

EUROPEAN VISIONS OF TODAY'S CHINA

# 'Els xinesos a Catalunya' (2001) revisited

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Illustrator: [Sr. García](#)

*Els xinesos a Catalunya* (The Chinese in Catalonia) [1], was published in 2001. It was the first piece of research to take an in-depth look at the population, especially given the need to further knowledge on how to incorporate it into the educational system. The pioneering work commissioned by the Jaume Bofill Foundation provides us with a helpful starting point for analysing the characteristics of their presence twenty years on.

In 2020, 65,048 Chinese nationals were living in Catalonia, making them the fourth-largest group of foreign residents, after Moroccans, Romanians and Italians. Like the rest of Spain, Catalonia has become a considerably more diverse society in terms of its population composition. In the year 2000, people of foreign origin accounted for just 2.9% of the total population; by 2020, that number had risen to 16.2%. The number of Chinese nationals in Catalonia has also increased its relative weight over time: in 2000, the 4,396 people of Chinese nationality accounted for 2.42% of foreign residents; by 2020, that percentage had doubled to 5.16%. Interestingly, while other nationalities saw their populations decrease during the second decade of the century, the Chinese population has increased.

## Young people, families and entrepreneurship

The number of young people in the population is another noteworthy feature, with more than 20% under the age of 15. These young people include both those born in Catalonia and those who have arrived for family reunification. Occasionally, recently born infants are sent to be cared for in China by other relatives, reinforcing the family nature of this migratory pattern and its transnational characteristics [2]. The profile of the Chinese population in Catalonia reveals a balance between the genders and a predominance of young couples with children. In addition, a very high proportion own small family businesses in the service sector—catering and small-scale commerce.

Almost half of those registered as residents have always worked and paid social security contributions (30,640 workers out of 62,188 residents in 2019), and notably, many of those are small business owners, as evidenced by the continued increase in the proportion of the population registered in the Social Security Regime for the Self-Employed: In 2005, 2,850 members of the Chinese origin population were self-employed. That number rose to 7,538 in 2010 and reached 15,885 by the end of 2019. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic ushered in an economic crisis and consequent job losses, but by April 2021, those jobs had been recovered.

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The population's high proportion of young people (20.9% are under the age of 15 compared to 14.6% for the non-foreign population of Catalonia in 2020) helps slow its ageing. In addition, its entrepreneurial economic activities increase the wealth of the autonomous community and contribute to the internationalisation of the economy. Over time, their businesses have evolved from being primarily low-skilled labour-intensive family businesses in the service sector to businesses with more capital and added value. There has also been an increase in the number of qualified workers, among which we find the descendants of migrants and the international students (of degrees, masters and doctorates) who have established themselves in Catalonia at different times, as well as the employees of recently arrived Chinese multinationals and expatriate executives, professionals and investors of all kinds, who are taking advantage of the opportunities offered by Law 14/2013 on Support to Entrepreneurs and their Internationalisation—a high percentage of applicants from China invest in property, among other things [3]—. According to property registry statistics, in 2019, they were the second foreign nationality to buy the most properties in Catalonia, surpassed only by the French.

Higher education in Catalonia benefits from the internationalisation of these new students. For example, at the end of 2019, of the 8,068 Chinese nationals with a valid study permit in Spain, 25% were based in Catalonia (2,011 students).

## Space and territory

The population of Chinese origin in Catalonia continues to hail predominantly from the south of Zhejiang province (Qingtian District and the residents of Wenzhou). However, the population has expanded to include people from other areas, including China's north-eastern provinces and Fujian province. The number of Chinese nationals from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Shanghai is also notable, with people from these areas having a relatively long history of settlement, while people from almost all the country's provinces have chosen to settle in Catalonia more recently. The predominance of people from Qingtian and Wenzhou is explained by the fact that from very early on, the area specialised in international migration as a way of life, and the family migration chains set in motion back then have been used to their full extent. Their settlement in Catalonia and Spain coincides with their presence in other southern European countries: Italy, Portugal and France have become their preferred destinations, and extensive transnational family networks have been weaved.

In Catalonia, from the outset, they were mainly concentrated in the Barcelonés region (55.6% of the total in 2020), and if you include the neighbouring areas of Vallès Occidental, Baix Llobregat and Maresme, the region accounts for 78.8% of all Chinese nationals in the Autonomous Community. Beyond this notable concentration, their presence is distributed throughout Catalonia, with many running service sector businesses in small municipalities.

