indicates that the commercial practices of both groups - the “locals” and the “outsiders” - have points in common, and are not exclusive realities.

It is important to understand the commonalities, because they reveal that some dichotomic categorizations, such as those that certain local representatives of the federal government present in their discourses, have inconsistencies that seem to deny and attempt to cover-up mutual interactions found in their practices. According to one retired Federal Police employee interviewed, although part of the discourse of the Brazilian government characterizes Chinese importers and merchants as mafiosas or accuses them of being responsible for “corrupting” public employees working in contraband schemes, there are mutual operations between the Chinese import networks and the Brazilian Customs sectors. Thus, perhaps it would be coherent to analyze the hypothesis that the pecuniary flow of *guanxi* (see below), among the Chinese immigrants in the circulation of imported goods in Pernambuco are constructed daily by the interaction of various social actors and dialogue with local cultural repertoires in this Brazilian state. These flows are expanding their “native” function of attending social needs and revealing the fragility of the coercive ideologies through which borders between the concepts of legality and illegality are justified.

The Importance of Guanxi

Guanxi is a Chinese term that in a literal translation means relationship, but that in Chinese culture refers to specific social relationships between two or more people; relationships that seek to achieve given objectives (commercial, financial, logistic, and others), and that are based, as a priority, on trust and loyalty (*xinyong*). It is a key element in the situation under study.

Relationships promoted by *guanxi* do not necessarily involve elements of illegality and corruption, but they can easily open a route to law-breaking or wind up involving illegal elements (Machado 2007: 01-29).

Outside of Chinese territory, *guanxi* is usually associated to illicit activities. Within China, the practices that it foments are so intertwined with the political-industrial sector and social life as a whole that they acquire a “natural” character and are seen as “commonplace.” Cristina Mei Chaw, 28 (a second generation Chinese-Brazilian and one of my principal interlocutors) agreed with this idea that *guanxi* outside of China is stigmatized and also warned me about an important issue in the research process: “When you were introduced to some Chinese and knew that in this way you would have a better relationship with them, you were conducting *guanxi*.” That is, in a certain form, the various strategies that I used to be accepted and win sympathy and confidence of the informants can be seen as forms of *guanxi*.

Based on an ethnographic study that he conducted in a village in the Chinese province of Shandong in the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) from 1988 - 1990, Andrew B. Kipnis (1997) maintains that the practices of *guanxi* are interlaced with the system of exchange, payments and counter-payments and are related to the idea of the gift. For this author, actions such as offering presents and or favors, to be a good host or guest and to participate in weddings, funerals and gatherings (among others) can produce and orient *guanxi*. He said that *guanxi* emerges from intentional efforts that make use of cultural logics of the past as they generate and support new logics and for this reason, the practices are part of a variable, dynamic and diversified phenomenon. Another view characterizes *guanxi* as an instrumental form of symbolic exchanges that are characteristic of Chinese society and that are similar to the social exchanges and principals of reciprocity that helped Marcel Mauss systematize the concept of gift (Yan 1996: 12-41).

An important issue is that on one hand, the gift identified by Mauss is seen as a general system of collective obligations (which reinforces Durkheim’s idea of society as a moral fact). On the other hand, Mauss does not refuse to enter the world of experiences of the members of the community, but also understands that this obligation is not absolute to the degree that, in the concrete experience of social practices, the members of the collectivity have a certain liberty to enter or leave the system of obligations, even if this can mean the passage from peace to war (Martins 2007: 08-21).

This is also the case in the relations of *guanxi* promoted by Chinese immigrants in Brazil: it is possible to leave the circle of mutual favors and commitments, but each member knows that he will have to face the consequences that this decision can bring. In this sense, the exchanges of favors and the circulation of goods (symbolic and material) given, received and retributed, interfere directly in the distribution of the positions and opportunities among the members of the social group and in possible modalities of recognition, inclusion and prestige. Thus, we should try to understand how the larger segment of the Chinese community studied (those who participated directly or indirectly in the trade networks of imported goods) experienced practices that can be interpreted as *guanxi*.

Licit and illicit. Legal and illegal.

A look at the storage spaces for goods in the port district of Recife and in the neighborhoods of Boa Vista, São José and Santo Antonio can provide interesting perspectives. These neighborhoods are close to the Port of Recife and have many informal storage spaces for imported goods. For this reason, the distribution of the products to the stores and stands is not done in large quantities that can call attention, but is conducted constantly with wagons, small cars or simply in bags, whose carriers often look like shoppers.

