



# Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

---

Giese, Karsten (2012),  
Global Flows with Chinese Characteristics, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*,  
41, 2, 3-7.

ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this introduction and the other articles can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org)>

---

Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies  
in cooperation with the National Institute of Chinese Studies, White Rose East Asia  
Centre at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield and Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is an Open Access publication.

It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <[ias@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:ias@giga-hamburg.de)>

For an e-mail alert please register at: <[www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org)>

The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which includes:  
Africa Spectrum ● Journal of Current Chinese Affairs ● Journal of Current Southeast  
Asian Affairs ● Journal of Politics in Latin America ● <[www.giga-journal-family.org](http://www.giga-journal-family.org)>



# Global Flows with Chinese Characteristics

Karsten GIESE

In this issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, we invite our readers to join us on a journey focusing on global flows with Chinese characteristics. These flows are literally spanning the globe and consist of capital, goods, people and ideas. Concentrating on people and ideas in this issue, these global flows have become ever more diverse and are affecting not only China but also countries all over the world. Though China had been mainly on the receiving end of both capital and ideas for almost two decades starting with the beginning of the reform period and has – once again – become a leading sending region of people sojourning to destinations all over the world, Chinese capital and ideas, now reaching ever more of the world’s regions, are late additions to this process. In this topical issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, four authors discuss some of the repercussions of these flows, which are not restricted to implications for the regions receiving Chinese investments and/ or people but are also affecting China and its society more and more. The proverbial “other” has become increasingly present, diverse and influential in China, be it in the form of representations of destination regions for Chinese sojourners and migrants or in the form of personal experiences, given the growing numbers and higher concentrations of foreigners from around the world who have chosen to settle and/ or conduct business in Chinese cities.

Starting with representations of the “other” in China, Artem Rabogoshvili focuses on the representation and transnational imagination of Russia in Chinese cyberspace. In recent years, Russia has become an important destination country for Chinese labour migration, and sojourning to Russia to work has been officially promoted as a potential means of poverty alleviation in northeast China. As a consequence, based mainly on positive stories of successful Chinese labour migration as a life project for self-improvement and the contributions of these migrants to the development of their home communities, Chinese government websites and online state media have shaped a particular understanding of Russia as a destination country for potential Chinese labour migrants and have developed a blueprint for future transnational migrant workers. In his contribution, Rabogoshvili contrasts this state-regulated transnational imagination – which in his understanding is based not least on the cur-

rent Sino-Russian rapprochement – with more nuanced and competing constructions that are negotiated and circulated within the more informal and semi-anonymous virtual spaces of online bulletin board systems. The author demonstrates how the interactive nature of these media facilitates discussion, clarification and eventual critical deconstruction of the image of the Russian Federation as a destination country that has been promoted via government websites and online state media – with obvious potential ramifications for pre-migration decision-making. Discussions of Russian xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiments, along with stories of migrants who have been cheated or otherwise failed to make their fortunes, emphasize the legal and economic vulnerability of Chinese working migrants in Russia. Following the inherent logic of the attention economy, sensational and extreme narratives are circulated and reproduced most widely within and across bulletin board systems. Hence, strong and influential counter-imaginings are constructed and serve both to contest the positive, state-regulated constructions and to potentially discourage would-be labour migrants. According to the author, this counter-discourse, along with the speed at which information is disseminated on the Internet, strongly influences the dynamic process in which transnational imaginings of Russia as a destination for Chinese labour are collectively renegotiated. As an effect, migration decisions can potentially be based on much more diverse and nuanced understandings than the positive transnational imaginings of both Russia and working migration to this country on government and state media websites would suggest.

In the second contribution, Liu Hong advocates a new understanding of the dynamic flows of people, goods, capital and ideas between one of the earliest and most important destinations for Chinese migrants and the Chinese homeland. After three decades of weak homeland ties, both informal and institutionalized linkages between the ethnic Chinese in Singapore and their home regions started to become revitalized in the 1980s. This revival of traditional ties, Liu argues, has gone hand in hand with general trends of globalization and the economic regionalization drive initiated by the Singaporean government, and these transnational linkages have been strongly intensified through the massive inflow of new Chinese immigrants. The transnational Chinese social sphere that has emerged throughout the course of these developments has facilitated a multitude of flows between Singapore and China but is inhabited and shaped by actors with competing agencies. While the early Chinese mi-

grants and their descendants in Singapore tend to emphasize their linkages to specific *qiaoxiang*, the new Chinese immigrants who have arrived since the 1980s have more often tended to identify themselves as overseas subjects of the Chinese nation-state and part of the re-emerging Chinese civilization. Through cultivating links with and lending support to various overseas Chinese organizations in Singapore, the Chinese and Singaporean governments are actively involved in the construction of such imaginations. But while the early ethnic Chinese immigrants have shaped their homeland linkages in accordance with the economically driven policies of the Singaporean government to emphasize links with hometowns and regions rather than engaging with the Chinese state as such, some new migrants' identification with the Chinese state is serving Beijing's nationalist revival and may even pose a potential challenge to Singapore's assimilationist agenda.

