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## 'A little bit freer': middle-class Chinese migrants on the periphery and new openings for political engagement

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### ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention to peripheral destinations of middle-class migration that are gaining prominence as traditional centres lose appeal. Focusing on middle-class Chinese migrants settling in what we call the global periphery, we examine off-centre migration systems that challenge established sending–receiving country configurations. Drawing on fieldwork in Hungary, existing research in Southern Europe and Southeast Asia, and an analysis of emerging online networks, we identify a shared vernacular migration narrative revolving around the pursuit of freedom. We suggest that freedom remains a central driver of migration – a notion largely sidelined in studies of voluntary mobility and rarely explored in the Chinese context. We understand freedom not as a political ideal but as an embodied, everyday experience: freedom from the pressures of work, family expectations, and social surveillance, and freedom to slow down, to make time for oneself and live with a sense of ease. Mobility here represents a situational disengagement that opens space for loosely networked transnational engagements. Amid growing global political uncertainty, shifting aspirations around work and education, and rapid demographic change, the periphery emerges as safer, more affordable, and more relaxed – a site where quiet experimentation with autonomy, expression, and belonging can unfold.

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Middle-class migration;  
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transnational mobility

Hungary is a little bit freer than China.

– Amy, expatriate employee of a Chinese multinational in Hungary

Li Ying, an online influencer and government critic with over two million followers, lives in Italy where he studied art. Eric, a self-described citizen journalist, settled in Portugal after graduating from a British university. Nini, a travel blogger, lives in Spain on a 'digital nomad' visa. The Zhangs migrated to Hungary on an investor 'golden visa', then moved with their son from Budapest to Lisbon. Liu Ren, who runs an online account providing migration and real estate advice, first settled in the Athens suburb

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on a similar visa, then moved to Finland. Zhao, who sold his central Beijing apartment at the peak of China's real estate boom, migrated to Budapest for a less competitive lifestyle where his two young children could thrive. The Pengs left Budapest for Phuket but came back after half a year. These individuals were between their late twenties and early forties when they decided to leave middle-class lives in China. Although their migration pathways and family circumstances vary, all chose peripheral destinations, understood here not as fixed geography but as relational positions produced across scales, as meaningful alternatives to dominant centres of power, capitalism, and immigration. Another aspect they have in common is that, like many other young middle-class Chinese – regardless of whether they left home as students, corporate employees or entrepreneurs – they invoke the idea of freedom when explaining their motivations for going abroad.<sup>1</sup>

This is perhaps unsurprising: travel has long been associated with getting away from the strictures of home. Yet what middle-class Chinese migrants call 'freedom' is not self-evident or easily explained within the existing conceptual frameworks in migration studies. Much of the literature explains such mobilities in terms of economic rationality or aspirational striving toward improved quality of life and expanded personal autonomy in a broad sense (Benson and Osbaldiston 2014). But the meanings that middle-class Chinese attach to freedom exceed these notions. While migration studies have paid increasing attention to freedom as aspiration – often aligned with liberal narratives of choice, opportunity, and self-actualisation – they have largely overlooked freedom as critique: a lived response to structural constraints as well as moral and values reorientation. Rather than a calculative logic of material improvement or the idealised projection of self-fulfilment through migration, freedom emerges as a quiet refusal to conform to social expectations, workplace and familial pressures and to let one's sense of self be compromised by constant surveillance. Freedom, in this sense, points toward both what is sought abroad and what is perceived as denied at home. It is not just an abstract ideal but an embodied orientation – a way of inhabiting mobility as an active disengagement from the status quo and reimagining a life more open-ended with a future aligned to personal values. In this article, we attempt to show how what we call the global periphery has become a migration destination for middle-class Chinese seeking freedom in this broadly defined sense.

Although theories of migration have become more nuanced since their first formulation in the late nineteenth century, migrants are still commonly cast as rational economic actors aiming to maximise their incomes as well as social and cultural capital. In particular, Chinese migrants have been portrayed as paragons of flexible accumulation and resource maximisation through 'flexible citizenship' and 'ethnic entrepreneurship' (Ong 1999; Zhou 2010) and are often associated with the concept of 'trading diasporas' (Cohen 2008). These notions suggest an ethnic network that has honed specific strategies to navigate various legal and social systems to their economic advantage whilst utilising social and cultural capital to minimise risks and maximise gains. This perception has been strengthened since the 1980s by popular business-school literature on the role of the Chinese diaspora in the rise of the 'Asian Tigers' (e.g. Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996) and the influential theoretical contributions of Aihwa Ong (1999). When, at the turn of the 1990s, migration from China restarted after an interruption of some 40 years, it was once again driven by entrepreneurs' intent on capitalising on China's emergence as the world's workshop (Nyíri and Saveliev 2002). Thirty years on, however, with

China now a central economic and geopolitical actor, the motivations driving outward migration reveal a more diverse and complex landscape.

The idea that voluntary migration can be driven by something other than economic rationality remains surprisingly underexplored (but see Carling and Collins 2018). To an extent, this oversight is due to the persistent focus on migration from poorer to richer countries in both migration studies and policy. But shifting geoeconomic relations, the rise of non-Western middle classes, and the erosion of a clear global rich-poor divide are redrawing the political economy of migration, laying bare the multi-directionality and diversity of contemporary migration flows. In an uncertain world characterised by political and economic volatility, rapid policy turns, and the uneven opening and closing of borders, Yeats' oft-cited line – 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold' – resonates with global migration imaginaries as well.