In addition to proudly exhibiting certificates of declarations of importation that “guarantee” the legality of the goods, Léo Li once spoke about the origin of his products: “Most come from Suape, it is all legal, documented, we work very much with contacts [with suppliers from the People’s Republic of China], with proper importation to sell within the law and employ 17 people as I do.” The Treasury Secretariat (Sefaz) of Pernambuco State confirmed that most of the Chinese products sold in downtown Recife arrive from the Port of Suape. In an interview with a local newspaper about this movement, Sefaz’ director of inspections alleged that “there are containers loaded with thousands of products. Some arrive with irregularities such as under billing or a larger number of products than declared. Another part come from other states, but this is much less.”⁴

The problem, according to what two Brazilians who are former employees

4 “A Invasão Chinesa no Comércio do Recife”, *Jornal do Comercio*. Recife, Agosto 19, 2007.

of the Federal Revenue told me, is that most of the customs declarations and certificates that the Chinese merchants in downtown Recife present to the inspectors are simultaneously false and valid. The documents are false because they indicate the legal entry into Brazil of lots of products, but do not come close to corresponding to the real quantity imported. At the same time, these documents are valid because they have authentications issued by official customs agencies. During research in Recife and Caruaru, it became clear that the Chinese merchants who were more “open” (not only in relation to me, but also in relation to Brazilian society in general) were those who had documents that legalized the products they sold. Nevertheless, the Chinese who were more “closed” did not have these documents and if they were caught by the police with false import documents they would be charged and thus lose the right to remain legally in Brazil. Thus, these people have their classifications in the lines of legal and illegal influenced by the specific routes that they cross within the circulation of Chinese products in Pernambuco, another *fragmented global space of grassroots globalization and of the non-hegemonic world system* (Ribeiro 2006b: 01-48).

After studying various networks of illicit commerce around the planet, Moisés Naím (2006) emphasized that the practices that these networks promote are effectively mixed with that of licit trade, using the same tools, and in general, the same people; this makes difficult the inspection and establishment of borders between what is legal and what is illicit, because in practice, these borders are blurred. On one hand Naím appears to assume a conservative posture when he condemns the increase of migration and of international mobility by judging that these factors are responsible for the global expansion of illicit trade. Yet it is undeniable that his affirmation that the illicit networks are intimately linked to the licit activities of the private sector and are intertwined to the public sector and political sector presents a coherence with the context investigated here and certainly with hundreds of others around the world. This situation shows that the regulatory roles and those of control of a Nation-State such as Brazil can be quite relative.

I once ran into one of my Chinese informants on the subway in Recife carrying some boxes of goods Made in China. Before I said anything he said jokingly: “Its not contraband, I’m clean.” In fact, it doesn’t really matter much where those products come from and how they were received. If they were fortunate enough to “pass through the hands” or through the consent of

certain people (and consequently, receive official customs certificates), they can no longer be seen as contraband. What characterizes something as legal or illegal are not the objects themselves, but the social relations that are established through them, the *cultural biography* of each thing (Kopytoff 1986: 64-91) is what determines this. The discussion about the distinction between the illegal (prohibited by law) and the illicit (socially perceived as unacceptable) considers that these terms are historically changeable and debatable (Abraham; Van Schendel. 2005: 01-37). A former dock worker at the Port of Suape (40 km from Recife) confirmed that when he was there, the intense movement of cargo at that location made detailed inspection of each container unviable. That is, the customs employees did not have the capacity to verify the correspondence between what was informed and what was effectively found inside each container. Thus, it is possible that many containers inform that they have a small quantity of products and in reality have many more.⁵

I believe that the principal task is to consider the interconnections between these terms and not homogenize an infinity of practices of economic survival as actions aimed solely at producing criminality. To understand these connections, their entrance into political and government operations and particularly their ability to mutate (making the illegal legal), is a more pertinent task than to simply demonize all of these practices.

