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Processes of South-South Migration in Their Historical Context: Biographical Case Studies from Brazil and China

*Eva Bahl & Yvonne Berger**

Abstract: »Prozesse von Süd-Süd-Migration in ihrem historischen Kontext: Biografische Fallstudien aus Brasilien und China«. This article examines interweaving collective histories in different formerly colonized regions of the world: 1. Migratory movements from the territory of the former Ottoman Empire to the Americas, specifically to Brazil, and 2. transregional migration between different regions within China. On the basis of empirical data, we discuss sociological biographical research as an approach to analyzing migration and social mobility as transgenerational processes. In the case of Syrians in Brazil who have fled from the civil war, these processes are reflected in transnational family structures, transgenerational mandates, and knowledge transmission. In the case of domestic migration within China, the “mission” that families give their children is social advancement through education (e.g., Crabb 2010; Fong 2004). In the context of anti-Western discourses in China, it can be demonstrated that postcolonial discourses are functional in the effort to regain former international strength and national prosperity, and that discourses on “becoming a modern citizen” pervade family aspirations. The article is intended as a plea for i) taking a closer look at historical and contemporary South-South relations, and ii) situating current migration movements historically. It ties into global historical and sociological debates on “shared/common histories” and “intertwined histories.”

Keywords: Biographical research, Brazil, comparison, generations, Global Sociology, PR China, postcolonial studies, South-South migration, Syria.

1. Introduction

In this article we examine the interweaving of collective histories in different formerly colonized regions of the world: Migratory movements from the territory of the former Ottoman Empire to the Americas, specifically to Brazil,

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and the domestic rural to urban migration between different regions of mainland China and Hong Kong. Based on empirical data, we discuss biographical research as a sociological approach to analyzing migration and social mobility as transgenerational processes. In the case of Syrians in Brazil who have fled from the Syrian civil war, these processes are reflected in transnational family structures, transgenerational mandates, and knowledge transmission. In the case of domestic migration within China, migration is reflected in biographical experiences garnered on the move while striving for professional and personal development. The intergenerational “mission” that families give their children is social advancement through education.

In our research, we propose the following: 1) taking a closer look at historical and contemporary South-South relations; 2) situating current South-South migration¹ movements and processes of social mobility historically; and 3) taking into account the actors and their experiences and perspectives. Consequently, we agree with Julian Go when he says that “the best postcolonial studies begin from the lived experiences of colonized subjects. [...] [W]e need social scientific postcolonial studies, alongside postcolonial studies in the humanities” (Boatcă, Farzin, and Go 2018, 433). Therefore, first we will introduce discussions about Global Sociology and the postcolonial critique and their consequences for biographical research. Subsequently, we present in detail two case studies of the entanglement of collective histories and social mobility in the context of South-South migration. These case studies draw on two research projects on migration and social mobility in Brazil and China, in which numerous biographical interviews were conducted.

From a standpoint that presumes stable comparison parameters, it could be argued that it is not possible to compare flight migration from Syria to Brazil with educational migration between different regions of China and Hong Kong. However, when we started to discuss our respective research topics, we discovered – besides the rather obvious differences – a lot of similarities: Among others, the connections between social and spatial mobility in the context of biographical self-understandings as members of the “middle class” and the continuation of migration projects in their transgenerational frame.

Moreover, we also realized that most of these can only be analyzed and explained by means of historical contextualization and an analysis of the discourses that shape everyday narratives. In the context of a Global Sociology, we also believe that comparing very different contexts can help us to sharpen our eye for regional particularities, as well as processual and structural similarities globally. Jörg Niewöhner and Thomas Scheffer have developed “the term ‘thick comparison’ analogously to Geertz’ thick description (Geertz 1973)” (2010, 4). They argue that “objects of comparison [...] are produced through *thickening* contextualizations, including analytical, cross-contextual

¹ For the different definitions and understandings of South-South migration, cf. Bakewell (2009) and Crush and Chikanda (2019, 381).

framings” (ibid., emphasis in original). In this sense we have chosen to juxtapose these two biographical case studies.

Both cases will first be historically contextualized and introduced in terms of their respective interconnections. We also highlight the relevant discourses that structure our cases. By presenting the two cases separately, we aim to provide detailed insights into both research contexts and our positionalities within the two transnational research settings. We then turn to the similarities we have reconstructed during our process of comparing and merging the two empirical strands into our main arguments in this article.

2. What is Global Sociology? Interweaving Past and Present – Postcolonial Discourses and Historical Situatedness

Discussions about Global Sociology have applied postcolonial critique to the discipline of sociology, a discipline that emerged to understand and explain “modern” industrialized societies (Hall 1992, 221-5). While the idea of an “innocent modernity” (Gilroy 1993, 44), Eurocentric theorizing, the construction of “the Other,” and a one-sided universalism² were at the center of this critique, the focus shifted to the recognition of entanglements (Randeria 2006; Santos and Boatcă 2022) and connected (Bhambra 2010) as well as intertwined and overlapping histories (Said 1994, 18).

Historical perspectives on pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial processes, among others, were always constitutive of these approaches. How could a sociology that widens its geographical focus and takes entanglements into account ignore processes of colonialism and decolonization, of slavery and its abolition, of neocolonial dependencies and transnational migration? As Manuela Boatcă and Fabio Santos put it, “research undertaken from European and North American perspectives disregards the magnitude of European colonialism in shaping past and present mobilities from and to Europe as well as between and within other world regions” (2023, 1).

Consequently, we situate ourselves in a tradition of sociological thinking that turns to different world regions and their entanglements and attaches significance to the theories developed in their respective contexts. Shalini Randeria sums up this claim as “a pluralistic, multi-perspective social theory which takes non-Western societies seriously, not only as objects of

² A central critique is the assumption that, while “Western” theories can be applied universally, social theories developed in other world regions are considered specific and context-bound. Or, as Julian Go puts it, “the problem with Northern theory is not that it seeks generalizability. It is rather that the source of generalization is provincial but Northern Theory claims universality” (2016, 6, footnote 5).

sociological research and theory formation, but also – and especially – as sites of social-scientific knowledge production” (Randeria 2001, 178). Bagele Chilisa has argued that “academic imperialism is when we conceptualise our research based only on the literature of the West” (Chilisa and Denborough 2019, 14). Therefore, in this article we strive to address knowledge production from a bottom-up perspective by focusing on the biographical experiences of two men “on the move” in Brazil and China.

Another important argument from postcolonial studies that we take up here is the appeal to take interconnections into account: “connection matters” (Randeria 2001, 183). While discussions of global historical entanglements often focus on the interconnectedness of Europe with its former colonies and the repercussions of historical events and processes in the periphery and the metropolises (Mintz 1986, xvi; Said 1994; Hall 1995), in this article we will take a look at intertwining histories between or within different formerly colonized (or semi-colonized) world regions. However, we will also show that these migration processes are always shaped – whether discursively or quite concretely – by European colonial history and/or discourses about “the West.”

