

# RECENT CHANGES IN ROMANIA'S ETHNICAL STRUCTURE. THE CHINESE MINORITY – A CASE STUDY

RADU SĂGEATĂ\*

*Key-words:* ethnical structure, recent changes, Chinese community, Romania.

**Abstract.** People of Chinese origin currently constitute one of the largest overseas populations in the world, with over 50 m people studying working and living outside of China today. The country has a long tradition of emigration. Indeed, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China has seen multiple populations waves move to North America and Southeast Asia. Countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia host flourishing Chinese communities, which play an active and in some cases dominant role in their respective countries' finance and trade with China. Romania could not avoid these evolution. The downfall of the communist system in Central and Eastern Europe and the abolishment of ideological barriers has created the premises for closer globalizing links within the urban systems from this part of the Continent. The majority of the Chinese who live in Romania are engaged in commercial activities concentrated in the Colentina–Dobroești–Voluntari area (“China Town”) but in some production activities (bicycle factories, wood processing industry, construction materials, print technology, recycling, etc.).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The ethnical structure of any territory is the outcome of a long process of evolution marked by a succession of political-ideological changes experienced in the course of time. Thus, some ethnical communities would disappear, lose considerable numbers and impact due to political circumstances (wars, deportations, persecutions) and/or to economic disparities between the territory of origin and the new residential one; on the other hand, new ethnical communities would emerge once political-ideological barriers fell and globalizing flows acquired momentum, generalizing.

Romania made no-exception to those evolutions. After the Second World War and especially after 1989, the German community (the Transylvanian Saxons and the Swabians from Banat), as well as the Jewish and Armenian communities would decline numerically, their place being filled by newcomers from thousands of kilometers afar (e.g. the Chinese and the Arabs).

## 2. THE CHINESE DIASPORA

Nowadays, the *Made in China* brand has increasingly become synonymous with globalization. The biggest demographic power in the world (ca. 19% of the global population), China is also a great economic power, coming second after the USA. According to World Bank reports, the Chinese economy would increase approximately twice versus the American one, while India (third place) toppled Japan. As a result, the three great demographic powers came to disputes also the place in the world's economic hierarchy. The Chinese economy relies on the largest diaspora worldwide (over 50 million inh.), that is, almost thrice Romania's population. For a better understanding of the Chinese demographic phenomenon let us recall that towns like Shanghai or Beijing exceed all of Romania's population.

---

\* Senior researcher, Institute of Geography, Romanian Academy, 12 Dimitrie Racoviță Street, 023993, Bucharest, RO-023993, radu\_sageata@yahoo.com.

The Chinese emigration is in no way a recent phenomenon. Given the geographical proximity to China of Indochina, Korea and Indonesia coastal zones, Chinese populations colonized them as early as the Antiquity, having substantially contributed to shaping their cultural identity.

As early as the Ming Dynasty, the Chinese navigator Zhèng Hé was assigned seven expeditions (1405–1433) in the Indian and Pacific Oceans to fight piracy, which threatened Chinese trade, and also make coastal investigations, reaching as far as Arabia and East Africa. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), several normative acts were issued, constantly restricting migratory flows; those who left the country without official permit were considered traitors and executed. Having a high natural increase rate and restricting emigration, led to a substantial numerical rise of population, pushing China into the forefront of the world hierarchy.

Yet, it was only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the imperial authority declined and European influences penetrated into the country; the Chinese diaspora emerged (largely after 1910), when the monarchy was abolished and the Republic of China came into being (1911–1949). The normative barriers limiting emigration fell and a sudden outflow of population, especially to South-East Asia, but also to Australia and beyond the Pacific, took place. Widespread poverty, particularly in the country-side, famine and the dissolution of the British, French, and Dutch colonial systems produced a shortage of labour in the new South-Asian states because many European citizens, or their heirs, residents in these countries, migrated to the former colonial metropolises looking for better living conditions.

In this way, Chinese communities appeared in Singapore, the Philippines, Indochina, Indonesia and Korea, Australia and America, mostly in the USA. These communities would substantially grow numerically especially after the 1949 Civil War, when the Communist Party came to the helm of the country. The removal from power of the Kuomintang national forces would considerably augment emigration fluxes as people tried to escape persecutions in Communist China. This move would dynamise the Japanese economy and contribute decisively to the other emerging economies in South-East Asia (Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Brunei). Simultaneously, migrational flows to the Western states would increase along three directions: to America (particularly the USA, Canada, Brazil and Peru); Western Europe (especially to Germany and France), Australia and New Zealand. Emigration targeted also the Communist Bloc, e.g. on the one hand, the Russian Far East and South Siberia (Buryatia, Tuva, Altai, etc.) and, on the other hand, Vietnam, where the Chinese minority is known by the name of *hoa*.

The 1989 events in Tienanmen Square, followed by the transfer to China of the British and Portuguese sovereignty over the cities of Hongkong (1997) and Macao (1999), increased emigration waves, many of their citizens holding double citizenship. These events marked a turning-point in the Chinese economic policy, engendering new special economic zones<sup>1</sup>.

Chinese emigration to Africa got momentum largely after 2000, when economic agreements with the raw-material exporting countries were signed (South-Africa, Angola, Zambia, Namibia, Nigeria, Chad, Algeria, etc.). Chinese exports to Africa consisted in both infrastructure exploitation technique, with the corresponding workforce, and an entrepreneurial culture, which was distinctively different from what existed in the host countries. As a result, the Chinese communities would in time acquire privileged places in the economic and social hierarchy of the host-countries. This situation has often generated resentments among the population of the poor countries in particular, incidentally turning into social tension and conflicts (e.g. the 1969 anti-Chinese revolts in Malaysia, 1965–66 and 1988 in Indonesia, and 2006 in Tonga).