Jiu and Ming are two Chinese who work in the city of Caruaru and are typical “temporary” workers. They are married and usually spend four months of each year in their home cities to visit their wives and children. They also travel constantly to São Paulo and Foz do Iguaçu (a Brazilian city located on the Paraguay border). They maintain that Brazilian immigration legislation is crucial in the life of any *huáqiáo* (Chinese living abroad) who spends time in Brazil and who at least wants access to public health services while in the country. Two other informants who fit into this category of “temporaries” and who live between China, Brazil and Mexico, say that with the visa from marriage and the family reunion, they are able to overcome

5 It is important to emphasize that this is not a reality restricted to Brazil. Anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom (2007), based on research in a number of countries, showed how “global outlaws” can act in an organized manner (or at least with the complacency) of some official customs spheres. In the particular case of the Port of Rotterdam in The Netherlands, Nordstrom describes the “illusions of inspection” that frequently occur there. In addition, the tremendous flow of containers makes control materially impossible.

problems and difficulties in the “Brazilian months” of their lives. The first is a permanent visa issued to a foreigner married to a Brazilian and the second is another type of permanent visa issued under immigration law to foreigners who have family ties in Brazil. These visas allow an undetermined period of validity. This latter type of visa allows for the meeting in Brazil of foreigners and Brazilians who have family ties or who can prove a stable union in Brazil. Some Chinese told me that if the Brazilian immigration legislation did not allow this, they would not have achieved any type of legal permanence in Brazil and without it, they would not feel they were “welcomed immigrants” and citizens in a certain way committed to the host country. In this sense, the immigration laws are a key element for national identifications be maximized and not be limited to factors such as place of birth (*jus soli*) or blood ties (*jus sanguinis*). For this reason, it is not possible to analytically separate family ties, immigration law and feelings of belonging to Brazil.

The granting of political rights and the sense of belonging and or being welcome to a national community provided by the laws of the host countries are of great importance, because they can reinforce or at least reveal the situational character of the processes linked to ethnicity and ethnic identities that they promote and represent. In terms of migratory experiences, the legal-illegal line (Ribeiro, 2000) and its borders of incorporation are essential to the different representations that the immigrants present about their countries of origin and about their countries of destiny and that compose the itinerary of their lives.

Four naturalized informants who said they feel as both immigrants and Brazilian of Chinese origin, commented that at times like elections and World Cup matches in which the Brazilian squad plays, they feel only Brazilian. And in certain meetings between members of the Brazil China Cultural and Educational Center (CCEBC)⁶ and representatives of government entities from Pernambuco who seek partners, I noted that some of those immigrants, who at the time of their interview defined themselves only as Chinese immigrants, substituted the adjective “Chinese” for “naturalized” to refer to themselves and emphasized their relationship as colleagues, friends and partners of Brazilians. These two examples refer to a central point: some individuals

6 The CCEBC is the main organization that represents the Chinese community in Recife. It was founded in 2006 by the initiative of members of this community in partnership with Brazilians.

have various possibilities of identification upon presenting willingness to be moved when there are opportunities, willfulness and situations considered convenient. This directly influences the choices that can be made and that cause ethnicity and ethnic identities to become important and to be activated at some times and not at others.

It is valid to mention that seven first and second generation Chinese immigrants (who have high spending power) confirmed to me that they have more than two passports each and justify this by associating the possession of one of these European or U.S. documents with ideas of security and convenience (considering the growing regulatory instruments of the Nation-States) that they believe these passports provide them. In addition to the fact that immigration laws promote various levels of citizenship, it cannot be forgotten that “citizenship” (expressed in documents such as passports) can literally be purchased today and that the accumulation of these documents institutionally formalizes multiple national fragmentations and belongings of some immigrants; fragmentations and belongings that, for some immigrants who are unable to purchase new citizenships, are restricted to the “informal” sphere of personal, ethnic and or identity identifications (Silva 2008: 78-119).

Back to Guanxi.

Guanxi is certainly a crucial element on the frontiers of incorporation and exclusion among the Chinese in Brazil. But how do the Chinese themselves interpret guanxi? Zhou and Ma were two Chinese immigrants who became important informants. Zhou, 34, was born in the rural province of Fujian, PRC and arrived in Brazil in 2000, since 2004 he lives and works in downtown Recife. Ma, 31, was born in a rural area of Hebei Province PRC and emigrated to Argentina in 1999. In 2001 he went to São Paulo and four months later to Recife. As soon as they arrived in Recife, Zhou and Ma continued to work with Made in China products, as they did in São Paulo, helping to collect goods, distribute them and sell them in stores of other Chinese in the São José neighborhood. They do not explain why they later gave up these activities in Recife and separated themselves from the other Chinese who are still involved in them. They said that guanxi is a practice that exists anywhere where there are Chinese emigrants, given that it is something very old and that supplies a certain security to the immigrants, but they also emphasize

that one thing is *guanxi* practiced only among Chinese and another is when it involves “outsiders,” such as Brazilians.

