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## **WHEN 'HOMELAND' IS NO LONGER 'HOME', THE IDENTITY CRISIS, THE LOSS OF MOBILITY AND THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN—— STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA TESTIMONIOS BY CHINESE TRANSNATIONAL WORKERS UNDER COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

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### **Research Background**

World Bank data (2020) shows that, soon after the abrupt lockdowns and travel bans due to COVID-19, the amount of money transnational workers sent home fell significantly in 2020. As COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis continues to influence the globe, the total remittance is estimated to decline 14 percent by 2021 compared to 2019. With unstable income and uncertainties caused by the pandemic, World Bank also pointed out that it is the first time in recent history that the stock of international migrants is likely to decline and return migration has increased. It is shown on the Ministry of commerce of PRC website (2020) that from January to September 2020, China dispatched 208,000 labors of various types, a decrease of 148,000 compared with the same period last year. Among them, 100,000 were under contracted projects and 108,000 were dispatched under labor cooperation. In the end of September 2020, there were 635,000 Chinese labors abroad. Taking the illegal, unregistered, and informal labor into consideration, the number of Chinese transnational labors is far beyond and deserves an eye on them.

Therefore, when I incidentally came across the WeChat public account where transnational workers from different locations gathered virtually to share their personal stories, complaints, emotional expressions and their dream of returning home, my attention was inevitably drawn by these narratives. I observed repeatedly on the narrators' stories posted on the comment zone of every related article published by the account administrator from April 2020 to October 2020. Most of the stories were narrated by transnational workers directly, while some of the stories were re-narrated by the administrator in the first personal. The narratives on which I focus in this study are mainly written narratives of transnational workers' experience under the global

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pandemic, many of which are testimonios. By John Beverley (2005)'s definition, testimonio is a novel-like genre told by witness of the event, on their traumatic experiences. My analysis will be on the narratives of transnational workers on experiences in foreign countries under severe pandemic conditions.

Reading these narratives, three themes have caught my attention. Firstly, the narrators repeatedly talked about 'boss', 'family', 'money' and 'home country', which relates to the mixed 'identity' as Chinese low working-class transnational labor, mostly middle-aged males. Secondly, they broadly talked about problems of 'space' and 'mobility' in pandemic. It is obvious from the above narrative like 'If we go out of the door of the labor camp, we may be shot by the police. We have to wait, wait and wait', we can see the loss of mobility created severe problems on these workers. Thirdly, strong emotions were expressed out by writing narratives in virtual spaces, such as 'desperate', 'afraid of being infected', and 'homesick'. Based on these observations, I came up with three research questions:

1. What does it mean to be 'Chinese transnational labor' in Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What kind of space has been created for Chinese transnational labor under Covid-19 pandemic?
3. What kind of emotions was expressed through these narratives?

## **Methodology**

Studies on narratives, especially testimonios, provides us with the unique stories of people under special social political context. Rorty (1985) argues that testimonio combines with the desire for solidarity, aiming at improving the narrator's ability to identify themselves, voice themselves, and try to share the values with others. Through testimonios, Witteborn (2012) explored the space of risk from the voice of asylum seekers and refugees in the USA, Germany, and Hong Kong. When analyzing testimonios in Hong Kong, the data was based on written testimonios published by NGOs as well as on a website designed by asylum seekers in Hong Kong in which they narrated their experiences. Although these testimonios are not orally narrated by individuals in off-line settings, they are similar to verbal testimonios in terms of the author's traumatic experience, the 'performance' by the narrator and interaction with the reader, and the potential to reach the general public and create empathize.

Therefore, in this study, for the written narratives published in WeChat public account, I also take the 'interlocutor' role (Koven, 2002) seriously as the author was trying to bring his or her story to the audience, to the public sphere, to which it would normally be impossible for him or her to get access (Beverley, 2005). As for Koven (2002), there are three roles that storytellers can perform: the author, the interlocutor, and the character. Koven's (2002) framework on analyzing speaker roles are very useful in understanding narratives created in virtual spaces. Therefore, I apply this framework in the narrative analysis process.

The criteria for selecting the data were based on (a) whether the narrative was a testimonio on their past experiences in a foreign country facing Covid-19 pandemic, (b) whether it is directly related to identity, space, and emotion, (c) whether it contains

enough information, (d) whether it is told in first personal. The data collection will be based on WeChat postings from April 2020 to October 2020.

## **Findings and Discussions**

Based on the social media narrative analysis, this study shed lights on the following dimensions.

First, when the low working-class community who went across the border and was stranded in the host country with severe Covid-19 situation, their mixed identity was under crisis when thinking about the home country, the family and the poor situation they were in. The national identity as 'Chinese citizen' made the transnational workers feel even worse. Why contributors to China's 'Belt and Road initiative' were blocked outside the border of the homeland? Most of the narrators cannot understand China's policy and doubted whether being 'Chinese' still make sense when living abroad in the pandemic. For transnational workers in such situation, it was possible to be forced into exile. Here, "exile" echoes with what Victor Hugo called "long dream of home" (in Simpson, 1995). Although it is not for political reasons, it still suggests a painful banishment from their homeland involuntarily (Peter, 1998).

Second, under the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese transnational workers were in a space of uncertainty, high risk and immobility. Mobility is a kind of resource with unequal relationship to people (Skeggs, 2004). Unaffordable flight tickets and hotels fees for 14-day quarantine after landing Chinese territory stopped their steps home. Even for those who want to pay the money, the limited quotas were already given to officials, high-level businessmen, overseas students, and state-owned enterprises' employees. Their appeal was too weak to be heard by the embassy and home authorities. Chinese transnational workers' posted stories prove that there is a politics of mobility which is about power relations and about separating the privilege from the non-privileged (Sparke, 2006; Bauman, 1998).

Through new media technologies, Chinese transnational workers from various locations gathered and reached out to the public. They also appealed to the government and asked for solutions. In extreme situations like the pandemic, narratives in virtual space are useful tools to ask its readers for support. It is also possible for them to enhance their capacity to construct their own identity and solidarity (Beverly, 2005). Meanwhile, scholars like Paul Gready (2013) keep a critical stance on personal testimony's power for advancing human rights. We should also pay attention to who owns and controls the narratives, as well as in what conditions did these narratives made public.

Except for understanding the identity struggle of these Chinese transnational worker, highlighting the problem of space, showing their motion expression, theoretically, the main purpose of this study is to highlight that social media narrative inquiry can facilitate social change. Practically, it also aims at raising the awareness of this group of people during covid-19 pandemic. As the whole world is working its way against the pandemic and economic downturn, let us also think about the transnational workers who are also on the frontlines of the pandemic.

There are several interventions governments should consider. First, supporting stranded workers in health, housing, and other social services. Second, adjusting the cross-border policies for its own citizens who are in genuine needs to meet their families. In the medium to long-term, as the pandemic comes to a new normal stage, policies regarding to transnational workers and others vulnerable groups, should embrace more humanistic concern. A clean-up policy to close the border to all the citizens is irresponsible and sloth administration.

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