The community of Chinese "expat-preneurs": understanding the challenges of doing business abroad

Luisa Helena Pinto
School of Economics, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

Emilia Fernandes
School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal, and

Li Xinyan
School of Economics, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

Received 12 July 2022
Revised 1 November 2022
Accepted 26 December 2022

Abstract

Purpose – To date, research on migration and entrepreneurship has rarely focused expat-preneurs. Based on recent developments in both fields, this paper aims to investigate the under-researched phenomenon of Chinese self-initiated expatriates who choose to temporarily live and do business abroad on their own volition.

Design/methodology/approach – To address this research gap, 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Chinese expat-preneurs living in Portugal were conducted, exposing their narratives about their multiple challenges.

Findings – The findings corroborate the theoretical need to look beyond narrow economic explanations for why individuals engage in transnational entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial itinerancy. A collective identity and ethnic community are important because they influence how opportunities are identified and pursued.

Research limitations/implications – This is a qualitative and interpretative study in a limited geographical area, which does not intent to ensure generalizability. More research is needed to further understand the phenomenon of entrepreneurial itinerancy in Europe and among other ethnic communities.

All authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Luisa Helena Pinto and Li Xinyan. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Luisa Helena Pinto and Emilia Fernandes, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding: The first author was financed by Portuguese public funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., in the framework of the project with reference UIDB/04105/2020.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval: This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was exempt by the Ethics Committee of the School of Economics from the University of Porto.

Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy
Vol. 18 No. 2, 2024
pp. 303-326
Emerald Publishing Limited
1750-6204
DOI 10.1108/JEC-07-2022-0098

Practical implications – The findings provide insightful inputs to Portuguese policymakers and locals on how to support ethnic entrepreneurship. Chinese expat-preneurs also benefit from understanding how to strength their ethnic social ties in connection with local communities.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the entrepreneurship and international mobility literatures by providing new insights into the nature and dynamics of Chinese "expat-preneurs", including their entrepreneurial itinerancy, necessary to properly understand entrepreneurs' diversity and assist in extending transnational entrepreneurial theory.

Keywords Transnational entrepreneurship, Self-initiated expat-preneurs, Chinese expat-preneurs, Entrepreneurial itinerancy, Qualitative research

Paper type Research paper

Chinese "expat-preneurs": understanding the challenges of doing business abroad

Migrants, including migrant entrepreneurs, have been regarded as individuals who leave their home country on a permanent basis, driven by necessity or opportunity reasons, with the intent to stay permanently and attain citizenship in a new country (Vance *et al.*, 2016). Although migration scholars have paid special attention to the resources and capital available to ethnic entrepreneurs who typically operate small family businesses that serve co-ethnic customers in the host country, entrepreneurial research (Elo *et al.*, 2018; Nazareno *et al.*, 2019) and expatriate studies (Vance *et al.*, 2016; Vance *et al.*, 2017), have documented new forms of international mobility and entrepreneurial flows, which are worth of further examination. For example, a growing body of expatriate research has underscored the differences between migrants and other international workers, such as assigned expatriates (AEs) (Fei, 2022) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (Andresen *et al.*, 2014; Zikic *et al.*, 2010), including those who self-initiate a business abroad (Vance *et al.*, 2016).

There is a conceptual difficulty to frame SIEs in a single definition (Brewster *et al.*, 2021). To clarify our position in this paper, we resort to Andresen *et al.* (2014) definition of SIEs as migrants who intentionally relocate across borders to legally work in a different country. SIEs also include international workers who decide to undertake an entrepreneurial activity in another country (Paik *et al.*, 2017; Vance *et al.*, 2017). This group of SIEs who willingly go abroad to be self-employed or start a business were named "expat-preneurs" (Paik *et al.*, 2017; Vance *et al.*, 2017). They differ from immigrants and immigrant entrepreneurs because they are legally, but *temporarily*, living and working in the host country, and they do not envision a permanent stay nor intent to attain local citizenship (Vance *et al.*, 2016). They also differ from AEs because they go abroad on their own volition and without corporate support. Although several expat-preneurs exploit local marketplace opportunities and then qualify as "opportunity entrepreneurs", in this study, we broadly consider an expat-preneur as "any individual who self-initiate an international assignment to start or join a new business venture in the host country" (Vance *et al.*, 2017, p. 37).

Entrepreneurship and expatriate literatures have rarely explored the experience of these expat-preneurs [recent exceptions are by Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė *et al.* (2021) and Yokoyama and Birchley (2020)]. Studies on international mobility show critical gaps in terms of geographical distribution and type of respondents (Brewster *et al.*, 2021), and Selmer *et al.* (2018) even argued that more research is needed to analyze and explain mobility patterns in context, a recommendation that Benton and Pieke (2016) extended to the Chinese in Europe. This is a significant research gap because we cannot assume that the theoretical and empirical knowledge built from migrants and other SIEs (e.g. academics) is readily

transposable to the transient experiences of SIEs who, on their own volition, look for opportunities of self-employment or entrepreneurial ventures (Selmer *et al.*, 2018).

To provide a wider understanding of the interplay between international mobility and entrepreneurship, scholars from both fields (Girling and Bamwenda, 2018; Nazareno *et al.*, 2019; Yokoyama and Birchley, 2020; Vance *et al.*, 2016) have been calling for more interdisciplinary research, in contexts other than North America, Western home and host countries, and migratory flows beyond South to North. Understanding these flows allows us to address in a deeper way how a set of barriers to full employment in the destination country, such as language differences (Zhang and Hussein, 2021), various educational and professional requirements and job discrimination (Nazareno *et al.*, 2019) are distinctively experienced by international workers. Furthermore, bridging the migration and expatriate literatures will bring to light new experiences and understandings of international mobility (Brewster *et al.*, 2021) as a global phenomenon. In a time of change and with an intensive increase in migration flows, exploring the diverse contours of migratory movements is of utmost urgency to national governments and international political institutions as to companies and consulting firms (Salt and Brewster, 2022).

To address this research gap, a qualitative study was carried out, and semistructured interviews were conducted to gather the narratives and lived experiences of Chinese expat-preneurs who originated from two south-eastern cities in China and who have been established in Portugal to do business. By drawing on the SIE literature and the migrant and entrepreneurship research on the Chinese in Portugal, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal account for the decision to move and do business in the country?

RQ2. What are the challenges arising from such a decision?

This research is relevant for several reasons. First, the growth of the Chinese population in Europe and Portugal is significant and is expected to continue in the coming years (Benton and Pieke, 2016; Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras/SEF, 2021) being the seventh largest foreign community in Portugal in 2020 (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras/SEF, 2021). Second, research has examined the characteristics of Chinese residents in Portugal, emphasizing their high self-employment and concentration in the textile and catering industry (Gaspar, 2017; Oliveira, 2003), which means this is a group locally involved in diverse entrepreneurial ventures that is worth of further examination. Third, little is known about the lived experiences of the Chinese in Portugal, especially in coping with their multiple roles and local challenges (Gaspar, 2017; Oliveira, 2003; Rodrigues, 2013). In fact, fewer studies examined the challenges arising from the decision to relocate independently to a country with interest in doing business (Benton and Pieke, 2016), such as those addressed in this study. Also, Oliveira (2003) urged researchers to further examine the "ability of Chinese entrepreneurs to draw on the inner resources of the ethnic group in order to achieve success in economic competition" (p. 14). Finally, prior expatriate research has rarely focused on this segment of SIEs (Vance *et al.*, 2017), and the existing migrant and ethnic entrepreneurship theories have shown difficulties accommodating the emerging trend of expat-preneurs (Girling and Bamwenda, 2018). Both streams of research need to be broadened to explain the behaviors of people who go abroad "temporarily" and "out of volition, not a necessity" to become self-employed and be entrepreneurs.

The following sections present the literature relevant to this study, including an overview of the methodology and a description of the main research findings. Conclusions and both theoretical and practical implications are then presented in the final section.