When I asked them what is different between one type of *guanxi* and the other, Ma referred to a fact that he said took place in Foz do Iguaçu that he learned about. He said that when there are only Chinese, these relationships of trust are developed without considering the norms and laws of each country where they are conducted and that in a way that is “closed” (within the group), but effective, people can be obliged to work “for free,” isolated, sold or loaned as punishment for not complying with certain agreements. According to Ma, the Chinese are selective and only accept Brazilians in *guanxi* relations when they are indispensable. When they do, they respect the “laws” and don’t let the Brazilians “understand the entire scheme, just a part.” Ma said that *guanxi* is based on “emotions,” “friendship” and the Chinese see socialization as part of a business, in his words: “no Chinese makes a distinction between being a friend and doing business in partnership with you, for both there must be trust.”

Referring to facts that had occurred with Chinese in the city of São Paulo, Zhou spoke of immigrants who, for not acting in accord with tacit rules imposed by the relations of *guanxi*, were exiled from the Chinese circle of ethnic protection and assistance and also from Brazilians “in government” who received bribes from the Chinese to “not see” the circulation and sale of illegal goods, thus constituting a form of *guanxi*. Although they define as “fraternal” the business promoted by these “relations of trust” they can constantly reveal these ties with authoritarian notions and practices. For Zhou, *guanxi* is not something “just Chinese,” but something related to the resources and strategies that, called by different names, serve similar goals: “the politicians, the police here do something that is like *guanxi*, but with one it has this name [...] If the Chinese here use *guanxi*, the *guanxi* of those who are in America [the United States] is different.” Thus, it would be fallacious to interpret relations that involve trust and loyalty among Brazilians and Chinese (and that can, in analytical terms, be classified as “*guanxi*”) as representatives of a type of transplanted cultural universe.

The cultural practices undertaken by the Chinese in Pernambuco need to be adapted to the reality of the host country. Thus, these “Chinese” cultural practices need to be constantly produced and reproduced, constructed and deconstructed, seeking the exploitation of certain advantages and

opportunities and the adaptation to certain restrictions. It is within these contexts that I perceive the practices of Guanxi undertaken by the Chinese immigrants in Pernambuco. The modalities of guanxi practiced among Brazilians and Chinese in Pernambuco dialogue with local cultural repertoires and expand their “native” function of meeting social needs. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that this occurs because these modalities are being practiced not in “virgin” territory, but in a territory that in a certain way has a cultural configuration in which there exist constant interconnections of business with personal relations and interests, which can cause the encouragement of nepotism and a certain violation of meritocracy (Barbosa 1999: 04-21).

I think that if I interpreted guanxi as a type of Chinese cultural essentialism that is static and uniform, I would be ignoring discordant views related by the Chinese informants themselves and, in addition, I would be hiding or at least ignoring important variables that are expressed through conflicts and tensions among the Chinese as a minority ethnic group in a foreign country and among them and the Brazilians, members of local and host society. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the guanxi practiced in Brazil is not a type of “Chinese version” of the “Brazilian jeitinho” (Barbosa, 1995) nor of the notion of personal relations of Roberto DaMatta (1979). Guanxi and the idea of “jeitinho” may be similar in that they are strategies constituted in virtue of given objects, but are distinctive in ethnic terms, given that guanxi can be seen as one of the possible symbolic representations of “being Chinese” in a context of diaspora and of immigration. From this perspective, adapted and extremely dynamic practices of guanxi appear to be developed by Chinese immigrants in the host countries, and can constitute an important element for the strategies of economic survival.