As traditional centres of global modernity are buffeted by political and economic turbulence, they start losing past allure while 'lower ranked' small countries as 'downscale' destinations increasingly beckon as sites of possibility, promising safe havens, stability and a slower, quieter life. The once unequivocal appeal of 'developed-country citizenship' (Fong 2011) – as an all-in-one package with access to higher-paid jobs, better education and health care, and happier lives – is no longer obvious. Migration systems that persisted for decades are being disrupted, no longer held together by the once stable sending-receiving country configurations. Aided by the instant spread of information and misinformation, the well-established migration infrastructures that undergird these systems are increasingly fluid, like the image in a kaleidoscope.

The steadily growing presence of middle-class Chinese migrants across the globe offers a particularly visible example of the fundamental shifts reshaping global migration (e.g. Beck, Nyíri, and Gaspar 2024; Choi 2022; Huang 2024; Koh and Yeoh 2025; Masumoto Takehiro 2025). As we have suggested elsewhere and will elaborate further here, the Chinese case demands taking seriously the quest for values and aspirations grounded in one's spiritual life (*jingshen zhuiqiu* 精神追求) – such as fairness, freedom, tolerance, or authenticity – that animate many familiar migration narratives (think of the foundational myth of the United States), yet which migration researchers have largely shied away from (Xiang and Nyiri 2022). What remains under-theorised is how freedom may function not merely as an aspiration, but as vernacular critiques of structural pressures expressed through discontent with pervasive social control and intense competition, as well as the narrowing possibilities of living as desired within one's home society.

Unlike the migrant entrepreneurs of the 1990s whose relentless faith in progress through hard work and capital accumulation made them take up the 'yellow man's burden' in poorer parts of the world eager for consumer goods (Nyiri 2006), the individuals we discuss in this article made a different choice. Getting out of China is to 'run' away – as many on the Chinese internet call it with a pun on the character 润 (*run*) that originally means 'to smooth' or 'to grease' (Zhang 2022) – from a society they find overcompetitive and too materialistic. Their destinations frequently are 'global peripheries' – marginal in global hierarchies but imagined as spaces of refuge and reinvention. At the same time, these migrants remain embedded in wider circulations of Chinese influence, as their lives continue to be shaped by the global expansion of Chinese capital, institutions, and infrastructure (Franceschini and Loubere 2022; Pieke 2014).

This ambivalent relationship to China's global capitalism is further complicated by growing geopolitical tensions. Increasingly, Chinese migrants, including students, find themselves under suspicion as alleged agents of the Chinese Party-state (e.g. Sun 2024). Such suspicions overlay and mingle with racialised anxieties that intensified during the coronavirus pandemic (Wang 2023). Yet, unlike the widely reported flight of the middle class from Putin's Russia (e.g. Domańska 2023; Gessen 2022), the figure of the freedom-seeking Chinese migrant receives little attention in both media and public discourse. Instead, recent policy literature has focused on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s 'United Front work' among Chinese overseas (e.g. Harth and Kwong 2023), further entrenching a securitised framing of Chinese mobility.

It is true that the CCP invests immense efforts and resources into tightening the connections with Chinese abroad and mobilising them for its own purposes (Barabantseva 2005; Ceccagno and Thunø 2023; Liu 2022), as well as in the surveillance and 'transnational repression' of critics abroad (Alecci 2025; Cook 2023). It is also true that as China's global economic footprint expands, a larger share of Chinese migrants come to depend on China's political economy, which is inextricably linked to the Party-state regardless of formal ownership. Yet amid these entanglements, Chinese migrants who are motivated neither by economic gain nor by the state's bidding are increasingly noticeable on the global stage. Even more unexpectedly, some young Chinese professionals embedded in China's global corporate expansion – where employees are often required to echo the Party's narratives of China's global role (cf. Hope 2025) – may have taken those positions for reasons that diverge widely from official narratives. Although expatriate managers of Chinese companies, students at European universities, and middle-class couples in garden suburbs live rather different lives, social media networks nonetheless bring people together, circulating shared concerns, sentiments, and ways of aspiring towards different futures. For many, such circulations point them toward the peripheries of global mobility, where what might look like 'downward' moves in conventional Chinese hierarchies reflect a shift in priorities and the willingness to trade status for freedom.

If, following Aristotle, the aim of politics is to make the good life possible, then these pursuits are inherently political, insofar as migrants are attuned to the constraints governments place on the conditions of a good life. We therefore adopt a broader understanding of the political as one's relation to, and interpretation of, power. The digital and media connections linking like-minded freedom-seekers on the periphery can be seen as forming an emergent habitus for political engagement. While these formations lack the organisational structure or public articulation typical of diaspora politics, they are nonetheless significant in subtle political reorientations and in the small experiments through which the new generation of middle-class migrants envision alternative futures.

### Peripheral aspirations

Our approach can be understood through the lens of migration aspirations, which have gained considerable attention in recent years as a theoretical framework for analysing how migrants imagine their futures (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2018; Collins 2018). Aspirations open up particular horizons for migrants to evaluate possibilities and position themselves within broader temporal and geographical frames. Carling

and Schewel conceptualise migration aspirations first and foremost as ‘a comparison of places’ (Carling and Schewel 2018, 953) when potential destinations reflect locally existing ideas and associated meanings. Such place imaginaries play an important role in constituting what Lubkemann (2005) calls an ‘emigrant script’ according to which the idealised ‘migration project’ unfolds. The ‘right’ aspirational pursuit, as scripted by the typical migration project, is to leave home in order to work or study abroad, to improve one’s own economic situations while maintaining a degree of ‘loyalty’ to where one comes from. In the past decades, these familiar scripts have been primarily anchored in aspirations towards metropolitan centres – places considered more prestigious and worthy of the considerable changes and sacrifices migration entails. Moving ‘upwards’ toward these centres fulfils the arc of one’s expected migration project, which aligns individual mobility with broader social construction of achieving a ‘better life’.