Chinese self-initiated expatriates

The expatriate literature distinguishes the SIEs from other expatriate populations, including organization-AEs and migrants (Brewster *et al.*, 2021; Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018; Doherty *et al.*, 2011; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012; Zikic *et al.*, 2010). Building on prior conceptualization efforts, McNulty and Brewster (2017a) showed that the distinction between AEs and SIEs is much clearer than between SIEs and migrants. As the authors recognize, while the widest and current definitions of migrants posit that they intend to move to another country on a permanent basis (McNulty and Brewster, 2017a; Zikic *et al.*, 2010), in practice, this intention might change. Likewise, SIEs can anticipate a temporary stay that might become permanent, which will classify them as migrants.

Given the need for construct clarity (McNulty and Brewster, 2017b) and the difficulty to single out SIEs and expat-preneurs from respective immigrants and immigrant entrepreneurs, we use the wider conceptualization of Andresen *et al.* (2014) in that SIEs is a category of the migrant who:

- deliberately relocate across national borders;
- independently change the dominant place of residence to; and
- legally work in a different country.

This is the operational definition used in the present study, which is consistent with the critical view of Brewster *et al.* (2021), who prefer "the simplicity of logical analysis based on international transfer, legal work, and intent that the stay is temporary" (p. 314).

An expat-preneur is then a category of business SIE "who goes abroad to initiate and exploit business opportunities by their own, or by employment in joint new venture development activities" (Vance *et al.*, 2016, p. 206). The most distinguishable features of expat-preneurs compared to ethnic and immigrant entrepreneurs are (Girling and Bamwenda, 2018, p. 209):

- the agency to go abroad "out of volition and not necessity";
- the temporary nature of the stay in the destination country; and
- a position of "privilege" (because of ethnicity, education, human capital, social class and financial resources, among others) that does not force them to go or remain in a single destination.

Hence, the Chinese who pursue, temporarily and on their own volition, independent legal work (e.g. as self-employed and/or business owners) in a different country, such as Portugal, qualify as expat-preneurs.

Taken together, these developments of the expatriate literature have deepened our understanding of SIEs and can contribute to broaden the migrant and ethnic entrepreneurship literatures. So far, however, fewer management studies have empirically examined the challenges arising from the decision to move independently to a foreign country with interest in doing business. Similarly, the entrepreneurial activity of Chinese immigrants has been explained by cultural and entrepreneurial theories (Girling and Bamwenda, 2018; Oliveira, 2003; Rodrigues, 2013) that have overly relied on the migration experiences to developed countries based on necessity (for a review see Girling and Bamwenda, 2018), and on how the family and the established diaspora support the acculturation process (Fu-Lai Yu, 2001; Shi *et al.*, 2015). Previous research has also examined the creation of immigrant entrepreneurial ventures within ethnic enclaves (Baier-Fuentes *et al.*, 2019; Ma *et al.*, 2013), but the entrepreneurial venturing of SIEs remains largely unexplored as explained below.

Migrant and ethnic entrepreneurship: the Chinese "Expat-Preneurs" in Portugal

Migrant entrepreneurship and ethnic entrepreneurship literatures have developed as sub-fields of entrepreneurship studies in response to new forms of global mobility (Vershinina, 2019). While several theoretical developments are taking place (for reviews and advancements, see among others Baier-Fuentes *et al.*, 2019; Nazareno *et al.*, 2019; Yokoyama and Birchley, 2020), including increased attention to entrepreneurs' agency (Zhang and Chun, 2018), social capital (Shi *et al.*, 2015) and mixed embeddedness (Bisignano and El-Anis, 2019), some scholars are calling for more theoretical and empirical developments exploring "diverse and alternative entrepreneurial individuals, processes and practices beyond the mainstream" (Vershinina, 2019, p. 774). Specifically, the concepts of embeddedness and mixed embeddedness (for a review, see Barberis and Solano, 2018) have prompted scholar's attention to the economic, social and ethnic conditions framing migrants' entrepreneurship (Ma *et al.*, 2013). Questions have been raised about the risks of "over-embeddedness" regarding the ethnic group and "under-embeddedness" when it comes to expanding the contacts and networks outside the diaspora (Schnell and Sofer, 2002). Research on migrants and ethnic entrepreneurship has shown that the host economy and the political-institutional context, along with ethnic networks and host discrimination, are attributes that can create specific variations in self-employment and entrepreneurship among migrant groups that require further examination (Elo *et al.*, 2018; Irastorza and Peña-Legazkue, 2018; Ma *et al.*, 2013).

In the past two decades, a considerable proportion of Zhejiang immigrants from the regions of "Qingtian" and "Wenzhou" found work opportunities in Europe (Gaspar, 2017). They usually work on the traditional textile and catering industries and live in a co-ethnic environment that stimulates the use of the native language (Marques *et al.*, 2005). Typically, the Chinese family is a production and consumption unit that makes efficient use of available human and economic resources (Fu-Lai Yu, 2001), so the creation of family businesses abroad drives the prosperity of Chinese communities in the host society (Benton and Pieke, 2016). The support from family members (close and distant relatives) and the family ownership of the business build a strong organizational structure that is also based on a gendered division of labor (Gaspar, 2017). Additionally, some core values are deeply rooted in every overseas Chinese (Zapalska and Edwards, 2001, p. 289) and include:

- the importance attached to the family by the Confucian culture;
- a strong tendency to promote the collective or the group;
- a deep respect for age, hierarchy and authority; and
- the importance placed on the "reputation attained through hard work and successful enterprise".

These core values are also treasured by Zhejiang immigrants and Chinese in Portugal (Oliveira, 2003; Rodrigues, 2013). Altogether, the Chinese business-family unit accounts for remarkable entrepreneurial success on an international scale (Benton and Pieke, 2016; Fu-Lai Yu, 2001; Gaspar, 2017).

The growth of Chinese residents in Portugal is significant. According to the official data (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras/SEF, 2021), the Chinese residents in 1995 were 2.202, whereas in 2020, they reached a total of 26.074, being the seventh largest foreign community in Portugal. The first group of Chinese in Portugal worked almost exclusively for a Chinese boss and were mainly focused on daily subsistence. These families spoke mainly a native and Mandarin dialect and found jobs and created businesses in "ethnic enclaves", such as in

Martim Moniz in Lisbon or Vila do Conde in Porto (Oliveira, 2003; Rodrigues, 2013). Whenever possible, they attended ethnic schools and religious activities, such as the Buddhism "Foguanghui" (Oliveira, 2003; Rodrigues, 2013).

With the economic and financial crisis of 2011, Portugal offered a Residence Permit for Investment Activities to attract foreign investment (Gaspar, 2017), commonly known as "Golden Visa". This Visa allows foreign investors to apply for a residence permit to start an investment activity in Portugal involving:

- capital transfer from abroad;
- job creation; or
- real state acquisition.

"Golden Visa" holders and foreigners legally living in Portugal can then apply for:

- family reunion;
- permanent residence permit; and
- Portuguese citizenship after residing in the country for five years.

The latest data (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras/SEF, 2021) shows that 1.182 residence permits were issued in 2020 for investment activities, and 296 (25 %) were required by Chinese citizens. In the past decades, a new wave of Chinese in Portugal has been investing in strategic sectors of the local economy (e.g. real estate, energy, banking and tourism), taking advantage of the specific legal and tax benefits offered by local policies (Gaspar, 2017) and the freedom of movement in Europe.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative methodology framed by a phenomenological approach. This approach postulates a subjective view of the world and focuses on the interpretation given to experience from a first-person perspective (Eatough and Smith, 2017). In other words, how people, as "embodied socio-historical situated persons" (Eatough and Smith, 2017, p. 195), resort to cultural and social resources to construct particular interpretations of personal experiences (Wojnar and Swanson, 2007). Specifically, this epistemological approach follows recent calls (Javadian *et al.*, 2020) to expand entrepreneurship studies as well as underlines how Chinese expat-preneurs give sense to their venture experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Procedure

In this study, we gathered data through in-depth semistructured interviews. This is an adequate method to depict participants' perspectives on complex topics (Patton, 2014) and provide insight into how people give meaning and order to the world and their lived experiences. The semistructured interviews combined a pre-determined set of open-ended questions with the opportunity to explore other topics by expanding respondents' responses. Furthermore, opting for a qualitative study allows to address the meanings that expat-preneurs attributed to their international and entrepreneurial experiences (Brewster *et al.*, 2021). In fact, the overwhelming majority of research on international mobility and SIEs is quantitative. Addressing this methodological gap is a way to expand knowledge attending to particular contexts and diversity of meanings related to the challenges, motives, benefits, relations and international experiences lived by different categories of SIEs.