Addressing questions of historical contextualization, entanglements, and broadening academic horizons by reading other texts and listening to other voices goes far beyond turning to specific (colonized) world regions or (colonial) time periods (cf. Meinhof and Boatcă 2022, 127). Postcolonial sociology is about a change of perspective that affects all phases of the research process. Feminist and postcolonial approaches in particular have shown how specific situatedness and hegemonic power relations are embedded in scientific research practices (Bhambra 2014; Haraway 1988; Harding 1993; Tuhiwai Smith 1999), illustrating how we are consequently involved in geopolitical relations of inequality and power (Wallerstein 1997; Mignolo 2009). This is crucial for situating a Global Sociology as a plea to develop postcolonial or decolonial perspectives within sociology. There are already well-known sociological and anthropological works which recognize one’s own perspective as always partial, positioned and embedded in power relations (Clifford 1986; Haraway 1988). Moreover, many social scientists focusing on methodologies of empirical and interpretive research have discussed subjectivity in the research process and have reflected upon the connection between the researcher and the subject of knowledge (R. Berger 2015; Berger 2022; Breuer, Mruck, and Roth 2002; Hsiung 2015; Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti 2016; Shinozaki 2012; von Unger 2021).

Global Sociology is concerned with the broad field between these more epistemological questions of representation, positionality, visibility, translatability, and language (e.g., Bhabha 1994; Fine 1994; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1997; Spivak 1988), as well as more materialistic questions of (neo)colonial dependencies (Rodney 1972; Frank 1978) in “the modern world-system” (Wallerstein

1997). However, Global Sociology as we understand it has the potential to address the interrelatedness of these issues and to contribute to a sociology that is multi-perspectival in its critique of global power relations.

In the context of a Global Sociology, it has become increasingly evident that there is a need for a broader discussion about qualitative methodologies (cf. Hsiung 2012; Gobo 2011). One group that has come together to devote itself to conduct and reflect upon concrete empirical research in the framework of the demands and approaches of Global and Postcolonial Sociology is the Global Qualitative Sociology Network,³ of which we are both members. Without being able to elaborate in detail here, we have been inspired and sensitized by the debates on translatability, positionalities and subjectivity, comparisons, contested knowledges, and not least terminologies like the so-called “Global South” and the “Global North” that we have with our colleagues in this network.

A question that is frequently posed in Global Sociology is: Whose voices are heard, or in other words, who can speak, and whose perspectives are included (Spivak 1988; Connell 2007)? Julian Go has argued for what he calls “the Southern Standpoint,” which he defines as “a social position of knowing [...] that is rooted [...] in geopolitics and global social hierarchy. It [...] captures the position, and hence the *activities, experiences, concerns and perspectives*, of globally peripheral (e.g. colonized and postcolonized) populations” (2016, 14; emphasis added). The argument we aim to present in this article is that biographical research is a methodology that fits well in such an endeavor.

In the following, we will briefly present how the insights and thought-provoking ideas we introduced in the last section were discussed amongst biographical researchers, especially in the German-speaking academia.⁴

3. Doing Biographical Research after the Postcolonial Critique

Postcolonial studies reached the academic debate in Germany relatively late and initially discussed the applicability of such theories and issues to the German context (Steyerl and Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2003; Castro Varela and Dhanwan 2010). Helma Lutz (2010) was among the first biographical researchers

³ Research Network “Qualitative social research and transregional theory-building in the context of global sociology(ies),” funded by the German Research Foundation (2022-2025; BU 3230/4-1). See: <https://global-qualitative-sociology.net/> (Accessed March 19, 2023).

⁴ We are aware of the provinciality of this focus, but for pragmatic reasons we have to concentrate here on the academic space in which we have both been socialized. In this sense, however, this context also represents the relevant setting from which our own positionality in the context of a global knowledge production must be critically reflected.

to ask explicitly to what extent these analyses of power relations and knowledge production would now affect biographical research. Some years later, she and Elisabeth Tuider discussed the postcolonial critique and its relationship to biographical research and concluded that the “method of biographical research is covered by this critique, as well as other interpretative methods” (Tuider and Lutz 2018, 105; translated from German by the authors). However, views on the effects and consequences of its realization differ.

Gabriele Rosenthal, who has conducted numerous empirical research projects in different world regions, argues that research in the “Global South” does not require other methods than doing research in the “Global North.” She suggests the following research rules that, according to her, apply in any research setting: “a) avoid subsuming phenomena too quickly under familiar categories; b) always have doubts that we understand what we hear or observe; c) never be afraid to ask questions in interviews” (2022). While some of the more general arguments are used in many interpretative methods, e.g., the avoidance of a hasty search for categories, Rosenthal emphasizes the need for methodological doubt and openness in order to discover new perspectives.

In contrast, decolonial researchers like Linda Tuhiwai Smith would probably not fully agree with this. Smith emphasizes the deep rootedness of “Western” academic traditions in imperial and colonial practices, regardless of the self-understanding, reflectiveness, and intentions of the individual researcher. She “identifies research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (1999, 2). In her book, which especially addresses indigenous researchers doing research in indigenous contexts, she demands research be recognized as “an integral part of political structures” (*ibid.*, 124) and discusses the advantage of “bringing to the centre and privileging indigenous values, attitudes and practices rather than disguising them within Westernized labels” (*ibid.*, 125). Thus, while Rosenthal and Tuhiwai Smith both advocate reflecting on one’s situatedness and its effects in the research process, as well as situating research historically and socially, they differ on who should conduct research in which contexts using which methods.

From a perspective of cultural relativism, Joachim Matthes in 1985 had already drawn attention to the necessity of a culturally sensitive reflection in the context of narrative interviews in Southeast Asia. Matthes referred to a “basic cultural rule of ‘face saving’” (1985, 320; translated from German by the authors) that makes conducting interviews in “Asian cultures” difficult. According to him, notions of speakers’ positions and biographical narratives vary in different cultural and regional contexts. Therefore, he emphasized that intercultural methods of narrative analysis must deal with the “different cultural organization of realities” (*ibid.*, 315; translated from German by the

authors). However, he concludes – and in this we can only agree with him – that a consistent pursuit of the “principle of openness” analytically takes these differences into account – rather than normatively presupposing their nature. We have had very good experiences with this openness in a variety of geographical and cultural contexts.⁵ What is important, then, in our view, is to avoid having a normative notion of biography and biographical narrative. For instance, if an interviewee talks only about the collective and very little about “individual” experiences, this is already a result and not a failed life-story interview. Artur Bogner and Gabriele Rosenthal (2014) have emphasized that, in contexts of dominant collective discourses, the biographical self-presentations of *outsiders* are often highly individualized and can thus open up a perspective on experiences beyond the dominant discourse.

In all these considerations, it becomes clear that biographical research understands the construction of one’s own biography as a knowledge-dependent and culturally distinctive social practice:

the individual refers in his interpretations, in his ascriptions of meaning, to the collective stock of knowledge which can be construed and applied in various ways depending on the biographical experiences of the actor, and which must be used creatively, reflectively, in each concrete situation. (Rosenthal 2018, 36)

This insight is not a unique point of biographical research, but a general sociological insight: The social finds its expression in an interplay of individual action and collective orientation. Therefore, biographical research helps us to understand the structural ambivalences of increased processes of differentiation and the associated changes of social life worlds. After all, biographies as “institutions of modernity” (Lutz 2010, 119; translated from German by the authors) “respond” to the demands of social processes. This leads to an understanding of *doing biography* (Dausien and Kelle 2005) that focuses on an analysis of the production of biographies as an interactive and situational activity, rather than on the “discovery” of a coherent self or univocal identity. From a constructivist perspective, one does not simply *have* a biography; rather, biographies must be produced, shaped, and continually updated.