The city of Barcelona alone accounts for 34.6% of the total (22,487), followed by Santa Coloma de Gramenet (5,156), Badalona (4,364) and Hospitalet de Llobregat (3,424). The phenomenon of Chinese residential concentration is particularly evident in some of Santa Coloma's neighbourhoods, such as the area popularly known as "Fondo" in District VI, home to 3,186 Chinese nationals in 2020 and accounting for 18.7% of the total registered population. More recently, a concentration has also developed in Fort Pienc in Barcelona, where 1,326 Chinese nationals are registered as residents and account for 4% of the total neighbourhood population. In fact, some of Barcelona's other neighbourhoods are also home to a high proportion of Chinese nationals within their foreign populations, such as Sant Martí de Provençals (20.9%), La Verneda i la Pau (17.7%) and Navas (15.7%). And the pattern is repeated in some Catalan towns such as Montgat (16.3%), Barberà del Vallès (13.5%), Sant Adrià del Besòs (13.2%), Cerdanyola del Vallès (12.9%), Badalona (12.9%), Sils (12.3%), etc.

In certain areas, a proliferation of service businesses easily identifiable with the Chinese population has sprung up: Chinese restaurants and supermarkets, hairdressers, travel agencies, estate agents, etc. In addition, some industrial estates also host an evident concentration of Chinese owned import/export and wholesale companies, such as Badalona Sur. Another characteristic of the population is its high intra-provincial and inter-provincial residential mobility. Finally, we must also take into account those who have adopted Spanish nationality, who, while they may have disappeared from the immigration statistics, have not lost their origins. In fact, a part of the economic elite of the population of Chinese origin in Catalonia are legally Spanish and tend to be those who have lived in the

country for the longest.

## Education and identity

Given that children of Chinese origin residing in Catalonia are schooled within the Catalan educational system, which does not offer Chinese as a second or third language, many of them attend Chinese language schools and academies run by Chinese associations dedicated to offering them the chance to become literate in Chinese outside of school hours, and especially on weekends. This demand to maintain the heritage language is being met by new private schools and academies with high numbers of students. In Catalonia's 2020-2021 academic year, 1,416 Chinese national pupils were enrolled in the second cycle of pre-primary education, 4,928 in primary education and 3,792 in compulsory secondary education.

The diverse life-family-school pathways of these young migrant descendants largely determine their positioning and identity within the wider society. The broad range of different experiences makes it difficult to simplify and place them all in one category. What can be confirmed, however, is that more and more young people of Chinese origin are accessing post-compulsory education and prioritising access to University (855 post-secondary baccalaureate students in the 2020-2021 academic year; 238 in post-secondary vocational training and 169 in advanced vocational training in 2019-2020), with more Chinese origin students being enrolled in all disciplines.

And it is precisely these young university-educated members of the population who, compared to their parents' generation, which regarded themselves as "guests" and subscribed to the Chinese cultural norm of a "do not disturb" and "go unnoticed" approach to life, are becoming increasingly more vocal and willing to advocate for themselves. Young people of Chinese origin no longer consider themselves as "guests", but as citizens with full rights entitled to the same conditions as the rest of the population, and when they feel that equality is not respected, they draw attention to the situation and condemn it.

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These young people share their classrooms and certain jobs with the students who come directly from China to continue their studies, having undergone a very different socialisation process, with varying life experiences. Once graduated and faced with a lack of employment opportunities for skilled workers, these descendants of Chinese origin migrants can follow the same pathway available to their more recently arrived colleagues and choose to migrate to China to find work [4].

## Beyond work: leisure, festivals, religion

Leisure consumption is particularly orientated towards the personal socialisation process. Viewing Chinese films and soap operas and playing games in the Chinese language, whether individually (e-games, bingo halls and casinos) or in groups (mahjong), is very common. In groups, they also frequent karaoke bars and certain clubs, discos and dances in public venues. The Chinese holiday calendar dictates some of their leisure time. The Chinese New Year, which features parades and the dragon dance to music, has already become an intercultural event in Barcelona and other Catalan cities. Even the lantern festival — which closes the fifteen-day cycle of the Spring Festival — is now celebrated. Other festivities of a more intimate nature see family and friends come together to share the special meals enjoyed on specific holidays.

Also noteworthy is the presence of several evangelical churches whose pastors preach in Chinese. Rather than converts, the congregation comprises families who were Christian before they migrated to Europe. The evangelism is complemented with all kinds of activities ranging from music groups to language teaching, particularly targeting young people [5]. Buddhist believers sometimes meet in private spaces to receive teachings from invited Buddhist teachers, although their numbers are small. Thanks to the initiative of a group of residents of Chinese origin, Barcelona even has its own Taoist temple, which has had mixed success and has an uncertain future [6].