The interview guide was first tested with two Chinese acquaintances of the authors and then improved according to the feedback received. Several broad open-ended questions about participants' international mobility asked:

Q1. Why did you come to Portugal?

Q2. How did you prepare for your international mobility to Portugal?

Q3. What were your main work challenges when you decided to come to Portugal? Could you please elaborate?

Q4. What were your main personal challenges when you decided to come to Portugal? Could you please elaborate?

Q5. How did/do you cope with the work challenges identified so far? Can you give an example?

Q6. How did/do you cope with the personal challenges identified so far? Can you give an example?

Q7. In general, how has been your experience in Portugal?

Finally, other questions addressed participants' demographics, family international mobility and past entrepreneurial and business experiences.

The interviews were conducted by the third author (an ethnic Chinese), who began by explaining the research purpose and related interview topics, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Because it was difficult to establish a relationship of trust with the Chinese community, we started by interviewing authors' acquaintances, and then a snowball sampling was used to identify other participants. This is a typical sampling method employed in qualitative research with overseas Chinese samples (Chan, 1997; Xu *et al.*, 2019) and when the study's participants are, to some extent, difficult to find or approach (Fossey *et al.*, 2002). All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and Qingtian dialects, which created a clearer understanding of the questions and a more relaxed atmosphere for participants. This also helped in expressing opinions and feelings, delving into the culture. Considering participants' busy working schedules, the interviews were run in a café, bar or restaurant, after working hours or during lunch breaks. The shortest interview took 30 min and the longest lasted one hour and a half.

Participants

The participants were targeted according to the following criteria:

- being from the south-eastern region of China (the primary origin of Chinese in Portugal, according to Gaspar, 2017);
- holding a residence permit in Portugal;
- having financed the relocation to the country by their choice and without corporate support;
- aiming to work and live abroad temporarily; and
- having an interest in doing business locally.

The final set of research participants included 15 Chinese expat-preneurs. This sample convenes the criteria of both business self-initiated expatriation (McNulty and Brewster, 2017b) and expat-preneurs (Vance *et al.*, 2016). Also, the sample size meets the minimum

requirements for an exploratory approach (Rowley, 2012), and data saturation was reached regarding the aim of the study. Data saturation is considered when there is enough data and new interviewees repeat similar experiences and ideas (Fusch and Ness, 2015). As in other exploratory studies (Guo *et al.*, 2021), our interest is on the depth of the information rather than on the size of the sample. However, the decision to conclude the interviews when we reached 15 was also due to the difficulty to gather more qualitative data from Chinese participants. The Chinese community living in Portugal is characterized by its closeness and reluctance to participate in initiatives outside the community (Gaspar, 2018), and such closure occurred despite the researcher who conducted the interviews being from the same ethnic group.

The profile of the research participants is presented in Table 1.

As observed in Table 1, of the 15 interviewees, 4 were male and 11 were female. All were from the south-eastern region of China (Wenzhou and Qingtian) and came to Portugal between 2004 and 2014. The average age was around 32 years, ranging from 22 to 54 years old. Most participants were married. Their educational background varied from primary to tertiary education, but all young participants had higher education. All participants are shareholders and/or business owners. At the time of the interview, only one participant was

Participant	Origin	Gender	Age	Marital status	Education	Key motive to come to Portugal	Arrival year	Present occupation	Countries of SIEs
A	QT	M	27	Married	High school	Relatives did business locally	2008	Shareholder of retail	Spain, Portugal
B	QT	F	32	Married	High school	Husband did business locally	2013	Shareholder of retail	Uganda, Portugal
C	QT	F	36	Divorced	High school	Relatives did business locally	2008	Shareholder of retail	Uganda, Spain, Portugal
D	QT	F	37	Married	High school	Married a man who did business locally	2004	Owner of retail	Uganda, Spain, Portugal
E	QT	F	29	Single	Bachelor	Relatives did business locally	2004	Shareholder of retail	Spain, Poland, Portugal
F	QT	F	54	Married	Primary school	Relatives did business locally	2006	Shareholder of retail	Spain, Poland, Portugal
G	WZ	M	34	Married	High school	Relatives did business locally	2008	Wholesaler	Portugal
H	WZ	F	35	Married	Bachelor	Married man who did retail in PT	2014	Shareholder of retail	Portugal
I	QT	F	35	Married	High school	Husband did business locally	2004	Wholesaler	Bulgaria, Portugal
J	QT	F	25	Single	High school	Relatives did business locally	2013	Clothing seller	Hungary, Portugal
K	WZ	F	40	Married	Middle school	Relatives did business locally	2004	Owner of retail	Netherlands, Portugal
L	WZ	F	28	Single	Bachelor	Relatives did business locally	2011	Clothing seller	Portugal
M	QT	F	22	Single	Master	Father did business locally	2004	Shareholder of retail	Portugal
N	QT	M	25	Single	Master	Parents did business locally	2010	Shareholder of a dental clinic	Portugal
O	QT	M	25	Single	Bachelor	Mother did retail in PT	2010	Owner of retail	Portugal

Table 1.
Participants characteristics

Notes: SIEs: Former self-initiated expatriation; QT: Region of Qingtian; WZ: Region of Wenzhou; M: Male; F: Female; PT: Portugal

employed in a local Chinese company while preparing the setup of her own business. Nine out of the fifteen interviewees had formerly lived in another foreign country, where they were an entrepreneur or self-employed.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed into Mandarin and afterward translated into English. The qualitative data were then subject to content analysis (Krippendorff and Bock, 2009) that involved the three researchers. We re-read each translated interview and then listed and coded the main themes based on the interview guidelines and the literature review (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). An inductive approach to the qualitative data was also undertaken to identify new emergent themes. The identification and selection of themes started from the interview guide and were followed by a discussion among the researchers for the choice of the sub-themes, so the final decision on the coding structure was obtained by consensus, thereby granting more rigor and reliability to the findings (Morse, 2015). After the first level of codification, we proceed to a second code order by searching for patterns or major categories that allow to relate the themes in the first order of codification. The process of content analysis is presented in Table 2, which includes a set of participants' quotes that illustrates the coding structure of the data.

Research findings

To present the findings, we describe the five themes that constitute the main categories related to the lived experiences and challenges of the Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal.

Diaspora and family network

When questioned about the reasons for international mobility, the interviewees highlighted the influence of the "diaspora and family network", including their prominence in their work and personal lives. The international mobility experiences of the interviewees were linked to a Web of Chinese business families that linked the overseas Chinese' communities in different countries and continents (e.g. Europe, Africa and America) since all come to Portugal to initiate or join a local family business (as shown in Table 1). Two themes emerged on how this diaspora influenced the decision to go abroad, reflecting the family pressure and the reunion with the family at the destination.

Family pressure to go abroad. The opportunity to be part of a Chinese migrant entrepreneurial community was understood by families as a way of upward social mobility. Doing business abroad raises the social status within the Chinese community because it provides an opportunity to "make money" (Participant E) and achieve economic prosperity. This is why the decision to leave involved the extended family, as explained by Participant L:

> After I graduated from university, I worked as an accountant in a company for one year, both wages and benefits were good, and I loved this job. But my mother insisted that working in Portugal for an uncle who had a retail store would be a better opportunity.

This pressure was maintained by the family even in moments when Participant L felt tempted to return to China:

> When I chatted with my mom by Wechat (weixin), sometimes I expressed my intention to return to China, but my mom always disagrees [. . .] for her, she has a girl abroad, which is a pride.

