Chinese Immigration in Paris: Realities of an Underworld

By CAROLINE GILLET

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PARIS -- After a series of small knocks, Liang pronounces a couple of words in Chinese to identify himself. Just a few seconds later, the door opens. It does not take much time for his parents to walk out from their workroom and get to the front door: their flat is 18 square meters large. Behind their small neatly kept kitchen, Yong-Tu and his wife Aillian used thin white painted wood panels to hide a studio. Back to back, two work tables and sewing machines are set up. Above, the couple has built a small wooden mezzanine where they sleep with Liang, their 20-year-old son.

"Illegal garment workshops are too dangerous," exclaims Liang, translating his parents' words. That is why like thousands of other Chinese immigrant families, the Xiang* family chose to work at home in their own clandestine workroom. Every day from 8 a.m. to midnight the couple assembles pieces of material. After school and homework, Liang sits next to them and stitches to the sound of his MP3 player. His parents, for their part, work to the snappy sound of sewing machines. "They don't listen to the radio, sometimes they talk a little," explains Liang in his hesitant French. It is very difficult to imagine the contents of these conversations. The Chinese calendar hung up in the workroom must be their only way to tell time passes by in the outside world. Their one window lets in little light from the inner court. The sole activity which could nourish their dialogue is the film they watch on their mezzanine in the evenings. "It's too dangerous for them to go out of the studio. They only do so if it's an emergency. Because I'm young, I stand less chances of being arrested, so I do the shopping, but I am still scared, and I look out, everywhere, for police controls," says Liang.

Many Parisians will tell you their buildings lightly tremble until late at night, to the sound of sewing machines, hidden in basements. This is particularly true to the 3rd district where Liang lives with his family. It's a few streets away from where the former Interior Minister and presidential election candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, set up his campaign office. It's a few hundred meters from where, in recent days, protests have been organised to complain about arrests of illegal migrants.

An estimated 700,000 men and women of Chinese origin live in France, according to the European Commission. Like the Xiang family, these immigrants often find themselves stuck between two worlds: excluded from the French state system, they are chained to their ethnic community to whom they owe the large sums of money for enabling them to set foot on French territory. And indeed, the solidarity networks from which Chinese workers can benefit upon arrival in France are essential. They are based on group strategies and help differentiate Chinese immigration from that of north and black Africans. If this solidarity works to their advantage, the cultural gap which separates the Chinese from the French, especially through language is, on the
other hand, a difficulty which migrants coming from ex-French colonies don't have to experience.

Chinese migration to France has existed for centuries, but only became visible in the 1960s. Waves of "boat people" started implanting themselves in what is known as the "arts et metiers" neighborhood of Paris. In the 1970s, the French witnessed the growth of a Chinatown in the 13th district: streets, restaurants and grocery stores are lit with colourful ideograms.

"What we like best about France? We get medical aid and the air is less polluted here then it was in China," translates Liang. "There are no mosquitoes, no flies," he adds with a big smile. Initially, however, the Xiang family decided to migrate to France because they had relatives who promised to help them find work. Once the decision was taken to leave, Yong-Tu and Aillian, today 49 and 44 years old respectively, left their son in the care of his aunt. For 14,000 euros each, they were given passports and tourist visas for France. This direct method of passage is the safest and therefore most expensive. The "parachute way" is more popular: the illegal immigrant exits the country with a fake "Schengen passport," or a fake resident permit. That is the option the Xiang chose for their son who joined them up in 2003. Liang, who was 16 at the time, had a transit visa through France to supposedly reach an African country. When he arrived in Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport, he refused to take his connecting flight.

"The police forced us to stay in a corner for 24 hours. They did not give us food or drink and I didn't go to the toilet during all that period," he explains. The third way, the most dangerous, can take many months, as migrants are taken through routes across southeast and central Asia by boat, train, car or even foot. All those who live in Chinatown know the story of someone who tried those routes but never made it to their destination. These migrants often die of disease, drowning or asphyxia. However, even those cheapest routes are accessible only to relatively wealthy Chinese families. "In China, we had a house with seven floors and a grocery store," explains Liang. The transition between their country of origin and France is therefore often made harder as it represents an important decline in social status.

Liang wears a couple of rings on each hand, his black brand-name outfit, large trousers and bleached hair contrasting with his parents' very plain clothes. Sitting next to them on a small stool in the kitchen, he explains, "we came here so that I can have a better future. The students who have finished university in my home town all have to stay at home. There is no work." Filial dutifulness and family solidarity are two pillars in Chinese society and the child, inserted in the family economic enrichment program is insurance for the future. After two years of French lessons upon his arrival in France, Liang was integrated into the national schooling system and is now preparing his French baccalaureate for next year.

Like him, the majority of illegal Chinese migrants work with their parents on a daily basis to help them pay back their passage debt, a sum of money they will probably spend their lifetimes to gather. Their task is made even harder by the fact that their work is underpaid. Having no legal status obviously makes them very vulnerable to abuse: their isolation from French society and misunderstanding of complex legal rules prevents them from denouncing their working and living conditions. Between the three of them, they earn from 1,000 to 1,200 euros a month and their studio, which has no heating, costs 600 euros a month. Furthermore, their debt makes it
impossible for them to return home. "If we were arrested and sent back to China, we would have to find a way to come back to France. Chinese wages would make it impossible to pay back our debt," says Liang. A return would also be humiliating in the eye of the rest of the family which stayed behind, in the seven-story house.

Without a residential permit, and no knowledge of the French language, these illegal workers have no other option but to isolate themselves within their community. The Chinese solidarity system enabled the Xiang to find housing and employment within their compatriot's underground networks. Before Liang arrived in Paris and started learning French, Yong-Tu and Aillian had to use the services of Chinese translators for all contacts with the world outside their community. Liang has now taken that responsibility. For youngsters like him, the pressure is enormous. Besides that dependency of his parents, he has to be successful in his schooling in French and carry alone the family migratory project. Finally, he has to work to help pay back the debt, all this in the fear of being caught and the distress caused by his illegal status. "During the breaks at school, I have to work to catch up with my French," says Liang. "In the evenings, I go home to help my parents with the sewing until late in the evenings. Besides going to school, I only go out of the studio to do what's urgent and I can't take the metro because that is where the police stage most identification checks." He says, "I cannot have a life like other teenagers. School, work, sleep, that's all."

Chinese immigrant's children are usually considered to have a relatively good capacity to adapt. They learn French rapidly and usually succeed in the baccalaureate. The community solidarity, their global long-term strategies and discreet activities can lead to professional success if they eventually get their immigration papers. But a July 24, 2006 law, otherwise known as the "Sarkozy Law," toughened the regularization conditions for foreigners. For the Chinese community, one particular aspect of the new law represents a great obstacle: the immigrant has to prove his "insertion within the French community." Families like the Xiangs enter a vicious circle. Their illegal status forces them to fold in on themselves, shutting them out from any possibility of getting legal status and escaping a situation that can certainly be classified as a form of modern slavery.

*For the purpose of this article, Liang's surname was changed to Xiang.*