In this context, modernization theorists have argued that processes of individualization provide people with “individual” agency and therefore constitute the prerequisite and necessity for biographization in the first place (Hansen and Svarverhud 2010; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010; Yan 2009, 2010). For instance, especially in academic debates about China, a long-running

⁵ Yvonne Berger has conducted biographical research in different regions and in different social and socio-spatial milieus in mainland China (Berger 2020, 2022). Eva Bahl has conducted biographical interviews in Israel/ the Palestinian Territories (Rosenthal 2016), Spain/Morocco (Bahl 2021), Brazil (Bahl and Cé Sangalli 2021; Bahl and Worm 2022) and Ghana, often talking to migrants from other regional contexts (such as Cameroon, Eritrea, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Syria).

debate since the 2010s has asked whether these assumptions also apply in China, with its different political structure and cultural context.

Consequently, Bettina Dausien and Paul Mecheril have pointed out that the representation of life stories is structured by assumptions of normality (2006, 156). This critique is central to a methodological discussion, as it refers to the requirement that biographical research must be reflected on. This is especially the case if social conditions, in spatial and cultural terms, are not identical between researchers and interviewees.

Beyond the assumptions of normality, there are other translational and intercultural challenges (Bahl 2021, 112-5; Berger 2023). As a large majority of qualitative research considers language to be the main point of reference, an interpretative understanding of meaning poses key questions for concrete research practices. For instance, the choice of a common language in the research setting is never “innocent,” as it is also accompanied by social positioning and power relations: “There is no neutral position from which to translate and the power relationships within research need to be acknowledged” (Temple and Young 2004, 164).

However, since every research practice is a process of understanding and interpretation, this does not just concern research in intercultural contexts. We argue that research in intercultural and multilingual contexts only forces us to deal with questions that sociological research should be dealing with anyway. We assert that biographical analyses are especially suitable for intercultural research projects because they allow us to reconstruct in detail the respectively relevant and possibly dynamic belongings and their genesis. In this way, they contribute to obtaining complex images of a society, rather than assuming homogeneous identities or a genuinely essential culture.

In the current era of globalized modernity, people, commodities, ideas, and both cultural and social values travel across the globe while at the same time remaining locally embedded. Agreeing that methodological nationalism (cf. Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) must be transcended, biographical research proposes a deeper understanding of *self-making* and *world-making* (Bruner 1999), which helps us to make deeper social analyses that go beyond the scope of micro-sociological research.

The cross-contextual comparison of biographical case studies discussed in this article highlights the relevance that case studies can have far beyond the “individual” case (cf. Bahl and Becker 2020). Furthermore, biographical methods allow us – and even force us – to take our often complex positionalities and subjectivities in the research process into account. We will also address this point in presenting our empirical research in the following sections.

4. Collective Histories and Social Mobility in the Context of South-South Migration: Cases from Brazil and China

The need to study migration processes in terms of their transnational entanglements and back-and-forth movements has been very prominently advocated in recent decades (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1995; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Faist 2014; Pries 2019). Sometimes this gives the impression that this does not describe a change in the research perspective but also announces a newer social phenomenon (Brubaker 2005, 8-10). In contrast, various social scientists have emphasized that the history of transnational entanglements is already a centuries-old phenomenon and that, accordingly, it is important to contextualize contemporary migration movements historically (Rosenthal 2012, 207-8; Nawyn 2016, 165-6; Bade 2018, 213; Boatcă and Santos 2023). The tendency to perceive social phenomena as “new” can be explained by the “re-treat of sociologists into the present” (Elias 1987), which was criticized by Norbert Elias.

Here, we strive to reinforce Elias’s call to focus *empirically* on the “diachronic as well as [...] dynamic character of societies” (1987, 226). And although important scholars of transnationalism such as Luis E. Guarnizo and Michael P. Smith have emphasized that “contextual conditions are not static, and must be historicized” (1998, 15), the transnationalism approach does not necessarily include a historical analysis. Thus, while we have benefited massively from the transnationalism approach, and while many of the phenomena discussed here should also be examined through this analytical lens, we strive particularly to emphasize the focus on long-term historical processes and South-South relations.

The strength of biographical research perspectives in migration research is that they recognize that migrating people have not always been and, especially, are not “only” migrants. They recognize that it is necessary to focus on life and family histories and life before migration to understand the actions, perspectives, and trajectories of migration as a potentially continuous process.

The biographical research perspective [...] provides a complex and differentiated analysis of transmigration processes that takes into account the social situation of migrants in the country of origin and the country of arrival and can thus reconstruct the agency and positionings of these subjects in transnational fields. (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti 2013, 250)

In the following two case studies, we will show what we mean by historical and actor-centered migration research. Analyzing life and family histories and how they are presented, in combination with a broader historical contextualization, can help us embed processes of South-South migration in broader

contexts of century-old South-South relations (in the case of Fadel Darwish [4.1]) and colonial experiences and postcolonial discourses (in the case of Pan Wenhao [4.2]). Migration research that focuses on migrants in the respective arrival society – and the amount of current migration research that has this focus is not small – runs the risk of excluding biographical and collective-historical trajectories that can contribute to understanding and explaining current processes of migration. Furthermore, biographical perspectives include the perspectives and experiences of the actors in a specific social field.

The two cases we will now present are very different regarding their regional emplacement, migration route, current life situation, etc. Rather, we want to highlight the similarities we have been able to reconstruct using a cross-contextual comparison and a historical and actor-centered biographical approach: 1) the importance of a self-understanding as “middle class”⁶ and the respective orientation towards “the West”; 2) processes of social mobility and their interrelatedness with spatial processes; 3) the potential continuation of migration projects; and 4) the importance of transgenerational and collective historical processes and of parents’ and grandparents’ migration histories, not to mention migration traditions that reach even farther back.

4.1 From Syria to Brazil

Historical Contextualization and the Recent Refugee Migration from Syria (since 2013)

Migration movements from the Levant region or the territory of the former Ottoman Empire to the Americas, specifically to Brazil, began in the second half of the 19th century. They can be explained by a complex mix of economic, religious, social, and political factors (Truzzi 2018, 3f.). Along with the United States and Argentina, Brazil was the most important destination country for these immigrants. They and their descendants have inscribed themselves in the cultural and political sphere of Brazil in many ways (Amar 2014). They later defined themselves mostly as Syrians and Lebanese, although these two nation-states did not necessarily exist at the time of their emigration or the emigration of their ancestors.

Brazil’s openness to immigration at the end of the 19th century must be seen in the context of the final abolition of slavery in 1888. Enslaved workers – especially in rural areas – were to be replaced by migrant workers (Truzzi 2018, xxiiiv). However, migrants from the Levant region, despite their

⁶ By this term, we mean a socio-economic classification that is “above the poverty threshold” (Neubert and Stoll 2015, 1) and has “greater consumption opportunities” (ibid., 2). Dieter Neubert has suggested that the “concept of milieu [...] promises a better understanding of the growing societal plurality of the Global South than application of a class concept” because it attempts “to capture socio-economic along with socio-cultural differences” (2014, 32).

predominantly agrarian-rural background, mostly settled in Brazilian cities, where they were initially exposed to experiences of exclusion and racism.

Migrants' connections with their regions of origin were very intense in the first decades of this migration process. There were a lot of transnational practices, such as home visits, maintaining correspondence, re-migration, and financing the construction of houses in the respective communities of origin. Most of the early Levantine immigrants were single men who planned to return after a few years of economic success to raise families. This pattern changed, however, with World War I, which led to famine and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. As early as 1916, France and Great Britain had divided their colonial spheres of influence between them in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In 1920, Syria and Lebanon became French mandated territories and remained so until independence in 1943 (Lebanon) and 1946 (Syria). In the course of these developments, migration projects became increasingly permanent, and families were newly established, or – if they had stayed behind – were taken to Brazil (Truzzi 2018, 9f.).