As such, the decision of leaving China is not, most of the time, an individual and isolated one. Individuals are perceived as a continuity of a collective project and fated to follow the family destiny. In this case, the pressure was first created in the origin country by those who

First level codes Challenges and strategies from doing business abroad		Second level codes
Difficulties/circumstances refers to the factors determining the decision to go abroad with the intention to do business	Family pressure to go abroad "After graduated from university, I worked as an accountant in a company for one year, both wages and benefits were good, and I loved this job. But my mother insisted that working in Portugal for an uncle who had a retail store would be a better opportunity". (Participant L) Reunion with family at host country "My parents moved to Portugal from Italy, maybe for a better business opportunity in Portugal . . .. After they started a retail store, I went to Portugal for a family reunion in 2000 . . ." (Participant N)	*Diaspora and family network*
Family and business Refers to the management of family and business issues	Family/Business planning "I knew him [husband] by marriage interview (Xiangqin). . . in Madrid, we first met on a blind date arranged by his uncle who knew me in Uganda . . .. My diligence in the Chinese community of Uganda was famous . . . I worked in a Chinese restaurant then, and the working environment was bad . . . I knew clearly that I have to consider marriage at the age of 22 . . . I did not have a rich family background . . . I wanted to leave the Chinese restaurant and changed my destiny through marriage, so I come to Portugal with him after the first blind date." (Participant D)	*Co-ethnic embeddedness*
Opportunities Refers to business opportunities abroad	Family support in the host country "I travelled to Portugal in 2004 after the suggestion of my brother who had a retail store in Portugal. . . he said it would be much easier to make money in Portugal than in the Netherlands . . . that was indeed the case . . .making money was much easier than it is now" (Participant K)	
Host country Refer the links with the host country	Focus on work, business and money "If I did not make enough money, how can I keep my parent get good treatment in hospital? Money is not all powerful, but it gives me the confidence and belief to face the difficulties of life. Money kept my parent's life longer. . . Making money is a way to protect family." (Participant C) Host country coming second when doing business "I hope Portugal always keep safe. . .. the economy keeps stable and developing. . .such we could do the business longer. . .." (Participant H) Language issues "The most difficult thing for me was the (Portuguese) language. . . as a clothing seller, I have to deal with all customers' problems . . .For troubled customers, I can only let the Portuguese staff solve their problems, after all, the language is very important." (Participant J)	*Instrumental relation with the host country*

Table 2.
Chinese expat-preneurs' experiences in Portugal

(*continued*)

First level codes Challenges and strategies from doing business abroad		Second level codes
	No commitment to the host country "I almost have no time to socialize with anyone. . . in the only spare time, I socialize with my friends in China or in other countries with Wechat. . . Wechat and business take up most of my life . . .". (Participant N)	
	Do business in a host location while it is profitable and before a new opportunity is captured elsewhere "I have no idea of how long I will stay in Portugal since the business is so unsatisfactory . . . if we find a better business chance in another foreign country or China, we will relocate to." (Participant B)	*Entrepreneurial itinerancy*
Dealing with the condition of an ethnic minority	Interactions with Portuguese customers "The complicated customers trying to call the police at every turn. . . actually nobody does it at China. . . theft occurs every day in store, we bear the loss, while the thief does not assume any responsibility even if the police arrives. . . the invisible discrimination has always existed in the store, for instance, people call us 'Chinoca'. . . and customers urinate in the dressing room. . ." (Participant D)	*Ethnic discrimination*

Table 2.

were not directly involved in the diaspora but managed and fed the migratory flow by impelling other family members and the wider community to take this step and maintain an entrepreneurial path.

Reunion with family at host country. Many participants had relatives doing business in Portugal, so they were indirectly involved in the diaspora by familial links, as was explained by Participant C:

> I come to Portugal in 2006, because my sister was here [. . .] I have no way to start a business in Spain, whether in finance or human resource [. . .] In Spain, no one would help me.

The reunion with family defines which host country to choose for starting an entrepreneurial activity. The main reason for such a choice is related to the financial and affective support that participants expected from the overseas community network. The decision to go abroad is also justified by blurring the family and business roles, as in the case of Participant B. To this participant, her willingness to go abroad was related to her family role as "a wife", which in her case has a double and mixed meaning – taking care of the family/husband and managing and controlling the financial survival of the family business:

> Once I had the opportunity to reunite with my husband, there was no doubt I would reunite [. . .]. The family can only be taken care of by wife [. . .]. Men do not know to take care of themselves, to say nothing of gathering and keeping money [. . .].

Some of the youngest interviewees came to Portugal to reunite with their parents aiming to continue the family business locally or in another country with a more favorable business environment. This is the case of Participant O, who come to Portugal directly from China for

parents' reunion, and Participant M, who come for the same reason. M said: "I come to Portugal for family reunion. I was eight years old then [. . .] my parents had a retail store in Portugal". Participant N added:

> My parents moved to Portugal from Italy, maybe for a better business opportunity in Portugal [. . .]. After they started a retail store, I went to Portugal for a family reunion in 2000. I was 5 years old then.

This interplay between family and business leaves us with the second main category.

Co-ethnic embeddedness

The links between family and business emerged in the interviewees' discourse from the start. The choice of the destination and the type of business to launch (or in which to take part) were made within a Web of co-ethnic connections. The process of coding revealed two subordinate themes:

(1) business/family planning; and

(2) family support in the host country.

Family/business planning. The decision to go abroad was backed by the extended family. For example, several women mentioned that an arranged marriage was often a first step toward international mobility and venture, with the family participating in the groom's selection. Participant D shared her own experience:

> I knew him by marriage interview (Xiangqin) [. . .] in Madrid, my husband and I first met on a blind date arranged by his uncle who knew me in Uganda [. . .] [. . .] I knew clearly that I had to consider marriage at the age of 22 (pause). I wanted to leave the Chinese restaurant and changed my destiny through marriage, so I come to Portugal (to make business) with him (her husband) after the first blind date.

Participant G added:

> Both of us are Qingtianness, having the same outlook on life, values, and family, and these will be easier for us to communicate and understand each other [. . .] he is running a Chinese restaurant there [Austria] [. . .].we knew each other by computer game [. . .]. We plan to marry next year, and then I will go to Austria and join his family and business [. . .]. Wherever my husband is I will follow.

For women, an arranged marriage seems to be a necessary condition for starting their own business, as Participant C explained:

> We Chinese employers clearly know that Chinese employees will not always work for us. Whenever there is an opportunity, they will think about starting their own business [. . .] Marriage often means a great possibility of leaving. Most Chinese couples will try their best to start a business, even a small one [. . .].

The intersection of family and business implies a subordination of all other personal and family expectations to doing business. This subservience was stronger among women but was accepted by most interviewees. Only one expressed a desire to escape, although recognizing the burden of such a deviant decision:

> I have a Portuguese girlfriend, and want to marry her (pause), but my parents did not agree and thought we were from a different world, it was not easy to live together (pause). My parents cannot understand, but I will stick to my own ideas. (Participant O)

Family support in the host country. The challenges associated with the resources needed to do business abroad were provided by the extended family. As for Participant C, the mobility

to Portugal was conditioned by the presence of a married sister having a company in the country, and the same happened to Participant F:

> My small food shop in Madrid, which was instantly from slight profit to loss [. . .] there was no way out for me. I can only seek refuge with my sister's daughter who was in Portugal, from being an employee for her until now partnered with her in running retail stores.

Participant K also moved from The Netherlands and changed the business (restaurant) after accepting the support of a brother: "Under such circumstances, I come to Portugal in 2004 after the suggestion of my brother who had a retail store in Portugal".

These narratives illustrate how the diaspora and family networks prompted and supported multiple self-initiated assignments and Chinese transnationalism. Overall, family arrangements were made to do business but were only granted within the Chinese ethnic community. The dynamics within the Chinese diaspora and family network portrayed an over-subordination to the higher purpose of "doing business" and "making money", which enacted a utilitarian and distant relationship with the host country, as further explained.

The host country: an instrumental relationship

The challenges of contacting and interacting socially with the locals were absent in the interviewees' speeches. Most were unwilling to be part of Portuguese routines and traditions and, consistently, their daily life occurred almost exclusively within the ethnic community. Hence, the interviewees enacted an instrumental connection with the host country, which was coupled with four main ideas:

(1) a strict focus on work, business and money;

(2) host country coming second when doing business;

(3) language issues; and

(4) no affective commitment to the host country.