Some internal differences

The Chinese immigrants who worked in shops with imported products in Recife discuss their “pending problems” in public. Due to the linguistic (and ethnic) borders between them and the Brazilians, the Recife “natives” can

7 Following the work of Roberto DaMatta and Lívia Barbosa I understand the notion of “Jeitinho Brasileiro” to refer to articulate forms of action which are typically Brazilian and which are used to get around norms and social conventions. Basically it involved the utilization and manipulation of social resources such as high hierarchical position to obtain favours for oneself and others.

hear arguments in Mandarin, but these “natives” are not capable of communicating to third parties what they heard. For this reason, it is common to see arguments between the Chinese who work with imported products in the center of Recife, especially among employers and shop clerks, among the clerks themselves and between clerks and those who carry the merchandise.⁸

Together with a friend I witnessed three arguments at three different stores: in two stores, the owners were debating with their employees and at the other a clerk was complaining about the services of a carrier. The content of these arguments involved complaints and justifications. In the arguments, both a clerk as well as a carrier who was the subject of complaints were called *nóngmín* (peasants). The two are part of an important segment of the Chinese immigrants identified and are working in those areas of commerce: they are people who went from rural zones in China to coastal cities in that country and who immigrated from there. Speaking with some Chinese informants some of their fellow immigrants being called *nóngmín* by their bosses, some admitted the frequency and prejudice and confirmed that the term is derogatory, equivalent to “redneck”; other interlocutors denied this and said that calling someone *nóngmín* in an urban area is done to encourage the person to leave behind “outdated” behavior, common to peasants and that are not productive in the commercial environment.

It is worth emphasizing that the latter Chinese, who deny the possible discrimination involved in the act of calling someone *nóngmín*, are directly linked to the CCEBC, the non-governmental institution that represents the Chinese community in Pernambuco.

I believe that this specific phenomenon of some being called *nóngmín* by their bosses (and fellow Chinese), is not indicative only of a residue or of a survival of a past situation, but of effective hierarchizations that exist in the Pernambucan Chinese community and that can be expressed, as in this case, through the relations present in the social division of labor. Following a hypothesis raised by Afrânio Raul Garcia Jr. (1989), I believe that from a sociological point of view emic classifications and categorizations should not be considered as results of “backwardness” of mental representations about

8 Given this fact, it is important to remember that due to the number of stores with imported products in downtown Recife, there is considerable commercial competition not only among Brazilian merchants and the Chinese, but also among the Chinese, who often sell the same products for the same prices.

reality of only symbolic importance. For Garcia Jr., when certain categories are used by various social agents of a group, they refer to current practices that denounce the situation of certain segments that compose it, and for this reason, their uses are made to deal with material and not only symbolic issues. In the particular case of classification of some Chinese as *nóngmín* by others from this immigrant community, it appears to be a reflex of the degrees of socioeconomic mobility through which the Chinese immigrants who live in Pernambuco pass through and that cause specific relations that even being constructed from particular socio-historic conditions cannot be explained by simple allusion to a past situation. This is because there are material elements that surround these relations that are not restricted to a merely symbolic dimension, such as, for example, the low monetary pay that the “*nóngmín*” receive from their immigrant Chinese bosses in Recife.⁹ This context also reveals the many sides to the Chinese businesses: where supposedly fraternal spheres, the enterprising and prosperous, coexist with the spheres of self-exploitation, heated competition and inter-ethnic exclusion.

As was said, Zhou and Ma were born in rural areas of the PRC. One day I asked them if when they worked with imported products they had been called *nóngmín*. They said yes, but emphasized that this only happened when they lived in São Paulo and when asked if they were offended they said that *nóngmín* is “no big deal,” given that at times other much more demeaning terms and curses were used. Ma then spoke of his migratory experiences. Before going to Buenos Aires, he worked for eight months in Shanghai “doing everything;” in a difficult period, but he said he learned a lot. For him, all the Chinese in the countryside want to go to the cities, even knowing the problems they will face, and this is not because of the rural poverty and exploitation, but because of the desire to “take risks and be free;” a will that he said exists even if many *nóngmín* know that they will not find real conditions to improve their lives economically in the big cities.¹⁰

9 During the research in Recife, I met some temporary Chinese workers who worked nearly 16 hours a day and who earned less than US\$ 80 per month.