An example of the political and intellectual entanglements between the emerging Syrian-Lebanese diaspora and their “homeland” is provided by María del Mar Logroño Narbona (2014, 203). She discusses the role of Syrian-Lebanese intellectuals, with whose participation some 140 Arabic newspapers and magazines appeared in Brazil in the years between World War I and World War II. In what became a “vibrant and very politicized transnational public sphere” (ibid., 205), which was centrally characterized by migrant actors with cosmopolitan life stories, the founding of the Republic of Lebanon in 1926 and the role of the new colonial powers of France and Britain were discussed, among other things: “The Arabic press produced in the Americas was not subject to the same censorship mechanisms imposed in the context of colonial Syria and Lebanon, so it offered a venue to develop political dissent against the new colonial order that eventually found its way back to the Middle East” (ibid., 206). Logroño Narbona also shows the importance of the diaspora for the colonial powers through the fact that the pro-French volunteer army *Légion d’Orient* recruited in Brazil (ibid.), and that the French colonial power had a great interest in controlling and regulating the Brazilian-Arab diaspora press (2014, 206f.).

It should be emphasized that the large number of Brazilians who currently define themselves as the descendants of migrants from the Middle East can only be explained by the migration movements that followed this initial movement and which continue to this day. These were related – for example, through chain migration or marriages – to pre-existing family networks, aimed at economic advancement, or had political reasons (Baeza 2018). Thus, collective-historical events, such as the Lebanon War (1975–1990) or the war in Syria (since 2011), led to more recent migration movements.

In September 2013, Brazil announced the introduction of a humanitarian visa for people fleeing the Syrian civil war. Brazilian embassies and consulates in Syria's neighboring countries were authorized to issue travel visas to people who wanted to enter Brazil (UNHCR 2013a). For the period from 2011 to 2021, the UNHCR indicates that Syrians were the second largest group among those recognized as "refugees" – after refugees from Venezuela – with nearly 4,000 recognitions (UNHCR 2022). According to data from SINCRE (Sistema Nacional de Cadastro de Estrangeiros), however, the number of Syrians who migrated to Brazil in the context of the war is more likely to be around 10,000. This coincides roughly with the figures published by UNHCR for the period up to the end of 2016: 8,450 humanitarian visas issued, and 3,000 Syrians who came to Brazil in the context of resettlement (UNHCR 2017). Since many may have stayed with relatives and acquaintances, the number of those who did not register as refugees is probably also high (UNHCR 2013b).

Biographical Perspectives and Positionalities in the Field

Before we now go into more detail about one life and migration course, we will outline the general profile of the interviewees, i.e., Syrians with whom Eva Bahl and her colleagues conducted biographical or ethnographic interviews in Rio de Janeiro in 2019.⁷ They were mostly young, single men who came from Tartus and had fled military service or forced recruitment. All were educated, and many had university degrees. Tartus is a port city on the Mediterranean Sea inhabited mainly by Alawites (about 80% of the population), a community that has close connections with the Assad regime, and by Christians and Sunnis (about 10% each), and overall, it was little affected by direct warfare. The city was long considered a stronghold of support for the regime. Accordingly, at the beginning of the war, many young men went to war against the "terrorist threat," as it was presented by the regime. Support for Assad and his regime crumbled only slowly and was related to the many deaths these battles caused. Increasingly, young men began to avoid military service, and forced recruitment occurred. Accordingly, most of our interlocutors were pro-government Alawites who had left Syria rather late after several years of enduring the war and, for example, they explained the war in

⁷ The research took place within the project "Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany: processes of inclusion and participation in the context of so-called irregular migration," funded by the German Research Foundation (RO 827/21-1) and led by Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rosenthal. The funding period was from February 2019 to January 2023. In addition to Eva Bahl, team members were Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu, Maria do Carmo dos Santos Gonçalves, Lucas Cé Sangalli, Hermílio Santos, and Arne Worm. The student members of the research team were Margherita Cusmano, Merve Eryoldas, Nathalia Louruz de Mello, Tim Sievert, and Tom Weiss. See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/607273.html> (Accessed October 08, 2022). The data used here are based on a field visit from September to November 2019. Other planned field visits had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Syria politically as a conflict between the United States and Russia and denied Assad's responsibility or glorified his role. While this already points to a specific milieu and positionalities on the part of our interviewees, the researchers' own positionalities also played a role.

The interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted by a Brazilian-German research team in the public space of Rio de Janeiro. The localization of research in the public space favored contact with men, who are more likely to spend time and work on the streets than women. Interviews took place in Portuguese and English, depending on the language skills and preferences of the interviewees. None of the researchers was able to speak Arabic, the interviewees' mother tongue. Besides the language options, further power (im)balances and negotiations came into play: Some of the interviewees were planning or wishing to go to Europe and hoped for help from Germany or German-based interviewers, while others were hoping for financial support.

The interviewer constellations also made a difference in some cases: For example, a Brazilian (woman) was trusted more than the German (female) researchers. In the research process, we have reflected constantly upon the power relations that came into play during the interviews. By applying interpretive methods during the whole process, we have taken these differences into account and tried to make sense of them analytically. Below, as an example, we will show how the self-presentation of Fadel Darwish might have been directed towards the German(-based) interview team. Fadel Darwish was interviewed in Portuguese⁸ by Eva Bahl from Germany and Lucas Cé Sangalli from Brazil, both interviewers based at a German university. The interview, which was analyzed using the method of biographical case reconstruction, is based on the principle that the "[narrated] life story and [experienced, lived through] life history always come together, they are continuously dialectically linked and produce each other" (Rosenthal 1993, 60).

Fadel Darwish: A Life and Family History between Syria and Brazil

The important role that the long tradition of migration from the Levant to Brazil plays in the current refugee migration from Syria is demonstrated by the case of Fadel Darwish, who comes from an Alawite family in Tartus. Fadel Darwish fled to Brazil in 2017 to escape forced recruitment into the Syrian army. His migration as a refugee to Brazil is closely tied to a corresponding transnational family network: His maternal grandfather moved to Brazil in the 1960s, first working as a fruit vendor on the street, and then owning a fruit store. He returned to Syria a few years later, after earning enough money to buy a house there. At least, that is how Fadel Darwish presented it. The

⁸ We would like to thank Nathalia Louruz de Mello for transcribing and translating the interview from Portuguese into English.

question here is whether the grandfather might also have left Syria in the context of political instability, coups, and infighting, and then returned when the Assad regime had been consolidated. Based on the course of events, this would be very plausible, but it was not and possibly could not be told by Fadel. We can therefore only hypothesize that there was a political component to the migration project which was not handed down in the family or was tabooed.

In any case, other relatives of Fadel have remained in Brazil and have experienced considerable social advancement there. Today he has several relatives who are well established in Brazil, working for big companies and owning real estate throughout Rio. They were the reason Fadel's parents persuaded him to emigrate to Brazil. Although these relatives were initially supportive of Fadel, at the time of our interview in 2019 he was frustrated by the very limited support they were willing to give him. At the time of the interview, Fadel was unemployed, and his father was sending him money from Syria to help him meet his daily needs.

Three central themes can be identified around which Fadel's presentation in the interview repeatedly revolved and which relate to the similarities mentioned above between the two cases we juxtapose in this article: 1) self-presentation as modern, progressive, and "Western" (especially in contrast to other Syrians); 2) his social decline due to a) war, b) migration, and c) a lack of support from (family) networks; and 3) Brazil as a "stopgap," a place of transit. The family history and its relevance to the migration project is thematized rather implicitly by talking about his current situation and his Brazilian family members. We will now describe his life and migration history in a little more detail and discuss his presentation in the interview against this background.