Focus on work, business and money. To a large extend, all interviewees limited their contact with the locals, despite providing services to the local community. For them, there was no life outside the Chinese diaspora, which, in turn, did not let them nurture other ties with locals. Being in Portugal or in another host country was virtually irrelevant, given the focus and effort on "doing business" and "making money", as explained by Participants D and F: "*Life looks like a wheel to run, and money is a lubricant and many contradictions in life and work can be solved with it*":

> If I did not make enough money, how can I keep my parents get good treatment in hospital? Money is not all powerful, but it gives me the confidence and belief to face the difficulties of life. Money kept my parents' life longer [. . .]. Making money is a way to protect family. (Participant F)

As many interviewees mentioned, the long work journey did not leave them time or energy for anything else outside work and/or business:

> Every day I open the store from 9:00 in the morning and close it around 21:00. It will be 22:00 when I arrive at home. When I finish all and lie down, it is around 23:00. Every day is the same and keeps repeating. (Participant O)

Likewise, leisure activities were instrumental for continuing the business, as explained by Participant D:

> [. . .] I need to do fitness to keep healthy (pause). My sick father and sick friends vividly told me the importance of keeping healthy. I cannot be sick: my family and business need me.

Host country coming second when doing business. Portugal was a suitable destination to be an expat-preneur as long as it offered economic profit. The ties to the host country were then utilitarian, as illustrated by Participant H: "I hope Portugal always keep safe [. . .] the economy keeps stable and developing [. . .] such we could do the business longer [. . .]". This reflection was also produced by Participant K regarding The Netherlands and the decision to come to Portugal: "The living environment and benefits in The Netherlands were better than those in Portugal [. . .] but the increasingly stringent labour policies [. . .] made business easily in the loss".

Language issues. Most interviewees were not proficient in Portuguese, despite considering such a skill critical to make business. While some interviewees tried to learn the basics to communicate with Portuguese costumers, others employed local workers (including Brazilian employees) to do so, as described by Participants J:

> Even now, having worked here for five years, knowing how to communicate effectively with customers is still an issue that I have to face from time to time. For troubled customers, I can only let the Portuguese staff solve their problems; after all, the language is very important.

No affective commitment to the host country. The lack of communication and identification with locals were, to some extent, reinforced by the fact that few meaningful social interactions were fostered outside the Chinese community. Most interviewees spent their free time (re)connecting with the Chinese lifestyle. They saw Chinese programs and regularly used Chinese social networks as explained by Participants M and N:

> I can only play a computer game and watch (Chinese) variety shows to waste time [. . .] it is so boring in Portugal that I am always thinking about going back to China.

> I almost have no time to socialize with anyone [. . .] in the only spare time, I socialize with my friends in China or in other countries with Wechat [. . .] Wechat and business take up most of my life [. . .].

Some interviewees considered the possibility of staying longer and eventually retire in Portugal but again, this intend was subordinated to a stable economic and family lifestyle: "Nobody preferred to stay in Portugal without making money [. . .]" (Participant D).

Ethnic discrimination

Episodes of racial prejudice and ethnic discrimination occurred predominantly in the workplace and with some local customers. Participant D summed the verbal and behavioral violence against the Chinese community:

> The Chinese retail stores in Portugal belong to the low-end service industry. We work in this industry, whether in China or in Portugal, so the unfair treatment or contradictions with customers are inevitable, which cannot be all classified as a race issue. And most of the contradictions are caused by language communicating obstacles [. . .] [but] the invisible discrimination has always existed in the store, for instance, people call us "Chinoca" [. . .] and customers urinate in the dressing room [. . .].

The violence and prejudice in the workplace against the participants create a feeling of impotence and suspicion regarding local institutions and authorities. The inertia of the local agents to the request for help from the participants and in the condemnation of ethnic discrimination is well illustrated by Interviewee E:

> When a thief stoles away goods and we call the police, the policeman always arrives at the scene after one hour [. . .] the police station is next to my shop [. . .] when a local calls the police, they arrive at the scene in 10 minutes.

The attachment of the new generations to the family business and entrepreneurial live was in some of the narratives related to the lack of opportunities for the young Chinese in the Portuguese labor market due to ethnic discrimination: "My friend's son, finishing high school education in Lisbon, was unable to find a good job and finally works at his mother's whole store". (Participant F).

Overall, these local discriminatory behaviors fostered a sense of injustice among the interviewees that further promoted their closure within the Chinese community.

Entrepreneurial itinerancy

Throughout the interviews, the phenomenon of "entrepreneurial itinerancy" become clear, resulting from the observation of two patterns:

(1) several interviewees come to the country following other self-initiated assignments (as reported in Table 1); and

(2) most participants referred that if they found a better business chance elsewhere, they would relocate again.

These patterns, coupled with an instrumental relationship with the host country, endorsed a phenomenon of "entrepreneurial itinerancy" that is well reflected in the following quote from participant M:

> There is a saying in China that a tree moves to die, and a man moves to live. Businessmen must always be alert to the local market and be flexible enough (pause), only in this way |making money| we can live and have food to eat.

Overall, all interviewees were clearly aware of the constant need for transnational mobility in favor of business profit, as explained by Participants I and D:

> I have no idea of how long I will stay in Portugal since the business is so unsatisfactory [. . .] if we find a better business chance in another foreign country or China, we will relocate to. (Participant I)

> I know clearly that the Chinese retail business in Portugal will be more and more difficult, but I have the self-belief that I am able to seek other opportunity [. . .] the past experience in Africa showed me that I have the strong ability to adapt to difficulties and crisis [. . .]. (Participant D)

In some cases, such disposition to entrepreneurial itinerancy was normalized as a cultural and regional legacy:

> We the Chinese, especially Qingtianness and Wenzhouness, no one would think of working for others [. . .]. Even if being an employee, it is temporary [. . .] being a boss is the goal. (Participant C)

To some participants, this "entrepreneurial itinerancy" was also transferred to the new generations for whom *fluid international mobility* was also expected to search for better conditions to do business. Participant K emphasized this in reference to her children: "when they grow up and go to other countries, maybe I will leave Portugal to live with them".

However, the "entrepreneurial itinerancy" condition of these participants and their "fluid transnational transit" on behalf of doing business come associated with a self-awareness that this is a road without return to the home country. All participants clearly knew that going abroad was a road of "no return". Participant B, as a store manager of a Chinese retail chain store, expressed her concerns as follows:

> It is impossible for me to go back to China except for retirement [. . .] I am only familiar with tasks in a retail store. If [. . .] I say [. . .]. If I went back to China, what can I do? Without any knowledge, or other working experience, and high education background, finding a good job seems an idiotic nonsense.

And she concludes: "Going abroad [. . .] it is a road of no return to China."

Participant F also explained:

> There is no turning back [. . .]. Most overseas Chinese know that [. . .]. If I was to go back to China, what can I do in China? Yes, I heard that some overseas Chinese went back to China, they made investments or started another industry [. . .]. But the end of the returning story was ultimately the need to find another way to go abroad again before they lost all money [. . .]. Society is very realistic, they cannot make money in China, where the business rules are completely different [. . .]. Making money in China is harder than in Europe [. . .].

Most of the participants seem to believe that "going abroad" and stepping into "entrepreneurial itinerancy" hindered the development of an "appropriate profile" in terms of employability and business skills to compete and be successful in China: "China is developing rapidly and has lots of chances [. . .] [. . .] the chances are not ready for me, I know my ability [. . .]" (Participant H). Therefore, "entrepreneurial itinerancy" comes with a career cost for most participants, even if they were proud of their professional and business paths.

Affective costs regarding the family left home were also mentioned by a few participants, such as Participants B and J:

> When my mother got cancer, I did not know that and had not accompanied and care for her [. . .]. Her first surgery was without children' accompanying, only her sister [. . .].

> When I was in China, I never considered the difficulty of my mother [. . .]. Only when I separated from her, having to face all the difficulties from life and work, and then I deeply understood her [. . .].

Finally, "entrepreneurial itinerancy" also had a distinct impact on the identities of the participants. Some of them, especially from the new generations, enacted an original and hybrid identity that reunited and mixed elements from different cultures:

> How to define myself? At first, I am Chinese without any doubt. Secondly, I knew both Chinese and Portuguese cultures, I do not need to define myself as belonging to only one side [. . .] I take the essence and discard the dregs from both cultures, and combine them [. . .] I am the combination of both Chinese and Portuguese, or I prefer to define myself as the international citizen besides as Chinese [. . .]. (Participant O).