Yet these centre-oriented place imaginaries are no longer hegemonic as peripheral and non-typical destinations are increasingly incorporated into migrants’ aspirational landscapes. We use ‘periphery’ as a scalar term that can refer to ‘small countries’ outside the centres of political and economic power as well as to locations away from business and education hubs. ‘Small countries’ (*xiaoguo* 小國) in the vocabulary of Chinese migrants are typically believed to be less powerful and to offer fewer opportunities and resources, and therefore inherently less desirable (cf. Hansen and Thøgersen 2015). These destinations are peripheral not only to the Anglophone First World but also to the major Chinese cities our participants left behind. Participants in our study consider the ‘poor, small-language countries’ (*qiong xiaoyuzhong guojia*, 窮小語種國家, Figure 1) of Eastern and Southern Europe as self-evidently lower-status, and one participant jokingly called Budapest a ‘village’. Voluntary migration to the periphery, therefore, is routinely met with bewilderment and even ridicule by those staying behind as many remain convinced that such a move means missing out on the opportunities and economic future in China.

However, such re-orientation toward the periphery does not necessarily reflect failure or compromise but can represent meaningful alternatives, as ‘peripheral aspirations’ reshape the migration project and the moral economy of mobility itself – the socially organised set of values, obligations to self and family, and expectations that configure one’s beliefs and actions. Choosing ‘lower-stakes’ destinations is not only extending the emigrant script but reworking it, with changing metrics that weigh up ease, liveability, and perceived autonomy and freedom. Building on Carling and Schewel’s (2018) argument to look past purely instrumental views of migration, we emphasise its intrinsic value as a way for migrants to cultivate different aspirational orientations.

In this paper, we make two analytical claims regarding migrant aspirations toward the periphery. First, the periphery becomes a spatial strategy through which middle-class Chinese address temporal pressures that have been increasingly difficult to cope with in China. Rather than defining the middle class through quantitative metrics, we follow Zhang’s (2012) emphasis on lifestyle and consumption patterns, as well as the aspirations that orient their mobility. All of our participants originated from China’s first and second tier cities, held college degrees, owned properties, and maintained lifestyles commonly associated with the middle class, including regular leisure travel and extracurricular classes for their children. It is within this social position that the experience of temporal pressures becomes especially pronounced.



### 欧洲贫穷小语种国家的人因为穷而窝在家里的生活

**Figure 1.** ‘People from European poor small language countries are snuggling up in their homes because of poverty’; Source: Zheng Nengliang Public Account, WeChat.<sup>4</sup> July 20, 2018.

Mobility aspirations often emerge at the intersection of emplacement and temporality, as explained by Daniel Mains (2011) in his ethnographic study of unemployed Ethiopian youth, who seek migration as a way out of economic stagnation and their sense of ‘temporal impasse’ – the feelings of being ‘stuck’ and not moving forward with life. In urban China, middle-class migrants experience a different but structurally analogous form of temporal strain characterised by the relentless pace of work and heightened social competition. These pressures create a sense of being caught in an accelerating rat race where time is compressed and access to opportunities becomes narrow. Cora Xu (2025) has detailed how young Chinese navigate intensifying ‘time poverty’ and ‘time debt’ generated by greater educational and professional demands in society today. Moving to Europe’s peripheries, therefore, becomes a strategy to address worsening ‘temporal inequalities’ by escaping the temporal compression at home while extending one’s ‘time capital’ abroad. Much like Mains’ interlocutors, Chinese middle-class imagine their ‘downscale’ migration as a pathway back into a more manageable temporal trajectory with a breathable pace and better work-life balance. Aspirations towards the periphery, therefore, open up different temporal horizons where one could live a life as desired.

Second, aspirations toward the periphery can be read as a distinct mode of lifestyle consumption compatible with middle-class self-positioning. In Sasha Newell's account of Côte d'Ivoire migrants (2012), migrating to Paris is a form of consuming an 'other-world' that Europe represents. The Ivorian migration project is scripted through a 'modernity bluff' in which going to Paris is staged as a cosmopolitan success. For Chinese middle-class migrants, periphery destinations like Hungary or Italy offer an easier access to 'pure Europe' (Nyíri and Beck 2020) as an object of lifestyle consumption, but the logic of value is configured differently. Economic resources and continuing ties to China shaped mobility choices of our informants in different ways. While some families could sustain desirable lifestyles with relative ease, others were stretched to their financial limits. Some were able to maintain their property and business in China after moving to semi-retirement in Hungary, others had sold theirs to finance the move; in yet other cases the husband remained in China to continue providing for the family. After moving, the families relied on earlier or continuing income from assets or business activities in China.

It is within this context that middle-class migrants pursue what might be called a 'good enough Europe' where urban amenities and desired lifestyle choices are attainable at a much lower cost than in either China's first-tier cities or Europe's metropolitan centres. Similar to Ivorian migrants described by Newell, who want to go to Europe in order to inhabit certain aesthetics and taste, Chinese who choose the periphery cultivate an image of themselves as 'freedom seeking', discerning pursuers of simpler, more 'authentic' life. Peripheral aspirations enable a re-positioning within middle-class value orientation – away from materialism toward a curated sense of well-being and social engagement. The periphery as migration destinations therefore is consumed differently – an affordable and liveable 'otherworld' that sustains particular aspirational styles and priorities.