Liu further elaborates that these transnational social spheres are rather fluid and continuously under construction and renegotiation because immigrants are simultaneously embedded within more than one society. Although states are still important actors, Liu concludes that the rigid dichotomy between state and society that has come to dominate large parts of Asian studies during the age of Asian nation-building and throughout the Cold War period has prevented us from gaining a deeper understanding of the roles various trans-state forces and cross-, sub- or transnational actors who are operating on the periphery of state-society relations play in reshaping the domestic and regional transformations that are underway in Asia.

In a related vein, and not just in terms of region of focus, Danielle Tan's case study of Chinese migration to and economic engagement in Laos is the next valuable contribution to the discussion of the role of states, transnational networks and the agendas of particular and diverse actors within the formations of post-Cold War globalization and statehood. In her study on the activities of economically motivated new Chinese migration to Laos, a country largely neglected by mainstream overseas Chinese studies, Tan sets out to challenge the notion of the retreat and weakening of the state in the age of neoliberalism. Applying a migration studies perspective, she argues that transnational networks are not undermining state power but rather strongly impacting the ways states are operating. Although Laos forms part of what is widely regarded as the "natural backyard" of China in Southeast Asia, little is known about the new Chinese migrants and their economic activities beyond popular

stereotypical allegations that they are plundering the natural resources of a weak state that is being victimized by the Chinese expansion. Tan cautions us that the term “Chinese” has to be deconstructed carefully, since it encompasses multifaceted realities, a wide range of different actors and diverse trajectories. She then convincingly demonstrates that the central state authority of Laos – regarded as a weak state *par excellence* – is actually being empowered through Chinese investment and migration rather than weakened as is commonly assumed. Chinese networks and business interests deeply intersecting and interacting with local communities and political authorities have proven highly instrumental to the project of neoliberal governmentality that has allowed the Lao state to reaffirm its hegemony over society and strengthen its grip on the periphery of its territory. From this perspective, the Lao state is a beneficiary rather than a victim of globalization and Chinese capitalism.

Because Laos shares many similarities with a large number of African states (weak state, resource curse, new Chinese immigration, state-to-state arrangements), this study also offers food for thought beyond the single case. Studying China’s rise without narrowing arguments down to allegations of neo-colonialism may reveal how Chinese entrepreneurial practices fit into the structures of state patronage, extraversion and space-making with the unexpected effect of strengthening rather than weakening state power, not only in the peripheral case of Laos but also in various African countries.

Though they do not look into the diverse forms of Chinese engagement in the African continent, Gordon Mathews and Yang Yang focus on global flows with Chinese characteristics in terms of African traders sojourning in China. In their case study of low-end globalization (which, in contrast to high-end globalization, entails that the economic actors participating in it must be physically present in order to personally make deals and avoid being cheated), they concentrate on the lives and livelihoods of Africans engaging in trade between China and various African countries. The authors discuss Hong Kong, in general, and the microcosm of Chungking Mansions, in particular – the latter as a safe, English-speaking gateway into Guangzhou, the “wild west” of low-end globalization. Traders as well as intermediaries exercise considerable sophistication in terms of both business practices and survival strategies in a context that denies many of them legal residency. Being distinctly temporary and often spanning days rather than years, this form of spatial mobility of Africans, which is facilitated and shaped by access to new

technologies of communication and transportation, shares many similarities with the sojourns of Chinese traders to Africa. Most African and Chinese traders know little about the language, culture, history or society of their respective destination countries and are not particularly interested in narrowing or closing these knowledge gaps. Even the romantic interests of traders in women of the destination country are largely described as strategic and practical in implication. Like their Chinese counterparts in Africa, African traders in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, Mathews and Yang conclude, are exclusively interested and engaged in expanding the global flow of goods with Chinese characteristics: They bring cheap Chinese goods – fruits of globalization – to populations that might otherwise never obtain these fruits. Facilitating this particular flow, the authors argue, might one day be regarded as one of China's most significant contributions to the history of globalization.

**Dr. Karsten Giese** is senior research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Asian Studies. Since 2005, he has been the editor of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. His research interests include socio-economic change in Greater China, Chinese domestic and international migration, and overseas Chinese studies.

E-mail: <karsten.giese@giga-hamburg.de>

# Contents

## Introduction

- **Karsten GIESE**  
**Global Flows with Chinese Characteristics** 3

## Research Articles

- Artem RABOGOSHVILI  
Chinese Migration to Russia as Revealed by Narratives in  
Chinese Cyberspace 9
- LIU Hong  
Transnational Chinese Sphere in Singapore: Dynamics,  
Transformations and Characteristics 37
- Danielle TAN  
“Small Is Beautiful”: Lessons from Laos for the Study of  
Chinese Overseas 61
- Gordon MATHEWS and YANG Yang  
How Africans Pursue Low-End Globalization in Hong Kong  
and Mainland China 95
- Simona Alba GRANO and TU Ping-Lan  
Development vs. Environment in Taipei 121

- Contributors 155