Nonetheless, most of them preserved what they called a "Chinese identity", albeit their intensive international mobility. This was further linked to the experience of ethnic discrimination (category above) as noted by Participant E: "I realized, I am Chinese, never and ever will be Portuguese or any other foreigner."

Discussion and implications

This exploratory study examined the lived experiences and challenges of Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal, drawing on the expatriate, migration and entrepreneurship literatures. Specifically, this study aimed to understand how Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal account for the decision to move and do business in the country and examine the challenges arising from such decision.

The findings documented the critical role of the diaspora and the complex interrelationships between the family and the business in explaining the intentions to go abroad and start a business in Portugal. Moreover, the Chinese expat-preneurs maintained

an instrumental relationship with the host country, which was a transient territory that represented a means to facilitate business and rarely an end in itself. Local ethnic discrimination further reinforced the distance from the host country and strengthened the ties among Chinese expat-preneurs and to their ethnic communities and to China, although everyone knows that "coming home" was unlikely.

Regarding the expatriate literature, the findings challenge the common profile of an SIE, as an individual in search for adventure and career progress, who is free from work-family bounds and is willing to embed in the local culture to overcome the stress emerging from such a life-changing event (Doherty *et al.*, 2011; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). Unlike Portuguese SIEs, who do not find support in the diaspora (Pinto and Araujo, 2016), the Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal purposeful used their ethnic network to go abroad and yield their entrepreneurial activities (Oliveira, 2003).

The expat-preneurs portrayed in this study are also distinct from the prototypical profile of the expat-preneurs originated in Western societies or located in other Asian regions (Selmer *et al.*, 2018). Although Western expat-preneurs (Vance *et al.*, 2017) and Japanese SIE entrepreneurs (Yokoyama and Birchley, 2020) activate an individualistic discourse centered on the personal and psychological agency (Dodd and Anderson, 2007; Selmer *et al.*, 2018), the Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal resort to a collective and co-ethnic network. The destiny of the Chinese expat-preneurs and their families is in itself characterized by a constant mobility at service of doing business. The preponderance of the diaspora and the family-business interactions were the strongest determinants of self-initiated expatriation and entrepreneurship, which is a phenomenon worth of further inquiry with other expat-preneurs and in other contexts. The findings clearly underscore the conclusion that Chinese "sojourn is multiple and circular rather than unidirectional or final" (Guo, 2022, p. 847).

Regarding the contributions of this study to the migrant and ethnic entrepreneurial literatures, the findings are generally supportive of earlier theorizations. First, our findings are partially consistent with previous ethnographic analyses of the Chinese migrants' in Portugal (Gaspar, 2017; Rodrigues, 2013); and are also consistent with earlier reports from Chinese entrepreneurs in Australia (Collins, 2003) and USA (Morawska, 2004), especially regarding the importance of the Chinese "transnational diasporas" (Guo, 2022). Such social and economic Web act as a source of material and affective support. In fact, the Chinese expat-preneurs of our sample reported a phenomenon of "over-embeddedness" (Schnell and Sofer, 2002) when it comes to their over-reliance on the diaspora and the extended family for their mobility and venture planning. They also explained how their collective obligations could come to include arranged marriages. Second, this study also provides an empirical foundation for Solano (2016) and Bagwell (2018) concepts of "multifocality" and "transnational mixed embeddedness". Overall, the findings reveal how Chinese expat-preneurs come to do business in Portugal through their ethnic links in multiple locations, which made it easier to seize local venture opportunities (i.e. multifocality) and how their transnational social capital (i.e. transnational mixed embeddedness) can further seize new opportunities outside the destination country. A stronger focus on how Chinese expat-preneurs navigate through or change their transnational mixed embeddedness is well worth of further research.

Finally, the data showcased how Chinese expat-preneurs were not concentrated exclusively in a co-ethnic business enclave in Portugal but instead were open to leave again in search of other business opportunities. While the Chinese expat-preneurs of this study are seemingly similar to other *transilients or transmigrants* entailed in the transnationalism paradigm (Guo, 2022), they are also dissimilar. Although the transnationalism framework emphasizes that international mobility is not unidirectional nor final but rather multiple and

circular (Guo, 2022), our findings go beyond these issues and illustrate how the Chinese can be involved in *entrepreneurial itinerancy*, which is the most intriguing finding of this study. While these Chinese expat-preneurs were part of a collective Web that determined their international mobility and their personal destiny, this network also endorsed opportunities for mobility and business break-out (Wang and Warn, 2018). In a recent study, Wang and Warn (2018) observed how low and high-skilled Chinese immigrants in Australia forged different patterns of horizontal and vertical business break-out to expand their businesses in the destination country. A horizontal break-out "means that ethnic businesses geographically relocate to locations that provide access to a mainstream clientele rather than being exclusively concentrated in a co-ethnic enclave" (Wang and Warn, 2018, p. 219), and a vertical break-out refers to changes in the business model to "shift along the value chain towards more lucrative mainstream spheres of business" (Wang and Warn, 2018, p. 224). The success factors supporting these break-out experiences in Australia were sufficient financial capital, business understanding, a stable relationship with suppliers and buyers and appropriate local staffing (Wang and Warn, 2018). These factors were also observed in this study. However, the *entrepreneurial itinerancy* observed among the Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal implied, first, individual mobility and, second, a capacity to recognize and seize self-employment and venture opportunities across borders, including out of the Chinese diasporas. It must be noted that migration studies have already reported cross-border business activities carried out by migrants (Santamaria-Alvarez, 2019). However, these studies emphasize the creation of transnational businesses through migrants' mixed embeddedness [for a review, see Barberis and Solano (2018)] and engagement in the life of the destination country with an intent to stay permanently. Our findings, instead, documented an international itinerancy generally absent from earlier accounts (Fei, 2022; Guo, 2022), and that echoed how the initiation of an international assignment can set off other assignments. Additional work is then required with respect to this phenomenon, specifically in other contexts and with other groups. In other words, future research can explore how *entrepreneurial itinerancy* can result from a certain position of privilege based on ethnicity, education, human, social and financial capital; and how is it linked to the opportunities generated by other institutional factors and macro policies, such as the Golden-Visa and the free movement of people within the European borders.

Limitations and implications for research

While the research findings are informative and advance our understanding of Chinese expat-preneurs, some limitations should be noted. First, the findings are limited to the sample size and composition. The 15 participants were mainly from Qingtian and Wenzhou, so the other Chinese living in Portugal were overlooked in this study. In fact, the Chinese expat-preneurs surveyed had international experience and ethnic resources that allowed them to start new businesses that provided services outside their ethnic community. As shown, they were not economically disadvantaged, and they plan do business in Portugal until it is profitable and before new opportunities are seized elsewhere. While the Golden-Visa policy built an opportunity structure in Portugal, it does not explain the transnational entrepreneurship nor the entrepreneurial itinerancy observed. Furthermore, this finding opens up additional avenues for transnational entrepreneurship research examining *how* and under *which conditions* do the Chinese expat-preneurs persist in doing business in a certain location or decide to exit and venture away. Research comparing how expat-preneurs from similar and different ethnic backgrounds seize and exploit venture opportunities in a single destination might also extend our understanding of different and multiple forms of agency.

Another limitation of this study is the ethnic origin of the interviewer, a Qingtianness in Portugal. While the immersion into the context was helpful to target the research participants, who would be hardly available otherwise, this cultural background might have bounded the interpretation of the data. Given the procedure of data analysis employed to ascertain the internal consistency and validity of the findings, we believe this is a minor concern in this study.

Finally, women were well represented in the sample, which is not uncommon among the ranks of expat-preneurs (Vance *et al.*, 2017). However, Chinese female expat-preneurs require further attention and research because most entrepreneurial ventures were, in fact, family businesses where women played an intertwined role in running the business and the family (Collins, 2003; Fu-Lai Yu, 2001). Furthermore, women subordination and disadvantaged life conditions that were reported are not unique (Cooke *et al.*, 2013), which warns of the need to examine the specific barriers affecting women expat-preneurs that end up framing their aspirations, career patterns and identity. Following the recent contributions of Zhang and Chun (2018), an intersectionist approach might be useful to deepen our understanding of how male and female Chinese expat-preneurs build their unique entrepreneurial identities.