Taken together, the periphery reconfigures people's broader 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004) as well as the specific capabilities that such mobility can generate (see also Carling 2002). According to Appadurai, aspiration is not simply an individual choice but a socially mediated ability to chart pathways toward a future of meaning and value. In our case, aspiring to peripheral destinations is not reducible to personal preferences; it emerges from how middle-class migrants navigate the temporal compression and intensifying pressure that structure urban life in China. The periphery thus becomes a site for experimenting with freedom, a space in which migrants could explore how far one could depart from the expected script of a 'proper' migration project.

Across our participants' narratives, freedom appeared as a recurrent theme, expressed in multiple ways and on different scales. Following Berlin (1969), we consider freedom as both freedom from and freedom to. 'Freedom from' refers to escape from external pressures (*yali* 壓力), such as workplace demands and family expectations, social conformity and gendered norms, as well as from the wider political environment and the pressure to perform narrowly defined success. 'Freedom to' encompasses the capability of individuals to lead lives they value, with temporal autonomy (i.e. having free time) as a central theme. Mobility becomes a form of temporal geoarbitrage (Hayes 2014), by which migrants opt out of the grinding time regimes of global production centres and turn instead to peripheral destinations as 'oases of deceleration' (Rosa 2013, 158). Reduced competitive pressure, lower living costs, and a distance from social and state

surveillance contribute toward a greater sense of freedom to cultivate personal interests from horse-riding to wine tasting, or to experiment with more horizontal parenting styles. The periphery becomes attractive when it makes imaginable a different organisation of time, value, and social connection.

At the same time, such aspirations seem actionable through the capabilities migrants assemble and develop incrementally along the way. Rather than treating capabilities as fixed stocks of resources, we understand capabilities as an evolving repertoire that can be enhanced and recalibrated through mobility. Chinese migrants stretch their economic and social capital in a process similar to what Paul (2011) describes as ‘stepwise migration’, and convert these resources into local know-how, fresh networks, and renewed confidence. In this sense, ‘downscale aspirations’ toward the periphery can expand migrants’ capabilities by opening alternative routes of self-realisation and widening their options in economic, social, and political life. Freedom, in this sense, is neither an abstract ideal nor a ‘natural’ outcome of simply moving away from China; it reflects a dynamic relation between Chinese middle-class aspirations and their capabilities, often worked out through their everyday experiments with making different choices and refashion their migration project.

### Notes on fieldwork

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Nyíri and Beck in Budapest since 2015, supplemented by fieldwork and interviews in the Netherlands and an analysis of WeChat chat groups and public accounts devoted to life in Hungary, practical matters and cultural activities in Europe. In parallel, since 2020, Zhang has been following students, self-employed individuals, and skilled professionals in the Chinese metropolis of Wuhan who were planning either to leave the country or to move to a smaller, more peripheral location within China and were studying alternative pathways to ‘run’. In Hungary, we have conducted participant observation and interviews with over 100 migrants aged between 21 and 47. Of these, we closely followed the trajectories of about a dozen families over the course of ten years, which account for some two-thirds of the material used in this article. All of the migrants in this study left China after 2013. Among them, some were self-employed, others worked in corporate or academic jobs, and some left as students.

For many, the entry point to Hungary was the ‘golden visa’ programme, which granted permanent residence in return for purchasing €300 thousand worth of state bonds. More than 18 thousand individuals took part in this programme while it ran between 2013 and 2017; over 80 percent of them were Chinese citizens (see Beck 2024; Beck and Nyíri, 2022, 2024; Nyíri and Beck 2020; Zhang 2024). Others arrived via different routes. Approximately a quarter were employees of two large Chinese manufacturing companies that announced major investments in Hungary after the pandemic. The remaining interlocutors came to Hungary to study.

These individual trajectories unfolded alongside a broader shift in Chinese mobility to Hungary driven by the country’s rapid rise as a recipient of Chinese corporate investment. After taking second place in 2022, Hungary became the top destination of Chinese FDI in Europe in 2023, accounting for 44 percent of the total (Éltető et al. 2024, 6–7). Much of the investment – especially in electric vehicle manufacturing and

related supply chains, as well as railway construction – was announced after the pandemic and brought a steep increase in the numbers of Chinese managers, engineers, and administrative staff. These include both intracompany transferees from China (and occasionally other locations) as well as locally hired graduates of Hungarian and European universities. Most are in their mid-twenties to early forties and belong to the same generational cohorts as the lifestyle migrants discussed earlier. Unlike those migrants, though, they tend to be single, and in cases where they are married, spouses and children have usually remained in China.

When asked why they left China, many offered very similar accounts: clean air, safe food, a green environment, a relaxed lifestyle, and above all an escape from ‘involution’ (*neijuan* 内卷)<sup>2</sup> in a society they see as polluted, expensive, ruthlessly competitive, and overly materialistic. While some migrants sought to reject competition outright, others wanted a ‘lighter’ version. For them, migrating ‘downwards’ became strategic circumvention. This is a form of overseas ‘lying flat’ dream (*tangping* 躺平, a term denoting the refusal to join the rat race), which rejects the imperative of constant development and getting ahead in the name of staying still and enjoying the present.