Fadel Darwish was born around 1990 as the second son of an Alawite family in Tartus, Syria. His mother was a housewife, and his father worked as an engineer in an oil company. A few years later, around the time he started school, a third brother was born. The family belonged to an established and highly educated upper middle class and owned a country house. In 2010, at the age of 20, Fadel went to university to study education for a teaching degree. Both his brothers decided to study medicine. At the time of the interview the older brother was working as a cardiologist, and the younger brother was still studying. Shortly after Fadel began his university studies, in 2011, the Syrian conflict began. Tartus was hardly directly affected by warfare, however, as described earlier, and many young men went to war in other parts of the country:

In Tartus there's no war, there's people who got out for war and died, and others came back to Tartus, but Tartus itself doesn't have war. In Tartus they didn't destroy anything. It's a city the same as Copacabana, beautiful, but the economy now is horrible.

In 2016, Fadel completed his master's degree in mathematics and started working at a government school as a maths teacher. In March 2017, after the enthusiasm for war in Tartus (a city which was predominantly loyal to the regime) had subsided and numerous young men had died, the security forces conducted raids rounding up young people for military service. More than 600 were conscripted and taken to fight in the northeast (Lazkani and Gutman 2017). That same year, Fadel arrived in Brazil via Beirut and Abu Dhabi. Over the next two years, he worked in a Syrian bakery and as a mobile snack vendor,⁹ among other jobs, both of which are typical occupations for people who have come to Brazil from Syria. His established and wealthy relatives supported him at the beginning but did not guarantee him a place "in their ranks." Thus, among other things, he received support in getting his own snack cart with a license – a privilege compared to other refugees without local family contacts – although this was an activity that did not correspond to his educational status, interest, or self-image. In other words, he received support, but remained stuck in the role of the Syrian refugee selling Arabic snacks in an urban space. At the time of the interview in late 2019, Fadel was unemployed and dependent on "reverse remittances." His father sent him money, so that Fadel could stay in Brazil. Looking back, he addressed the social decline he experienced as a result of the war-related economic crisis in Syria:

I think it's hard [...] I was in Syria with a good level, worked at a government school, I gave maths classes [...] I have my apartment, I have my house, even my family has a ranch, yeah, but it's because of the war. Even the salary there was good [...] before the war. But because the war arrived in Syria the economy is broken. It broke a little a little a little until it turned in to this horrible, horrible situation.

So, after he had already experienced social decline in Syria, the situation in Brazil then aggravated by his migrant status and his work as a street vendor:

In Syria I was with my girlfriend, a civil engineer, her father has a company of cars. Now I won't get a civil engineer [E.B.: as a girlfriend] here, as I work on the street [...] With a person who has a food cart on the street, I think that you know how this is going to be. [...] It won't give you a social life, you won't meet many friends.

For Fadel, at the time of the interview, the hope for improving his frustrating situation lay in two options: 1) employment with a Brazilian company (i.e., an office job that could get him "off the streets" professionally and provide him with a regular income); this was only within his horizon of possibilities because he had established relatives in Brazil who could help him with the

⁹ Many Syrian refugees work as vendors of Arabic food in the streets. Sfiha, a kind of mini-pizza with minced meat, and kibbeh, egg-shaped bulgur dumplings with minced meat and onions, are both common food in the countries of the Levant. They were introduced to Brazil by migrants from the region and are now a popular fast food there.

appropriate contacts. In addition, he was 2) considering further migration. Thus, in the interview, Fadel wonders whether or not he would have better chances to improve his living situation in Europe:

I will leave to another country and get to some country in Europe [...] go to Germany, for example, a country in Europe to get a better opportunity, and I will, I won't stay here, [...] it's about the general situation of refugees. Everybody here works selling sfiha, kibbeh or works at a store, it's not a dream for anyone. I'll try to leave to another country [...] I'll study. I won't stay here selling sfiha.

In addition to the thematization of social decline and the clear perspective on Brazil as a place of only temporary residence, another theme was very present in the interview: Fadel presented himself as modern, progressive, and "Western" (especially in distinction to other Syrians):

I'll show you a picture [E.B.: he shows us a picture of young women lying on the beach in bikinis] this is the beach of Tartus, almost the same as here [...]. When I arrived here: look there's a woman, for me it's normal, everything normal. What's not normal, I don't do the work that I'm doing.

Or elsewhere:

The Sunni people from Syria do not have a good mind, they have a closed mind. [...] the Christians and Alawites] from my city, I think that the level of people is almost from the first world.

These statements can be explained with reference to various constellations. One role could have been played by interview partners who might be perceived as "Western" (Lucas Cé Sangalli from Brazil and Eva Bahl from Germany, both working at a German university), towards whom the stigmatizing image of "backward Muslims and Arabs" is discursively rejected. This self-presentation as "Western" should be analyzed in the context of what Edward Said calls "Orientalism" (1978). This describes the often-romanticized representation of the Orient that is widespread in the homogeneously understood "West" and that interacts with and feeds imperial power relations.

The image of the "backward Muslim," which is also quite present in Brazil, is present not least between different groups immigrating from the Levant, since most of the early migrants from the Levant region were Christians. Also of relevance is the self-image of Alawite Syrians, who were able to secure a stable position of power in Syria through their role during the French mandate (1923–1946) and in the Syrian military (cf. Fildis 2012 on the history of Sunni-Alawite rivalry in Syria). Moreover, the war in Syria has made religious affiliations increasingly relevant to the self-image of different groupings and thus to the respective perspectives on the war. This is also true for active diaspora organizations in Brazil and Argentina (Pinto and Baeza 2017).

However, this self-presentation should certainly be seen in relation to the two components introduced earlier. Due to his own perception of himself as "progressive" and "Western," social decline is perceived as particularly unjust

and migration to Europe as particularly obvious. Thus, in the interview Fadel gave voice to his opinion that Europe would be better off if it had taken in more Syrian Christians and Alawites. Last but not least, his disassociation from the Sunnis – whom he characterizes as narrow-minded and conservative – can also be seen in his fear of Daesh, or the so-called Islamic State. He makes his flight from forced recruitment a central justification by saying that he did not want to fight against the “monsters” of Daesh.

To conclude, Fadel Darwish finds himself in a very ambivalent position within his family and regarding his family history. He navigates between his idealization of his grandfather’s and other relatives’ successful migration stories, his parents’ respective expectations and his dependence on family members in Brazil as well as in Syria. He sees himself in a relatively desperate situation, his greatest hope resting on the possibility of further migration to a “Western” country that will allow him to fulfill his educational and professional aspirations.

In the following, we present a second biographical case study in its socio-historical context. It is very different from that which we have just presented. Nonetheless, there are important commonalities between both migration projects that support our central argument about historical contextualization and transgenerational processes.

4.2 From China to Hong Kong

Historical Contextualization and the Discursive Construction of Modern Citizens

In China, the phenomenon of mostly internal migration processes can only be understood if we take a closer look at the discursive historical contexts which shape today’s narratives, aspirations, and biographical orientations. As we will see, they become visible in educational trajectories and in the biographical struggle for social advancement.