In addition, and given the limited scope of this study, future research may further examine the individual characteristics of first and second-generation of Chinese expat-preneurs. Our findings uncovered a gap in the study of SIEs, with the Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal emphasizing the centrality of the family and the diaspora rather than their autonomy and self-directedness, as traditionally reported by other SIEs. These findings warrant further research on the individual characteristics of these expat-preneurs, as well as the roles played by the family and the diaspora in the transition process to new transnational ventures. Furthermore, there are an increasing number of international students who have been studying in the USA and Europe and who might be tempted to create their own startups, which is another promising research avenue. Empirical evidence from other underrepresented ethnic groups of business SIEs and expat-preneurs constitute an opportunity to extend this stream of research.

Finally, the return to China and the domestic economic contribution of these expat-preneurs have also been neglected (e.g. for an exception, see Tharenou, 2015) and are much required. For example, Souhu (2017) reported an increasing number of Chinese returning to Qingtian, making local investments that far exceed RMB 200bn and total donations to social welfare funds over RMB 300m. These figures reveal the economic relevance of the transnational entrepreneurship originated in this region and point out the need for further research.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study have also some practical implications for different stakeholders. As shown, Chinese expat-preneurs are contributing to the Portuguese economy, which supports the "Golden Visa" policy. However, the findings also have implications to migration and integration policies. First, a basic level of Portuguese language should be required to renew a residence permit. As shown, the knowledge of the local language is a key issue in dealing with daily challenges and pursuing local business. The acquisition of some basic host languages is also a first step to develop a greater commitment to the country. Second, the signs of ethnic discrimination from locals should not be overlooked, given the country's efforts to attract foreign investment. Local communities, schools and families are better off working together to prevent and eliminate racism toward foreigners and Chinese entrepreneurs who have a role to play and are contributing to the local society.

To the Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal, the findings suggest they can further strength their ethnic social ties in connection with the country. Given the emphasis on social networks and the common use of WeChat, this communication instrument can be further used. For instance, "Portuguese BaoMaJie" is an official WeChat account that publishes all types of information, including local business investment offers and travel services, providing easy access to various Chinese groups in Portugal. This Chinese channel can then be used to enact other social contacts and untap new business opportunities.

To Chinese families and newcomers, the findings of this study also draw attention to the importance of holding realistic expectations about the success of a transnational entrepreneurial venture despite the key role played by the family and the diaspora. As shown, learning the host language to widen the interaction with locals might decrease potential conflicts and improve entrepreneurial success.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how Chinese expat-preneurs decide to go abroad and perceive their mobility challenges, especially in pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. Drawing on the SIE literature and the Chinese migrant and ethnic entrepreneurship, a qualitative and phenomenological approach was followed to uncover the lived experiences of 15 Chinese expat-preneurs doing business in Portugal. The findings reveal the strong weight of the diaspora in the international experiences of the expat-preneurs as most of them were not in their first international venture nor considered it to be the last, which illustrates a phenomenon of *entrepreneurial itinerancy*. Contrary to the "necessity entrepreneurs" who are pushed into entrepreneurial activity by the barriers of the host labor market (Nazareno *et al.*, 2019; Vance *et al.*, 2016), the Chinese expat-preneurs in Portugal resort to the family and the diaspora to initiate and transition between transnational entrepreneurial ventures. This transnationalism requires a high level of collective and ethnic embeddedness but also implies high agency and capacity to recognize and seize opportunities for self-employment and entrepreneurship. Despite being exploratory, the findings support our interdisciplinary approach to the study of expat-preneurs and encourage further research in other contexts and with other ethnic groups.

References

Andresen, M., Bergdolt, F., Margenfeld, J. and Dickmann, M. (2014), "Addressing international mobility confusion – developing definitions and differentiations for self-initiated and assigned expatriates as well as migrants", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 25 No. 16, pp. 2295-2318, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2013.877058.

Auerbach, C. and Silverstein, L.B. (2003), *Qualitative Studies in Psychology Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis*, New York, NY University Press, New York, NY.

Bagwell, S. (2018), "From mixed embeddedness to transnational mixed embeddedness: an exploration of Vietnamese businesses in London", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 104-120, doi: 10.1108/IJEBR-01-2017-0035.

Baier-Fuentes, H., Hormiga, E., Miravitlles, P. and Blanco-Mesa, F. (2019), "International entrepreneurship: a critical review of the research field", *European Journal of International Management*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 381-412, available at: www.inderscience.com/offer.php?id=99427

Barberis, E. and Solano, G. (2018), "Mixed embeddedness and migrant entrepreneurship: Hints on past and future directions an introduction", *Sociologica*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 1-22, doi: 10.6092/issn.1971-8853/8617.

Benton, G. and Pieke, F.N. (2016), *The Chinese in Europe*, Springer, Berlin.

Bisignano, A.P. and El-Anis, I. (2019), "Making sense of mixed-embeddedness in migrant informal enterprising: the role of community and capital", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 974-995, doi: 10.1108/IJEBR-03-2018-0114.

Brewster, C., Suutari, V. and Waxin, M.-F. (2021), "Two decades of research into SIEs and what we know? A systematic review of the most influential literature and a proposed research agenda", *Journal of Global Mobility*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 2049-8799, doi: 10.1108/JGM-05-2021-0054.

Chan, S. (1997), "Migration, cultural identity and assimilation effects on entrepreneurship for the overseas Chinese in Britain", *Asia Pacific Business Review*, Vol. 3 No. 4, pp. 211-222, doi: 10.1080/13602389700000050.

Collins, J. (2003), "Cultural diversity and entrepreneurship: policy responses to immigrant entrepreneurs in Australia", *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 137-149, doi: 10.1080/0898562032000075168.

Cooke, F.L., Zhang, J. and Wang, J. (2013), "Chinese professional immigrants in Australia: a gendered pattern in (re) building their careers", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 24 No. 13, pp. 2628-2645, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2012.750615.

Crowley-Henry, M., O' Connor, E. and Al Ariss, A. (2018), "Portrayal of skilled migrants' careers in business and management studies: a review of the literature and future research agenda", *European Management Review*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 375-394, doi: 10.1111/emre.12072.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2000), "Introduction: the discipline and practice of qualitative research", in Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 1st ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, pp. 1-29.

Dodd, S.D. and Anderson, A.R. (2007), "Mumpsimis and the mything of the individualistic entrepreneurs", *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 341-360, doi: 10.1177/0266242607078561.

Doherty, N., Dickmann, M. and Mills, T. (2011), "Exploring the motives of company-backed and self-initiated expatriates", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 595-611, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2011.543637.

Eatough, V. and Smith, J.A. (2017), "Interpretative phenomenological analysis", in Willig, C. and Stainton-Rogers, W. (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Psychology*, 2nd ed., Sage, London, pp. 193-211.

Elo, M., Sandberg, S., Servais, P., Basco, R., Cruz, A.D., Riddle, L. and Täube, F. (2018), "Advancing the views on migrant and diaspora entrepreneurs in international entrepreneurship", *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 119-133, doi: 10.1007/s10843-018-0231-x.

Fei, D. (2022), "Chinese in Africa: expatriation regime and lived experience", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, pp. 1-22, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2022.2029373.

Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F. and Davidson, L. (2002), "Understanding and evaluating qualitative research", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 36 No. 6, pp. 717-732, doi: 10.1046/j.1440-1614.2002.01100.x.

Fu-Lai Yu, T. (2001), "The Chinese family business as a strategic system: an evolutionary perspective", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 22-40, doi: 10.1108/13552550110385736.

Fusch, P.I. and Ness, L.R. (2015), "Are We there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research", *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 20 No. 9, pp. 1408-1416, available at: http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss9/3

Gaspar, S. (2017), "Chinese migration to Portugal: Trends and perspectives", *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 48-69, doi: 10.1163/17932548-12341343.

Gaspar, S. (2018), "Percursos migratórios e trajetórias de vida de descendentes de imigrantes Chineses", *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas*, Vol. 87 No. 87, available at: http://journals.openedition.org/spp/4689

Girling, R.A. and Bamwenda, E. (2018), "The emerging trend of expat-preneurs: a headache for the pre-existing ethnic entrepreneur theories", *Sosyoekonomi*, Vol. 26 No. 38, pp. 207-219, doi: 10.17233/sosyoekonomi.2018.04.12.