### *Pleasures of the periphery: A good enough life in a free enough place*

Since the 2000s, the spread of investment-for-residence schemes across Europe, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere has opened up pathways for middle-class Chinese to pursue healthier and freer lifestyle outside China while relying on assets or incomes inside it (Nyíri and Beck 2020). Such pathways were catalysed by tourism, which helped many forming personal impressions of foreign countries, while the rise of social media influencers circulated these impressions more widely both outside and within China. All of these gave rise to an increasing range of aspirations to explore opportunities away from China: lifestyles, business opportunities, freedom of expression, or simply withdrawing from social pressures linked to work, income, marriage, and raising children.

The Covid-19 pandemic reconfigured these expanding imaginaries abruptly and revealed how quickly one’s mobility could be curtailed and these possibilities foreclosed. The lockdowns (Ling and Zhang 2023; Yang 2022) turned vague ideas of leaving into concrete intentions for many, exposing the arbitrariness of state intervention even among the highly privileged. The sentiment of a young woman interviewed by Lu Hongan in Amsterdam is a good reflection of this shift: ‘I assumed that I was lucky since I didn’t think government policies could have a negative effect on my life, but after experiencing the pandemic, I realised my mistake thoroughly’ (Lu 2024). Another young woman in Amsterdam said:

I always thought Shanghai was the best city in China. (...) You wouldn’t be judged by others, and you could enjoy freedom and equality. However, after experiencing the lockdown, Shanghai [...] turned out to be just like any other city in China, [...]. From that moment, I started taking actions to leave China. (Lu 2024)

These experiences intersected with fluctuating geopolitics, especially when the Sino-US trade war, sanctions, and rising Western suspicion toward China led to deeply felt anxieties amidst China’s economic slowdown and tightening surveillance. Together, they contributed further to a sense of losing control over one’s life trajectories, prompting the flight of China’s business elite and a frantic search for exit strategies among the

middle class (An and Kim 2023; Zhang 2022). These pressures did more than intensify the desire to ‘run’; they reoriented how migrants evaluated possible destinations.

Although North America and Western Europe remain powerful symbols in China’s migration imaginary, they increasingly appeal to different strands of value. Many interlocutors drew sharp distinctions between American and European lifestyles, rejecting the former as unruly or risky – too similar to China in terms of materialism and competition and too different from it in terms of ‘guns and drugs’ – while embracing the latter as socially, culturally or politically resonant. Some foregrounded welfare provision, fairness, gender equality, and equitable public services as important – values that at least one interlocutor explicitly described as ‘left-wing’. For most, however, what truly mattered was the ability to live on their own terms – neither subject to the pervasive state scrutiny they associated with China, nor exposed to what they viewed as the West’s ‘excessive freedoms’, often represented in the media through images of guns, drugs, public protests and labour strikes. In their eyes, Hungary – the EU’s only member ranked ‘partly free’ in Freedom House’s global ranking – turned out to be just tantalisingly free enough.

These preferences for social fairness and safety do not remain abstract ideas but shape the everyday choices families make after settling in Hungary, particularly in relation to schooling. Unlike earlier Chinese migrants to Hungary or professional ‘expatriates’ who prefer English-language international schools, many of the families we spoke to chose local public schools for their child’s education in Hungary. In their opinion, free access, in contrast to the overt commodification of education in China, was integral to what they considered ‘good education’. As one father explained:

I want [my son] to be a good, sincere and honest man who knows how to care, how to enjoy happiness, and helps other people. I don’t want him to go to a good university [...] if he is diligent and gets into a good university, I’m very happy for him, but this is not my expectation.

The preference in schooling also reflects a wider search for low-pressure environments, which points many families towards Europe’s peripheries – such as Eastern and South-eastern Europe, particularly Greece (Tseng and Gaspar 2025) – rather than its centres. As a father in his mid-thirties told us:

My cousin lives in Germany. He called me several times to go there. But had I gone there, my quality of life would not be the same as it is [in Hungary]. Consider my current situation: there is no pressure on me, I can be at home, and I can take care of my child all day.

The distinct appeal of the periphery lies not only in its accessibility and low costs – and thus cannot be simply reduced to a strategy of geoarbitrage – but also in a vernacular sense of moral order that many migrants associate with wholesomeness and safety. Similar motivations are voiced by middle-class Chinese migrants in Southeast Asian destinations such as Thailand (Siriphon and Li 2024), Malaysia (Ngeow 2022), and Laos (An and Kim 2023), seen as calmer and less demanding than either Western cities or China’s urban centres. As a young Chinese in Laos said:

Whether I’m in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, or France – I just don’t want to live in China. Laos was my first trip abroad, and while driving on the road, I fell in love with the sky I saw and decided to settle here. In China, I never even had time to look at the sky. I thought, ‘Why am I living like this?’ (An and Kim 2023, 151)

There are clear parallels with the appeal of domestic peripheries such as the towns of Dali in southwestern China and Anji in Zhejiang Province, which have attracted middle-class migrants from coastal and central megacities (Friedman 2023; Xu and Spruyt 2025). Like their global counterparts, these internal destinations are seen as less polluted and more relaxed, further from government oversight yet still offering the lifestyle and amenities deemed important. While relief from pressure was the most common way migrants described their motivations, other registers of freedom also surfaced in our conversations. Previous studies show how gendered and sexual norms – around marriage, reproduction, and appropriate femininity or masculinity – shape freedom-oriented migration among well-educated women and queer men (Choi 2022; Chen 2025; Lu 2024; Martin 2021), and some of our interlocutors echoed these concerns. A smaller number explicitly articulated a desire for political freedom, especially around expressing critical opinions on civic matters in public and promoting feminist thoughts.