10 When Ma spoke of the problems that the migrants suffer, he referred to a set of strategies and policies of the PRC government in the last 20 years to contain the uncontrolled swelling of cities on the coast and to encourage the permanence of most of the population in their rural regions of origin. Machado (2007) commented that these migrant populations in China (who left the rural zones for the industrial cities) are known as “floaters” and lack a number of social rights, because due to the hukou or domestic registration policy, aimed at establishing individuals in certain locations, the flight of

Nevertheless, not all the temporary Chinese workers who have Pernambuco as one of their frequent places of destiny come from “poor places in China to the gutter of the West,” as some other Chinese immigrants say. In recent years, some of them include executives, small business owners and trainees who work in the technology or industrial sector. Some of these people were those mainly responsible for a wave of Chinese investments in Pernambuco such as the future installation of a factory by the Chery company in the state and the establishment of various joint ventures between Brazilian and Chinese companies. In addition, these factors were decisive in establishing a sister-city agreement between Recife and Guangzhou, the economic accord between the Chinese province of Sezhuan and the state of Pernambuco in 2003 and for the creation in 2007 of the Pernambuco Business Office in Shanghai, which made this the first Brazilian state to have its own representative in the PRC.¹¹ The sum of business in bilateral trade and investments intermediated by this representation reached US\$ 500 million and the number of companies represented grew considerably, according to the Federation of Commerce of Pernambuco (Fecomercio) and the Federation of Industries of Pernambuco State (FIEP), responsible for the creation and maintenance of that entity in the Chinese territory.

Final Considerations

The Chinese community in Pernambuco is heterogeneous. But this diversity does not make unviable the analysis of its different constitutive universes in groups or at least make them interpretable based on a convergence. Everything that constitutes the social life of these immigrants studied and its base is mobilized and re-configured in this circuit of moving from China or Taiwan to Pernambuco (and from Pernambuco to China, as has taken place with much of the second generation).

these people from their “proper places” implies a need for restructuring of some public policies that aim at social stability, as conceived by the Chinese Communist Party (Machado 2007: 02-27).

11 Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong, PRC. In Sept. 2007, the sister cities agreement between the two cities consolidated the cooperation projects in the fields of urban development, education and healthcare. With the project, both municipal administrations give priority to signing new agreements with the cities with which they have agreements of this type. The presence of Chinese immigrants in Recife was emphasized, by the CPR government, as one of the main justifications for the project in a clear recognition of Pernambuco as one of the destinations of its emigrant populations.

The practices of *guanxi*, the desire to “take risks and be free,” the ties established from the metaphoric and blood kinship relationships, the modality of capitalism that I call ethnic and the variety of religious practices by the immigrants studied (see Silva 2008), all constitute a set of inter-relationships present in or supported by the phenomenon of the Chinese diaspora that allows this phenomenon to be seen from the prism of a transnational totality. In fact, the Chinese diaspora in Pernambuco is representative of the inter-lacing between ethnic identities and the conditions (integrative, historic, economic, technological, cultural, social and ritual) that are needed for the establishment of transnationality (Ribeiro 2000: 93-129).

Why is transnationalism an essential issue in this process? This phenomenon is equivalent to a level of integration that crosses all the others and whose space can only be conceived as diffuse and disseminated in a network and which for this reason, does not correspond to the territorial realities such as the local, regional, national or international levels that can be represented in terms of the delimited areas. This fact significantly alters the relations between territories and the different social, political and identity arrangements of those who experience transnationality (Ribeiro 2000: op. cit.). It is essential to analyze which experiences can be considered transnational or not, because various levels of experiences reflect different capacities of structuration that, in turn, influence the relativization of the standards of inclusion and reception of the immigrants in these political and symbolic collectivities which are the Nation-States.

For this reason, I gave priority in this article to the data collected from temporary Chinese immigrants. Of those who participate in the Chinese community of Pernambuco (even if seasonally), the temporaries are those who best approximate the condition of transnational citizens, along with the members of the second generation. This fact is principally due to the immigrants’ transitory lives. For example: during the ethnographic study at the Chinese stores in the center of Recife, it was common to see immigrants working at a certain store in one month and the next, others were in their places. About this exchange of employees, the owners or managers often responded: “he or she came to take the place of the other.” The Chinese who work in these spheres of commerce usually call “temporaries” those immigrants who live only seasonally outside of China or Taiwan, due to labor issues and or those related to kinship and friendships ties. This factor is

associated, above all, to the dynamics of the transnational trade networks in which these people operate. The temporary workers have a specific function at this point of convergence and interconnection of the non-hegemonic world system (Ribeiro: 2006) that exists in Pernambuco. Simultaneously, the temporary Chinese workers (as well as the thousands of other immigrants in similar conditions around the world) are those who suffer most from the regulatory spheres and the coercion of the Nation States, even if these spheres are quite relative.

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