The notion of social mobility and its achievement is therefore reflected in government ideas about modernization in confrontation with so-called “Western” thoughts. The anticipation *of* and imagination *about* “the West” are preceded by a long political tradition. The search for a unity of modernity in the tradition of sociological theorizing has drawn significant criticism, especially in cultural theories informed by postcolonial perspectives. The interdisciplinary controversy over the partial lack of modernization of non-Western states was constitutive of colonialism (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1992). By the end of the 19th century, the world was largely divided among the major European states, and China became of special interest for reasons of trade and economic interests that led to the so-called Opium Wars (1839–1842/1858–1860). In short, China lost these wars and found itself a semi-colony (*ban zhimindi*) subject to the trade efforts of the Western powers (Petras 2006), which forced China to open its ports completely to foreign trade interests, primarily in

eastern China, and to recognize Hong Kong's annexation by Britain. This turning point marked the beginning of China's decline as a former world power. Almost a century and a half later, China was able to reemerge as a world power. And the slogan "one country, two systems" (*yi guo liang zhi*) since the 1980s has led to controversial debates and political inequality among Hong Kong (and Taiwanese) citizens after Hong Kong was returned politically to the People's Republic in a transitional phase of 50 years in 1997 (Tse 2016).

In China today, "the West" is still constitutive of the construction of a tradition-modernity dualism. Discourses about social backwardness in the process of modernization are produced in close confrontation with China's geopolitical position in the Western world. In the context of anti-Western discourses in China, it can be demonstrated that postcolonial discourses are at work in the effort to regain former international strength and national prosperity (Gransow 2006). According to a recent study by Adam Liu, Xiaojun Li, and Songying Fang (2023), public perceptions about "the West" show great divergences, especially if we distinguish between Europe and the USA. Therefore, Europe, for instance, receives a much higher level of favorability in public discourse than the United States (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, discourses on "becoming a modern citizen" (Berger 2022), combined with a diverging anticipation of the West, have already become embedded in everyday life. They play an essential role in the biographies of individuals and pervade family aspirations as a whole (e.g., Crabb 2010; Fong 2004). Because of the historical shift from the socialist era to economic liberalization and the opening up that began in 1978, it is even more evident that the parental generation is imposing educational aspirations on their children and demanding that they improve their family position within different social milieus. At the same time, the post-Mao generation is confronted with the family experiences of their parents, characterized by the difficult social conditions and political oppression of the Mao Zedong era. Thus, education "is greatly valued in Chinese culture as it is viewed as the path to becoming a morally noble person. It is also considered an important avenue for upward social mobility, not only for individuals but also for the entire family" (Lai et al. 2016, 84).

In China, significant educational reforms have been triggered by a broad educational expansion, especially since the 1990s. However, these reforms led to increasing inequality in the distribution of educational opportunities (Du 2016; Mok and Wu 2015; Yeung 2012). Although the Chinese leadership aimed for equal distribution and participation, it was especially neoliberal ideologies about educational *success* that found their way into everyday life (Kipnis 2013; Lin and Sun 2010). In view of China's current development policy, the stratification of the educational sector plays an important role in China's meritocratic system today by selecting and filtering "talents" for

successful economic development and international competition (Mok 2005; Mok and Wu 2015).

However, the social inequality between the rural and urban populations continues to widen. Paradoxically, the distribution of educational opportunities is driving domestic rural to urban migration more and more at a time when housing is no longer affordable in the large eastern cities, the labor market is flooded with academics, and the educational sector, which is scarce in the tertiary sector, continues to dwindle. In this context, two strands of social discourse are particularly important: On the one hand, urban-rural differentiation and the devaluation of rural areas, which are considered backward within modernity; and on the other hand, the prominent concept of “quality” (*suzhi*) in the context of the so-called education for quality (*suzhi jiaoyu*) reforms (Kipnis 2011).¹⁰

Against the backdrop of the political modernization efforts and social development of the past decades, the construction of citizenship in China is still of central importance for the production of “modern” citizens. The motives for domestic migration from rural to urban regions often include the desire for socio-economic improvement to one’s living situation (Wang and Teng 2022). In particular, rural educational migration aims to improve educational opportunities and therefore social mobility for families. The difference between the rural and urban population, especially with regard to migrant workers and ethnic minorities (e.g., Jakimów and Barabantseva 2016; Solinger 1999), but also in the context of educational migration (Wu and Zhang 2015; Xu and Wu 2022), takes on a special significance.¹¹

These social conditions have had huge social implications and shape everyday life perceptions and biographical desires, especially with regard to education and social mobility. In particular, students face the need to perform through individual performance in the (higher) educational system, and in accordance with China’s neoliberal market orientation and promotion of social mobility. As a result of the expansion of education, students are in a highly competitive situation regarding access to prestigious schools and universities.

¹⁰ Although this term is difficult to translate, the *suzhi* concept represents the central element in the discourse around a performance-oriented educational subject in China’s reform process (Kipnis 2006). Andrew Kipnis further illustrates the extent to which this agenda is intertwined with the political goal of building a superior nation in global competition. Furthermore, the discourse about having “quality” as a form of human capital is embedded in peoples’ everyday lives (*ibid.*).

¹¹ In this regard, the *hukou* system, the Chinese system of household registration, determines and regulates the distribution of the population not only in local geographical but also in material terms, since specific privileges such as health care, access to education, local elections, etc., are linked to it. It represents a system of belonging that stratifies citizens in accordance with their places of birth into urban and rural populations (Chan 2015).

Biographical Perspectives and Positionalities in the Field

The following empirical data are based on a study of biographical orientations in educational trajectories and social inequality in urban China (Berger 2020, 2022).¹² During fieldwork phases in Shanghai and Chongqing, almost 35 multilingual biographical interviews in Chinese and English were conducted with young adults born in the 1980s (八零后 *baling hou*) and 1990s (九零后 *jiuling hou*) who were studying in top universities or had completed their degrees at the time of the study. The interviewees belong to a common generational context: They were born after 1978 and differ fundamentally from their parents' generation, which was shaped by the experience of the Cultural Revolution and therefore was challenged by a strict class system and distribution of work. In sociological terms, they also share a *social structural* context. The institutionalized educational transitions of school, university, and professional establishment were analyzed on the basis of relevant biographical decisions and one's own ideas, expectations, and educational motives. All the interviewees shared the experiences of the opening up and reform process and partly experienced upward social mobility through education. Questions discussed in the project were: How do young Chinese interpret their social advancement in the course of education? What biographical orientations can be identified? What are the differences between the educational paths and motives of those who made it to the (elite) universities? The social conditions for this generation have changed fundamentally in recent decades. China is in a phase of social transition, which has sought to intensify educational reforms in order to produce capable individuals for the national and global labor market and, at the same time, to counteract the growing inequalities in the education sector.

Although experiences of positionality and subjectivity in the research process have already been discussed in more in-depth publications (Y. Berger 2015, 2022, 2023), a few aspects will be highlighted very briefly. In terms of concrete research practice, the relevance of translating survey instruments dealing with multilingualism and code-switching, and the use of interpreters in the research process, can be highlighted as points of reflection in the context of language and translation and the researcher's positionality. In the case of the interview situation, the positionality of the researcher also enters into mutual ascriptions of normality as a form of co-construction (*ibid.*). The setting of relevance in the context of biographical interviews can therefore depend on the person to whom biographical experiences are described, especially when the life stories of a "Western" researcher, who is assumed to be privileged, are narrated in a difficult political context. Thus, diffuse questions of research ethics arise when dealing with confidential information and a fear

¹² The project was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Chinese Scholarship Council China (CSC).

of doing harm to the interviewees because of assumed individual or collective opinions, especially when told to a foreign researcher.