Guo, S. (2022), "Reimagining Chinese diasporas in a transnational world: toward a new research agenda", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 48 No. 4, pp. 847-872, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2021.1983958.

Guo, Y., Rammal, H.G. and Pereira, V. (2021), "Am I 'in or out'? A social identity approach to studying expatriates' social networks and adjustment in a host country context", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 136, pp. 558-566, doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.07.059.

Irastorza, N. and Peña-Legazkue, I. (2018), "Immigrant entrepreneurship and business survival during recession: evidence from a local economy", *The Journal of Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 243-257, doi: 10.1177/0971355718781248.

Javadian, G., Dobratz, C., Gupta, A., Gupta, V.K. and Martin, J.A. (2020), "Qualitative research in entrepreneurship studies: a state-of-science", *The Journal of Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 223-258, doi: 10.1177/0971355720930564.

Krippendorff, K. and Bock, M.A. (2009), *The Content Analysis Reader*, Sage Publications, London.

Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, V., Duobienė, J. and Mihi-Ramirez, A. (2021), "A comparison analysis between pre-departure and transitioned expat-preneurs", *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 11 No. 3539, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.588169.

McNulty, Y. and Brewster, C. (2017a), "Chapter 2: the concept of business expatriates", in McNulty, Y. and Selmer, J. (Eds), *Research Handbook of Expatriates*, 1st ed., Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 21-60, doi: 10.4337/9781784718183.

McNulty, Y. and Brewster, C. (2017b), "Theorizing the meaning(s) of 'expatriate': establishing boundary conditions for business expatriates", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 27-61, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2016.1243567.

Ma, Z., Zhao, S., Wang, T. and Lee, Y. (2013), "An overview of contemporary ethnic entrepreneurship studies: themes and relationships", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 32-52, doi: 10.1108/13552551311299242.

Marques, J.C., Góis, P. and Oliveira, C. (2005), "Dévoilement des liens transnationaux des migrants chinois au Portugal. Oficina do CES", available at: https://ces.uc.pt/publicacoes/oficina/ficheiros/241.pdf (accessed 11 January 2022).

Morawska, E. (2004), "Immigrant transnational entrepreneurs in New York: three varieties and their correlates", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 10 No. 5, pp. 325-348, doi: 10.1108/13552550410554311.

Morse, J.M. (2015), "Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry", *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 25 No. 9, pp. 1212-1222, doi: 10.1177/1049732315588501.

Nazareno, J., Zhou, M. and You, T. (2019), "Global dynamics of immigrant entrepreneurship: changing trends, ethnonational variations, and reconceptualization", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 780-800, doi: 10.1108/IJEBR-03-2018-0141.

Oliveira, C.R. (2003), "Immigrants' entrepreneurial opportunities: the case of the Chinese in Portugal", FEEM Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei Working Paper, Research Paper Series 75, pp. 2-29, available at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6264397.pdf (accessed 11 January 2022).

Paik, Y., Vance, C.M., D'Mello, J. and McNulty, Y.M. (2017), "Exploring expat-preneur similarities and differences between self-initiated and company-assigned transitioned expatriates", *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 51-60, available at: www.m.www.na-businesspress.com/JOP/PaikY_Web17_1_.pdf

Patton, M. (2014), *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed., Sage Publications, London.

Pinto, L.H. and Araujo, R. (2016), "Social networks of Portuguese self-initiated expatriates", *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 89-103, doi: 10.1108/JMD-07-2014-0069.

Rodrigues, I. (2013), "Flows of fortune: the economy of Chinese migration to Portugal", Doctoral dissertation, University of Lisbon, available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10451/8257 (accessed 11 January 2022).

Rowley, J. (2012), "Conducting research interviews", *Management Research Review*, Vol. 35 Nos 3/4, pp. 260-271, doi: 10.1108/01409171211210154.

Salt, J. and Brewster, C. (2022), "Intra-company transfers: the government/corporate interface in the United Kingdom", *Global Networks*, pp. 1-16, doi: 10.1111/glob.12397.

Santamaria-Alvarez, S.M., Sarmiento-González, M.A. and Arango-Vieira, L.C. (2019), "Transnational migrant entrepreneur characteristics and the transnational business nexus: the Colombian case", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 1014-1044, doi: 10.1108/IJEBR-02-2018-0092.

Schnell, I. and Sofer, M. (2002), "Unbalanced embeddedness of ethnic entrepreneurship: the Israeli Arab case", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 8 No. 1/2, pp. 54-68, doi: 10.1108/13552550210423714.

Selmer, J., McNulty, Y., Lauring, J. and Vance, C. (2018), "Who is an expat-preneur? Toward a better understanding of a key talent sector supporting international entrepreneurship", *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 134-149, doi: 10.1007/s10843-017-0216-1.

Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras/SEF (2020), "Relatório de imigração, fronteiras e asilo 2020", SEF, Lisbon, available at: https://sefstat.sef.pt/Docs/Rifa2020.pdf (accessed 1 February 2022).

Shaffer, M.A., Kraimer, M.L., Chen, Y.P. and Bolino, M.C. (2012), "Choices, challenges, and career consequences of global work experiences", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 1282-1327, doi: 10.1177/0149206312441834.

Shi, H.X., Shepherd, D.M. and Schmidts, T. (2015), "Social capital in entrepreneurial family businesses: the role of trust", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 21 No. 6, pp. 814-841, doi: 10.1108/IJEBR-04-2015-0090.

Solano, G. (2016), "Multifocal entrepreneurial practices: the case of Moroccan import/export businesses in Milan", *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 176-198, doi: 10.1504/IJESB.2016.078698.

Souhu (2017), "Qingtian, the hometown of Chinese overseas Chinese", available at: www.sohu.com/a/292725031_100020074

Tharenou, P. (2015), "Chinese international business graduates: a career dilemma: repatriate or stay?", *Journal of Management and Organization*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 37-59, doi: 10.1017/jmo.2014.68.

Vance, C., McNulty, M., Paik, Y. and D'Mello, J. (2016), "The expat-preneur: conceptualizing a growing international career phenomenon", *Journal of Global Mobility*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 202-224, doi: 10.1108/JGM-11-2015-0055.

Vance, C.M., Larrieu, R.J., Bergin, R., Mercado, J., Richmond, J., Walden, M. and Reeser, C. (2017), "A field exploration of the 'expat-preneur' phenomenon", *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*, Vol. 36 No. 6, pp. 34-43, doi: 10.1002/joe.21812.

Vershinina, N. (2019), "Migration, enterprise, and society", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 774-779, doi: 10.1108/IJEBR-08-2019-818.

Wang, Y. and Warn, J. (2018), "Break-out strategies of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in Australia", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 217-242, doi: 10.1108/IJEBR-03-2017-0108.

Wojnar, D.M. and Swanson, K.M. (2007), "Phenomenology: an exploration", *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 172-180, doi: 10.1177/0898010106295172.

Xu, K., Drennan, J. and Mathews, S. (2019), "Immigrant entrepreneurs and their cross-cultural capabilities: a study of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in Australia", *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 520-557, doi: 10.1007/s10843-019-00261-4.

Yokoyama, K. and Birchley, S.L. (2020), *Transnational Entrepreneurship in South East Asia: Japanese Self-Initiated Expatriate Entrepreneurs*, Springer, Singapore.

Zapalska, A.M. and Edwards, W. (2001), "Chinese entrepreneurship in a cultural and economic perspective", *Journal of Small Business Management*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 286-292, doi: 10.1111/0447-2778.00026.

Zhang, Z. and Chun, D. (2018), "Becoming entrepreneurs: how immigrants developed entrepreneurial identities", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 24 No. 5, pp. 947-970, doi: 10.1108/IJEBR-07-2016-0214.

Zhang, Y. and Hussain, T. (2021), "SIEs' interaction and adaptation to their task performance", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 128, pp. 370-380, doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.01.049.

Zikic, J., Bonache, J. and Cerdin, J.L. (2010), "Crossing national boundaries: a typology of qualified immigrants' career orientations", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 31 No. 5, pp. 667-686, doi: 10.1002/job.705.

Corresponding author
Luisa Helena Pinto can be contacted at: lhpinto@fep.up.pt