## Sport and tourism

With its legacy of 370 million followers on social networks and more than 100 million euros in turnover, FC Barcelona has had Didac Lee (Figueres, 1974) on its Board of Directors as the Head of New Technologies for a decade (2020-2021). Chen Yansheng (Guangdong, 1970), the owner of Hong Kong-based Rastar Group, a toy, video game, film and television company, became the president of RCD Espanyol (Reial Club Deportiu Espanyol) in early 2016, after buying almost half of its shares. In January 2019, forward Wu Lei (27 years old), one of the best goalscorer in China, made his debut for Espanyol football club. These three people of Chinese origin occupying leading roles in Catalan football, represent the profiles of 1) descendants of migrants, the son of a journalist and a graduate in Hispanic Philology who met in Spain after arriving via Taiwan in 1966 and decided to settle in Figueres, where they opened the first Chinese restaurant in Girona, in 1974; 2) new investors from China with interests in various sectors, to which we can add the executives of Chinese multinational subsidiaries and those who invest in property in order to obtain a residence permit under the provisions of Law 14/2013; and 3) elite athletes, including some of the outstanding table tennis players to have played for Catalan clubs since the 1980s, such as Daili Xiao and Yao Li at Calella in the 1990s, parents of María Xiao (Barcelona, 1994), the best Spanish rower in 2020 (73rd position in the world ranking), together with Sofía-Xuan Zhang (Cartagena, 1999) who has lived in Cassà de la Selva (Girona) since the age of five, daughter of table tennis player and coach, Xu Hong, who ranked fifth in the world under-21 rankings that same year.

In addition to the previously mentioned variety of contributions to elite sport in Catalonia,

they have also made a significant contribution to the teaching of martial arts in gyms, academies and associations. For example, Catholic priest Peter Yang (1921-2014) was one of the first people to introduce tai chi in the seventies, as well as being the patron of the first Chinese restaurant in Barcelona in 1958. Lam Chuen Ping (1952-), who arrived in Barcelona in 1972, studied Wushu and Chinese medicine, was the founder and first Master of the Barcelona Wushu Institute and one of the pioneers in the teaching of Chinese martial arts in Spain, launching the Wushu department of the Spanish Federation of Judo and Associated Disciplines in 1986. Wong Ping Pui was another of the first Wushu masters in Catalonia in the seventies. Partly related to martial arts, it's also worth highlighting the opening of Chinese medicine clinics, particularly those specialising in acupuncture, as well as Chinese medicine teaching centres.

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One more recent phenomenon is the increase in Chinese tourists, who are renowned for spending more money while on holiday in Catalonia than any other nationality. In fact, given the market's growing importance in terms of volume and consumption, particularly in regard to luxury products, stores often hire shop assistants who speak Chinese to serve this clientele, as is the case at the luxury product outlet centre, La Roca Village. In 2019, 350,000 Chinese tourists visited Catalonia, amassing a total expenditure of 705 million euros. In addition to the shopping tourism they are well known for, the sector promotes specific travel agencies, tour guides, accommodation and food, etc., which boosts the local economy in many areas.

## And then came the pandemic and activism...

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 and the accompanying economic crisis and losses produced by the mandatory confinement and stoppage of all non-essential activities affected workers and entrepreneurs of Chinese origin just as it did the rest of the Catalan population, but it also led to increased racism. They were the first to become aware of the pandemic and knew how to respond to it —wearing masks, voluntarily confining, closing businesses—, anticipating the measures subsequently imposed by the government. In February 2020, they attracted a lot of attention because of the factors described above, leading to certain racist demonstrations that were quickly condemned, particularly by the younger generation born to migrant parents, on social networks (hashtag #nosoyunvirus) and at public events like the Catàrsia performance. A group of Asian descendants gathered at Barcelona's Arco de Triunfo to read a poem that declared: "I am not a virus nor am I a threat to your pure egoism, Euro-white society" [7] [8]. Lawyer Yunxiao Kang offered her free advice to those affected by racist acts similar to those seen in 2003 with SARS, as recalled by Isa Zhang [9]. Women, in particular, have become the spokespersons for the population [10].

The young people of Chinese origin in Catalonia, who are increasingly accessing university and living with Chinese international students, are beginning to reflect on their position and identity in Catalan society and express themselves publicly. They are Catalans, among other possible identities under discussion/construction, and as such, they demand respect for the citizenship of which they form part. The young people interviewed for *Els xinesos a Catalunya* were enrolled in school in the year 2000, and they continue to reside here, contributing cultural and economic wealth to a society that has always been diverse in its composition. The initial surprise at their arrival and settlement has given way to the certainty of their influence and contributions.

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