Overall, the study elaborated forms of habitualization between the urban and rural domestic milieu and the social conditions embedded therein. Hence, as a study of different social and socio-spatial milieus of upward social mobility, the project is located within the reconstructive methods of qualitative social research (Bohnsack 2014; Nohl 2010). As a result of the study, the biographical orientations of one's family background and educational aspirations in the context of the family are processed differently by the domestic migrant milieu than by the urban milieu. Two different modes of biographical negotiation emerge. On the one hand, in the urban milieu a class-specific positioning can be highlighted in the biographical orientation of one's course of education. On the other hand, for the migrant milieu, there is the spatial differentiation of spheres and a balancing of perspectives between an anticipated (urban) center and periphery as a form of socio-cultural differentiation. These modes of processing illustrate the biographical balancing between spatial origin and the associated educational conditions.

Pan Wenhao: Establishing Coherence in Upward Social Mobility: "It's kind of a migrant thing, and it's about the family"

We will now discuss the case of Pan Wenhao regarding the above-mentioned similarities which connect both empirical cases. Thus, in the case of Wenhao, the orienting discursive framework of biographical self-presentation: 1) involves the perspective of a transnational and domestic migrant student in which socio-cultural differences within China play an important role in identity formation; 2) in his following self-description as "nomadic," he follows his own family biography and uses his study-related opportunities for educational migration and upward social mobility; and 3) therefore, Hong Kong functions for Wenhao as a "stopgap" in the realization of his educational goals. Unlike his biographical experiences at the time of his acquisition of education in mainland China, he is searching for his own individual development through his idealized transit to North America.

Biographical narratives always contain past, present, and future references. Thematic passages in which ideas about the future and career aspirations are expressed are significant, and blueprints for biographical orientation were described by some interviewees at the time of their interviews. While some of the interviewees were confronted with decisions about transitioning into the workplace, others had already taken their first step into the labor market.

In the following biographical case study we focus on a life story as part of the rural milieu of the study, a life story about family migration and cultural difference and a life between northern and southern China. Pan Wenhao was born in Beijing and was 22 at the time of the interview. His parents have

academic backgrounds. When Wenhao was in elementary school, he migrated with his family to Shanghai for work. At the time of the interview, he was in the final stage of his B.A. studies in journalism in Shanghai and in the application phase for a Master's program in Hong Kong. Wenhao hoped to have a better chance to improve his social status through the higher income available and the development of his personal interests as a journalist outside mainland China. Thus, he begins his life story with his origin and frames his biographical orientation as a story of cultural differences in a geographical north/south divide:

My life story? Hmm, OK. I was born in [city in northern China], and just two months after I was born, my parents took me to Shanghai. So actually I was born in [city in northern China] and grew up in Shanghai. Many people, many people ask me, "Where do you come from?" You know, in Chinese, "你是哪里人?" [Ni shi nali ren?, Where do you come from?] So when I was young, I always told them, I was Beijngnese 'cos you know my dad was born in Beijing and my mom was born in [city], one city in Inner Mongolia. So parents are all, all come from northern China, so the life style, the culture, the behavior, everything is about the north, you know, it's not like. It's like the northern people, not the south, like the Shanghai people.

The beginning of Wenhao's life story locates it spatially. Both the culture and the behavior of his parents were influenced by a northern culture. As a result, the juxtaposition of north and south is a distinction that is of great consequence to his everyday life, and which will be biographically significant for several years. Wenhao orients himself to a question of his biographical self, which he expresses through the rhetorical question about his origins and which is frequently posed to him in everyday life by others. He addresses his internal-migrant origin in the context of an ambivalent self-positioning, which Wenhao sees as different from his biographical experience.

For Wenhao, the phase of school education is a search for balance and a biographical process of adjustment in which his own experience of internal migration requires a balancing of local learning conditions. Thus, during his secondary education, Wenhao experiences, as it were, a continuation of his migration experiences in Shanghai, which were initially family-related. His experiences of cultural difference continue during this time. In everyday practice, Wenhao particularly perceives a hybrid position – which he initially considers "separated" – by means of language. He subsequently links his perception of cultural differences by temporally interlocking descriptions in the context of his childhood memories and school experiences:

My childhood? I think I was quite separated from the Shanghai culture and Shanghainese children, because I lived in a northern family environment and I cannot speak Shanghainese. So the language is one of the biggest barriers for me in getting a better understanding of the Shanghai culture and Shanghai life. [...] So Shanghai is famous for its longtang [胡同, traditional residential alleys] where people live together. I didn't have that kind of

experience. I lived in a six-storey flat, you know, and I didn't have too many Shanghainese friends when I was a child. Because one of the reasons is the language. Because I cannot understand, even when my teacher criticized me, if she used Shanghainese, I could not understand at all.

How Wenhao thinks about his employment achievements is revealed by his chosen field of study. For Wenhao, studying to be a journalist is at the center of his agency. While Wenhao's effort to find a (cultural) balance between his origins and Shanghai characterized his school phase, the educational system subsequently represents a counter-horizon.

In the further course of the interview, his idealization of his professional future as a journalist becomes clear, to which he attributes characteristics like "justice" and "moral standards." However, in the course of his studies he became aware that this would not be factually realizable in China, a realization that did not live up to his expectations. In light of his realization, Wenhao planned to take his journalism studies in a new direction by moving to Hong Kong:

Being a journalist in China means you have to suffer a low salary, you will not be treated, you know... It's not a good choice to be a journalist in China because of the control of the government, the press control. [...] I do not want to be a journalist as my whole life job. Maybe I will try to be a journalist for several years after my graduation, but I think not more than 10 years I will try to do so. Something about business. So my post-graduation degree in Hong Kong is business and financial journalism, not a social journalist, but something related to business, you know. So that's something I want. Learn something about business, and being a business journalist, and then, if it's possible, I will change my way to the business side. But actually I did not like it. I like the human science, the arts more than the business. [...] Actually, I did not have a business sense, but we choose our major based on not what we like, what we want, but on what will, what can bring us money. [...] because I want to give myself more opportunity, more possibility to change my, to change my career path in the future.

Wenhao's work-related interests lead to a fundamental biographical change where he reevaluates his biographical orientation as a product of coherence in the context of his family history, as we will see below. This also leads to a reorientation towards the economic relevance of his studies in Hong Kong. Wenhao reinterprets his professional orientation, although he does not give up his general career aspirations. The final assessment makes it clear that his biographical aspirations are no longer linked to an idealized interest. His own interest in the humanities contrasts with the expansion of the content of his future journalistic work. Initially, this represents a consideration for material output, which is expressed by the reference to a generally shared knowledge.

In the following passage, Wenhao describes his mother's working conditions and migration history and relates it to his own migration, as well as his future expectations:

You know, at that time, people did not find their jobs where they wanted to. They were distributed. The government told you that you should do that, so you do that. So they [the parents] were distributed to Shanghai, and my mom always told me she sometimes, well you know, missed her parents. She told me that after she was 18 years old, she went back less than 10 times. And it was a how to say? She was like an immigrant, for my mom, from a small city to a bigger city. Then she doesn't even imagine she would come to Shanghai, but you know, the destiny, the life, told them you must do this, so... As for me, I was born in Beijing and then brought to Shanghai, and now I feel like the same thing happens to me like my mom. My mom migrated from [City in the Inner-Mongolia] to Beijing and then from Beijing to Shanghai, and now I'm from Beijing to Shanghai, and then in September, I will go to Hong Kong to further my postgraduate study. And then I want to stay in Hong Kong temporarily, if I get an opportunity. If I can find a job. And then I want to work for several years, and if it is possible, I want to go to America. It's kind of a migrant thing and it's about the family, about, you know, in China, people have strong relationship between the parents and children, so it was quite the same for my family. My mom and my grandparents.