Nearly all female managers we spoke to, both expatriate and local hires, expressed a sense of relief at no longer being expected to work after hours and remain available for phone calls on weekends. One woman in her late twenties who graduated in computer science from a prestigious U.S. university first moved back to Peking, which she considered safer and more pleasant, but later applied for a job with a major Chinese firm in rural Hungary where she said she could pursue her favourite pastimes: tennis and horse riding. Another young woman at the same company confided that she might quit the job and stay in Hungary after her assignment ends because life there felt ‘a little bit freer’ than in China. She began learning Hungarian and entered a relationship with a Chinese PhD student in Budapest. In contrast, several male managers framed working long hours and overtime was a duty to the company or even to China, although this contrast may reflect the fact that more of the men we talked to were older and married, whereas all women were single.

Although our student sample was limited, gender or sexual minority identification may have been a factor influencing the decision to come to Hungary where university diplomas offer limited global credentials (cf. Chen 2025). In 2024/25, there were nearly 2,800 Chinese students in the country, the second-largest group of foreign students. Among them was Wapi, a lesbian student in Budapest. Shortly after her arrival, Hungary passed a law banning public events ‘promoting’ homosexuality, the first such law in the European Union. Nevertheless, Wapi hangs a small rainbow flag from the window of the apartment she rents from a Chinese landlord and shares with another Chinese student. She says no one has bothered her about it, in contrast to China, where she says displaying such a flag would be ‘too dangerous’ and ‘not allowed’. Wapi finds Hungary ‘definitely a bit freer’ than China, and she has taken advantage of her time there to travel widely across Europe.

Eventually, the imagined pleasures of the periphery do not always align with the realities of living there. The longer migrants settle into their new environments, the more clearly they perceive its limits, as illustrated by the mother who became an onward-migration agent after realising Hungary’s poor economic prospects. The quality of education was a common source of disappointment. Many migrants moved to Hungary after being sold the idea that, with its top ranking in per capita Nobel Prize recipients, this is a nation ‘that loves learning’. Most interlocutors casually enrolled their children at the nearest public school, many of which were severely under-resourced and

underperforming. Yet they did not recognise these problems as systemic; instead, migrant parents opted to change schools – sometimes repeatedly, in one extreme case four times within eighteen months.

Racial discrimination was another recurring source of frustration. Many migrants arrived in Hungary assuming that the conspicuous amicability between the Chinese and Hungarian governments would translate into an environment free from racial harassment. Although most spent their first few years in Budapest reiterating how welcoming and friendly Hungarians were toward them, as their children became more fluent in Hungarian, families grew increasingly aware of racist attitudes expressed across multiple realms from housing and education to health care. Nevertheless, even these encounters did not always result in onward migration. Compared to the ‘more developed countries’ that might otherwise seem desirable, Hungary was still regarded as safer, and – despite its flaws – good enough and ‘free enough’.

### The quest for freedom and new forms of the political

If Hungary is, for many, ‘free enough’ to be enjoyable, it is because ideas about where one might go, and what kind of life might be possible there, are increasingly spread through and shaped by digital platforms. Chinese language social media such as WeChat, Xiaohongshu (RedNote), and TikTok, as well as Telegram, X, and YouTube, have become key infrastructures for navigating different exit routes out of China. Migration brokerage now assumes hybrid formats on these platforms – YouTube influencers and WeChat public-account owners who document and share daily lives abroad also double as paid consultants or brokers. As migration pathways diversify, broker-influencers posting about seaside summer homes in Portugal find themselves competing for clicks and likes against those vlogging student life in Thailand or gap year experiences in the Philippines. Content categories are often fluid as well – a single channel may cover issues from housing to schooling, from sightseeing to lifestyle choices across multiple countries. Broker-influencers’ personal contingencies become marketable narratives – a mother disappointed by her daughter’s job prospect in Hungary becomes a promoter of onward migration on WeChat; and an account devoted mostly to real estate in Greece suddenly begins posting about migration to Finland as the account owner considers such a move.<sup>3</sup>

The distinctiveness of China’s online environment, shaped by government restrictions on most foreign platforms and the integration of multiple functions into a few ‘super-apps’ like WeChat, continues to shape the online interactions and networks of recent Chinese migrants abroad to the point that it is apt to speak of a ‘WeChat diaspora’ (Sun and Yu 2022). Their experiences of foreign places, from sightseeing and dining to immigration procedures and politics, are filtered through information circulating on WeChat and other platforms such as Bilibili or RedNote (Martin 2021). These same platforms connect migrants to friends and family in China and allow audiences in China to follow influencers overseas, even though what can be written, said or shown is limited by censorship and self-censorship by fears of account suspension or closure. Nonetheless, these platforms serve as gateways through which like-minded migrants find one another and form ad hoc digital and live publics, such as the Netherlands-based ‘The Weirdo Podcast’ (*Bu He Shiyi* 不合时宜), whose million-odd

subscribers are spread across Europe, China and beyond, and the San Francisco-based ‘Valley101’ (*Guigu 101* 硅谷101) streaming across all major podcast and video platforms with over 4 million subscribers among Chinese speaking communities.