To conclude, Wenhao characterizes himself as a “nomadic” educational migrant. He completes his biographical self-presentation by describing his mother's working conditions at that time, which required multiple internal migrations of the family in times of state-mandated work assignments. In retrospect, Wenhao's own life story about the “fate” of his mother's internal migrations is brought into line with his own biographical aspirations for a better life. Thus, Wenhao sees his future as shaped by his family history. For Wenhao, this typification of his life story as a migrant serves to establish a biographical coherence in which he is able to find an inner balance and explain his studies in Hong Kong, which will begin in a few months. His professional vision of the future, including his desire to migrate to the USA, is expressed in the context of his close relationship with his parents.

However, Pan Wenhao's biographical project has not been completed. Therefore, the focus was on how he visualizes his future in the phase of career establishment and how he makes sense of it in terms of his educational biography. In creating a biographical *coherence*, previous (educational) biographical experiences are interpreted as connections within the career establishment and are understood as meaningful.

The orienting discursive framework of his biographical self-presentation is the perspective of a transnational and domestic migrant student from different regions in China moving to Hong Kong and then from Hong Kong to North America. In his self-description as “nomadic,” in line with his family biography, he exploits his opportunities for educational migration. For him, Hong Kong is a place of transit for a future realization of his educational goal of living in North America. The overall projection of his idealized biographical achievement is “the West” as it stands for a personal self-fulfilling future.

5. Concluding Remarks: Historical and Actors' Perspectives, Cross-Contextual Comparisons, and How They Help Us Better Understand Global Processes of Migration

As stated above, we want to highlight the similarities and commonalities that we have been able to reconstruct in both biographical case studies by doing a cross-contextual comparison.

5.1 The Importance of a Self-Understanding as “Middle Class” and the Respective Orientation Towards “the West”

Stuart Hall argued that “the discourse of ‘the West and the Rest’ became [...] the dominant way in which, for many decades, the West represented itself and its relation to ‘the Other’” (1992, 225). While he aims this critique first and foremost at “Western” societies, and specifically at modern sociology, in this article we have shown that this very powerful discourse has a meaning for those who, on the one hand, are excluded by it, and on the other hand relate strongly to “the West” as a place of longing and opportunities.

Fadel Darwish presents himself, his family, and, more generally, the Alawites from Syria as “modern,” progressive, and meeting “Western” standards. Consequently, his migration project considers Europe a place to aim for that possesses possibilities for self-fulfillment. Meanwhile, he feels he is stuck in Brazil. He also has a clear awareness of belonging to an educated middle-class family. The emphasis on this is related to the social decline he has experienced as a result of the war and his migration projects.

Pan Wenhao’s overall life story is about family migration and cultural differences, a life between northern and southern China and his migration to Hong Kong in order to improve his social position as a business journalist seeking personal development. Thus, as an implicit orientation, for Pan Wenhao “the West” stands for a “better” personal self-fulfilling future. “The West” becomes – not physically, but ideally – the positive horizon of biographical aspirations for a better life.

At the same time, both empirical cases show a neoliberal belief in upward social mobility through achievement. As already discussed in the previous section, very briefly, there are unequal opportunities for social mobility: For instance, educational attainment is not an overarching guarantee of social mobility. We have already pointed out that in both cases the notion of social mobility is related more to socio-cultural differences, and not exclusively from a socio-structural perspective on vertical upward mobility. In the case

of Wenhao, perceiving himself as “middle class” also shows a genuine improvement in status compared to the status of the parents.

In highlighting the biographical case of Wenhao, the “striving individual” (Yan 2012, 188) functions as a key point in a dialectic of modernity in which the individual has to perform appropriately in order to gain (educational) success. At the same time, an expectation of personal development arises in-between and is redeemed by individuals who no longer want to resign themselves biographically to the promise of mere material status improvement, but seek their own personal realization – regardless of what this means individually – from the modern demands of self-optimization.

5.2 Processes of Social Mobility and Their Interrelatedness with Spatiality

Social mobility is an important component of both migration processes: While Fadel Darwish sees being a migrant as strongly interrelated with his social decline, in the case of Pan Wenhao migration is a project for his “advancement through education” (Apitzsch and Siouti 2014, 14). Pan Wenhao describes himself as a “nomadic” educational migrant in the context of his family history. And although Fadel Darwish sees himself in a rather desperate situation, onward migration to another country in the European Union or North America, as well as further education, remains his ambition, as in the case of Pan Wenhao and his future prospects in the United States. Both cases show the potential continuation of their migration projects.

5.3 The Potential Continuation of the Migration Projects

In both cases, the onward migration is already part of the horizon for the near future. While Pan Wenhao explains that “America” (USA) might be the next step after Hong Kong, Fadel talks about European countries, where he hopes to be able to work and study in a dignified way. The planned (or imagined) onward migrations are always connected with the hope of being able to (further) improve their life situations and, in the case of Wenhao, his family’s situation. But they also contribute to a self-understanding of “being on the move,” of being a “nomadic” (in the case of Wenhao) educational migrant. Here, a relevant difference between Fadel Darwish and Pan Wenhao becomes clear: While this mobility in Wenhao’s self-presentation rather contributes to a positive self-image as an “up-and-comer,” in Fadel Darwish’s case it rather indicates an increasingly desperate and untenable situation from which he no longer knows any other way to escape.

5.4 The Importance of Transgenerational and Collective-Historical Processes and the Parents' and Grandparents' Migration Histories, as well as Migration Traditions That Reach Even Farther Back

These aspirations and ideas are, in both cases, often transmitted between generations. Parents and grandparents, with their migration (hi)stories and the knowledge that comes from them, have expectations (both implicit and explicit) that strongly influence the biographical horizons of our interviewees. Fadel Darwish would never have chosen Brazil as a destination if it had not been for the country's liberal visa policy and – first and foremost – his family's strong historical ties to Brazil. Having heard stories of the successful temporary migration of Fadel's grandfather and the upward social mobility of other family members, Fadel's parents were convinced that Brazil would be a promising place for him to live in safety and social security. And, to go one step further, the migration of Fadel's family members would not have taken place were it not for the close ties and massive migration movements from the Levant region to Brazil that began at the end of the 19th century. The social success of Fadel's family members in Brazil is an important model for him – although he is convinced that the progress they experienced would no longer be possible in contemporary Brazil.

On the other hand, it became clear that Chinese educational migrants aim to become modern (educated) citizens (Berger 2022) in order to achieve improvements to the family's class status. The family's migration history is central to Wenhao's biographical orientation, although the generation that grew up under Mao's socialist leadership could hardly achieve any improvement to their status.

Biographical research is interested in past experiences and present perspectives, as well as in the imagined future that is always based on and influenced by the past and present. The four structural similarities that we have uncovered by comparing the biographical case studies presented here involve all these interdependent temporal levels, as well as their interrelatedness with collective-historical processes. To understand them and their (practical and discursive) relevance for contemporary migration processes, the biographies we study have to be contextualized *historically*. The self-positioning and orientation towards “the West” cannot be understood without a broader historical context of collective and family histories, nor can the respective migration projects and ambitions. On the other hand, currently ongoing social mobilities and spatial processes, as well as future perspectives, have to be taken into account.

As we have shown, biographical research can help us to include the perspectives of actors, their desires, aspirations, and ideas about a “better life” into our analyses. By taking into account their experiences and perspectives,

we have made an argument for historical and actor-centered migration research and cross-contextual comparisons as valuable contributions to a Global Sociology.

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