While avoiding direct politics, these networks nevertheless offer room for the political in the broader sense. These online communities also produce offline events where members can meet in person and express themselves without the constraints of online censorship. Here, peripherality is less of a feature of specific destinations but the dispersed and often low-visibility contexts where the everyday work of running the media platform is carried out, while public events might take place in more centrally connected urban hubs like Amsterdam. As most activities take place online, administrators and contributors often base themselves in a range of lower-cost locations and travel occasionally to meet fellow participants who are themselves spread across ‘centre’ and periphery. Thus, Wapi’s friend Jasmin, a student in a midsize Hungarian town, first applied for a digital internship with The Weirdo and then travelled to the Netherlands to help out at an offline discussion about the state of European and Chinese societies. Meanwhile, she declined the local Chinese student association’s calls to travel to Budapest to welcome China’s Chairman Xi Jinping. Her choice shows how digital networks can catalyse offline public expression and choice that can be meaningful expressions of one’s political agency. It is in this sense that overseas peripheral destinations differ from domestic lifestyle mobilities within China – rather than framing freedom primarily as a kind of withdrawal, these spaces open up limited but meaningful possibilities for acting upon political agencies through choice, refusal, and selective participation. Those looking for room for more overt political expression can tap into similar networks that operate on non-Chinese platforms and also offer offline events, such as the Nowhere bookstores whose five physical locations in America, Europe, and Asia anchor a global online public (Yuan 2024); the globetrotting U.S.-based journalist Yuan Li’s podcast Bumingbai; or Italy-based Li Ying’s X account ‘*Li Laoshi Bu Shi Ni Laoshi* (Teacher Li is Not Your Teacher 李老师不是你老师)’, which exposes cases of power abuse of China and documents issues of such quintessential middle-class concern as overwork and high school students’ excessive school burden. In a pioneering study of emerging Chinese civil society organisations in Europe, Luo Ming found that, besides personal referrals, algorithmic exposure helps increase the audience of these initiatives (Luo et al. 2025).

Some twenty years ago, two of the authors studied how Chinese students abroad, angered by Western media reporting on China, used online forums to coordinate spontaneous demonstrations in support of the CCP without formal organisational membership or long-term nationalist commitment (Nyíri, Zhang, and Varrall 2010). In the present context, we observe similar dynamics: rather than becoming full-time activists who pursue political causes (and, in this case, risking harassment by the Chinese authorities), public engagement with social and political issues is only one aspect of the lives of these middle-class individuals whose migration decisions and aspirations have been driven by diverse considerations. This loosely networked, situational form of engagement is facilitated by a flourishing social media infrastructure and informal cultural spaces that foster connections. The boundaries of these networks are fluid; they do not require commitment and there is no formal membership. Their relationship with other Chinese organisations or the Chinese state is generally not adversarial;

some of those frequenting their activities may even be members of professional organisations endorsed by Chinese embassies. This permeability enables participants to maintain a wide range of affiliations without necessarily signalling a fixed political voice. The constant balancing act between influence and safety, between active engagement and selective disengagement, reflects the broader logic of political ambiguity that characterise new middle-class migration practices.

We noted earlier that migration studies have long framed mobility through economic rationality, while questions of values, such as social citizenship, rights, and inclusion, feature most in studies of post-migration settlement. Political engagement is likewise siloed within sub-fields of ‘diaspora politics’, often focusing on diasporas formed by violent struggles for political change and sovereignty (Hepner 2009; Koinova 2011; 2014). Research on Chinese communities abroad has similarly centred either on voluntary associations connected to the state (Liu 1998), the CCP’s ‘United Front Work’ and ‘influence operations’ (Alecci and ICIJ 2025; Ceccagno and Thunø 2023), or dissident organisations banned in China whose members either already suffered persecution before leaving or would do so if they returned. There is very little understanding of the political life among ordinary migrants who do not engage in these more structured forms of mobilisation.

What we have observed among middle-class Chinese migrants in Europe’s peripheries does not fit these established frames. Their pathways are not characterised by exile, nor do they practice a wholesale rejection of the Chinese state. Rather, their engagement is expressed through quiet withdrawal, lifestyle reorientation, and strategic participation, which may appear ad hoc and apolitical on the surface, but carry implications for how freedom is expressed, experienced, and contested. Compared to those who have moved to China’s periphery, these individuals dispose over a far broader range of options between withdrawal and critique. Jasmin’s choice of attending a critical discussion of public affairs instead of joining Xi Jinping’s welcome team may be a modest act as far as public politics go, but such a choice would not have been available in China. These forms of engagement do not necessarily build long-term transnational politics; instead, they create loose yet resonant spaces of freedom in which fresh political subjectivities could be explored by middle-class Chinese migrants.

## Conclusions

The trajectories of Chinese migrants described in this article point to the shifting global geographies of migration linked to the rise of non-Western – particularly Asian – middle classes, the changing nature of work and education, demographic shifts, and global political uncertainty. The once unquestioned hierarchy of ‘developed-country’ destinations, with the United States at its pinnacle, is becoming more fragmented and contested. This hierarchy has not disappeared, but increasingly coexists with multiple, complex, and recalibrated imaginaries of desirability shaped by diaspora networks, circulated information, digital media, and calculative planning. In this emergent landscape, peripheral regions are no longer fallback options but can become purveyors of safe and more liveable alternatives. Above, we have discussed how such considerations affect the choices of lifestyle migrants, students, and corporate expatriates. There is increasing evidence of a similar logic behind the growing popularity of some Southeast Asian countries such as

Malaysia (Koh and Yeoh 2025) or Thailand (Lertpusit, Ge, and Ho 2025) – destinations that may hold limited value for enhancing their international credentials – among Chinese students going abroad. While expanding higher-education aspirations among students from modest educational or financial backgrounds is one factor, the appeal of these emerging destinations reflects shifts in priorities: a desire for alternative lifestyles and greater personal autonomy made possible by affordable living costs.

The global periphery looms large in other Chinese migration pathways beyond the West, and Africa could be another interesting case illustrating the wider meanings of peripheral aspirations, as it often functions as a default destination for fresh Chinese graduates and over time as a site of lifestyle choice and reorientation. Africa absorbs large numbers of young Chinese white-collar workers: technicians, engineers, managers, and clerical staff. Other young middle-class Chinese go abroad as volunteers (Nyíri 2019) or freelance workers, for example teaching Chinese on short-term contracts within or outside state-managed programmes, often for similar reasons (An and Kim 2023). Such choices parallel those of their Western peers. Clearly, far from all of those young expatriates who help further the expansion of Chinese capital abroad are driven by the Party's vision. For fresh graduates, jobs with Chinese companies in Africa are sometimes the only ones available if they want to apply the skills their education qualifies them for. Indeed, Chinese students in France told one of the authors that for graduates with a BA in French, it is now standard practice to go to Africa to work and then use the money they save to pursue a master's degree in France. While a number of fine-grain studies have recently dealt with Chinese expatriates in Africa (e.g. Driessen 2019; Huang 2024), these tend to focus on the ambivalent entanglements between Chinese capital, racial ideologies and views of development. From Melissa Lefkowitz (2022), we know that many young Chinese go to Africa out of a desire to 'help', but that such motivations are sometimes hard to separate from accumulating extracurricular credit for subsequent applications to American universities. For others, living in Africa may be fulfilling in itself. An article on a Chinese news site profiles a government official from southwest China who moved to Kenya in his forties to join the rangers at the Maasai Mara wildlife reserve (Jiang 2025). For most young Chinese in Africa, it is likely not a matter of choice, but it can still offer freedoms unavailable to them in China, such as openly pursuing same-sex relationships. In this sense, African destinations exemplify a form of peripheral mobility where constraints and the opportunity to pursue limited freedoms intersect in everyday practice.

Taking this perspective further, the pursuit of freedom and other non-material aspirations may resonate well beyond the pathways of educational, professional, or lifestyle migration typically associated with the transnational middle-class. Here too, the periphery plays an important role. Since the late 2010s, Eastern Europe has become a rising destination for temporary contract workers from South and Southeast Asia (Bielenin-Lenczowska and Patzer 2022), now probably numbering close to a million. Ongoing fieldwork among Filipino and Indonesian workers in Hungary and Poland suggests that one factor attracting these workers to the region is the lack of close surveillance and the availability of free time that can be used for everything from sightseeing or meeting friends to sexual experimentation or churchgoing to taking an informal side job (Lacsina, Nyíri and Dewanto 2026). Good public transport and welfare provisions are additional positive factors. Unlike at Middle Eastern and Asian destinations,

workers are not housed in sequestered compounds and retain some freedom of movement.

These everyday experiences of mobility and relative autonomy – within strict constraints – point toward a broader sensibility shared across migrant groups who choose to come to the ‘periphery’: a preference for places that feel ‘a little bit freer’. Whether among middle-class migrants who disengage from high-pressure societies or contract workers who prefer more free time and wider urban access despite lower pay, there is a common desire to seek environments where state control, societal expectations, and surveillance feel just a little less overwhelming. It does not always translate into overt political critique or participatory activism. More often, it is expressed through minor and ordinary acts of disengagement that form the kind of political transnationalism characterised by informal, low-stakes action with emotional ambivalence. Peripheral destinations, from Eastern European cities to Southeast Asian getaways, offer not only lower-cost lifestyles and a simpler way of living, but also freedom gained from a loosening of social obligations and distance from the state. This is where we see the emergence of a different political subjectivity – not heroic or oppositional, but quietly experimental with autonomy, expression, and belonging. The periphery becomes meaningful not only as a destination, but also a space for imagining what it means to be ‘free enough’ across borders and to be involved in alternative transnational politics as autonomous actors.

## Notes

1. Unless stated otherwise, migrants’ profiles and opinions come from the authors’ fieldnotes.
2. This term, which originates from anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s work, and was widely adopted in vernacular Chinese discussions around 2020 and refers to the necessity of exerting ever greater efforts to maintain one’s social status (Wang and Ge 2020).
3. Such links between personal migration projects and commercial brokerage are not limited to middle-class Chinese migrants: Filipino contract workers, for example, often become ‘migration influencers’, with the income helping support their own next move (Wanicka 2025).
4. ‘Zheng Nengliang’ (Positive energy) is the public account (Gongzhong hao) on WeChat run by a Chinese mother who refashioned herself as an onward-migration agent after becoming disappointed by the limited prospects Hungary could offer her daughter, who held a degree in medicine. The pigs in the image refer to the derogatory English acronym *PIGS* (Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain), used to denote Southern European countries that suffered serious economic setbacks in the wake of the financial crisis. However, the author uses the expression in a broader sense, as an umbrella term for ‘poor small-language countries.’

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Pál Nyíri**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Juan Zhang**: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft,

Writing – review & editing; **Fanni Beck**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

Due to ethical considerations regarding participant confidentiality, the data supporting this study are not publicly available. However, data may be made available by the first author upon reasonable request for academic purposes only.

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