At present, the largest Chinese communities live in South-East Asia, representing the majority in Singapore (74.1% of the total population), holding an important share in Malaysia (24.6%; 6,960,900 pers.) and Thailand (14.0%; 9,392,900 pers., the largest Chinese community in South-East Asia). As a matter of fact, nearly half (ca. 22 million) of the overall Chinese diaspora live in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore (Fig. 1).

---

<sup>1</sup> Shenzhen zone in the proximity of KongKong, and Zhuhai zone established close to Macao.



Some of the towns (China Towns) in the above-mentioned states also have the largest Chinese communities: Bangkok (2,900,000), Singapore (2,800,000), Penang (650,000), Kuala Lumpur (612,300) and Jakarta (528,000) (Table 1).

The south of Siberia is perhaps the most characteristic demographic discontinuity worldwide. Despite ancient exchanges of population, the Sino-Soviet ideological gap (1956–1985)<sup>2</sup> affected also this segment as the northern Chinese border became relatively closed<sup>3</sup>. In this way, the area was subjected to a strong demographic pressure between the Chinese ethnical bloc in the south (average density 145 inh./km<sup>2</sup>, often 1,000 inh./km<sup>2</sup> in the vast plains of Huang He and Yangtze) and the Siberian peoples in the north (average density under 1 inh./km<sup>2</sup>).

Table 1

The largest Chinese communities in South-East Asia (2015)

Host-country	Total number of Chinese	Ratio of Chinese / total population of host-country	Cities hosting important Chinese communities		
			City name	Total number of Chinese	Ratio of Chinese / total city population
Thailand	9,392,900	14.0	Bangkok	2,900,000	35.0
Malaysia	6,960,900	24.6	Penang	650,000	39.1
			Kuala Lumpur	612,300	34.6
Singapore	2,808,300	74.1	Singapore	2,808,300	74.1
Indonesia	2,832,510	1.2	Jakarta	528,000	5.5
Myanmar	1,637,500	3.2			
The Philippines	1,350,000	1.3			
Vietnam	970,900	1.1			
Cambodia	800,000	6.0			
Korea Rep.	800,000	1.6			
Japan	674,900	0.5			

Data sources: Calendario Atlante de Agostini, Instituto Geografico de Agostini, Novarra, 2014.

As the ideological blockage was lifted, the demographic flows northward got momentum, the share and influence of the Chinese communities from south and east Siberia in the local economy growing. The number of Chinese living in the Russian Federation is estimated at 200,000 – 400,000 people, diffusely distributed, being concentrated especially in the south of Siberia autonomous republics and in the big urban centres.

The Chinese communities living in the USA and Canada (ca. 5.3 million people) are the followers of the economic immigrants who began arriving especially in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They would concentrate in five areas of big urban agglomerations: New York, San Jose – San Francisco – Oakland, Los Angeles, Toronto and Vancouver.

Latin America hosts over 2.6 million Chinese people, half of them living in Peru (1.3 mill., 4.1% of the country's population). They are known by the name of *tusán*, derived from Taishan (Toishan) city, Guangdong Province (China), the first Chinese emigrants to Peru having originated therefrom. Beginning with the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> cc, they had been brought as slaves by Spanish and Portuguese navigators (Look, 2010).

For all the significant cultural differences, the Chinese immigration to Australia and New Zealand has never ceased, currently representing some 4% of the overall population in each of these countries (i.e. 12 mill. people).

<sup>2</sup> A Sino-Soviet ideological gap, begun in 1956, became known only after 1961, when the Chinese communists officially denounced the “band of Soviet leadership traitors”; things would smooth down in 1985, when Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping came to rule Russia and China, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Mongolia growing into Moscow's ideological satellite.

Obviously, in most cases, migrational flows were generated by economic factors, being facilitated through the intermediacy of the powerful South-East Asian Chinese communities. According to statistical data, about 866,500 Chinese live in Australia<sup>4</sup> and some 180,000 in New Zealand<sup>5</sup>.

Chinese migration to Africa is a recent, exclusively economic, demographic phenomenon that got momentum after the year 2000. The agreements concluded between Chinese investors and their African partners have in view industrial and infrastructural co-operation projects to be implemented with Chinese management and workforce, local labour being hired only on condition that they should observe certain quality standards imposed by the Chinese managers. As a result, Chinese specialists and workers, most of them together with their families, came to work in the African states, forming gated communities.

The host-countries, China has trade relations with, have a relative political stability and important mineral resources. About 50% of the Chinese residents in Africa are found in two southern African states: the South-African Republic (ca. 350,000 pers.) (Rahimy, 2009) and Angola (259,000 pers.), being employed mainly in the extractive industry.

Massive Chinese immigration to Western Europe occurred after 1950, when political opening began, the EEC came into being, and post-war economic development was short of labour force. The EU Chinese communities are put to some 2 million people.

Most of them live in France (700,000 pers.), basically one-third (1%) of that country's population. The explanation would be that Indochina, a former French colony, triggered emigration flows to the colonial metropole. A second destination for the Chinese emigration was the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (over 450,000 Chinese settlers, 0.7% of the country's population). Italy has the third largest Chinese community in the EU (320,794 pers.)<sup>6</sup>, migrants coming at a faster rate in the last 15 years. Next in line stands Spain (166,223 pers.)<sup>7</sup>, the Chinese immigration also dating from colonial times, a massive move beginning in the years 1920–1930, and especially after 1990, people being tempted by economic opportunities. The other countries hosting Chinese communities on their territory are Holland (80,198 pers., 0.5% of that country's population)<sup>8</sup>, Germany (56,000 pers.)<sup>9</sup>, Sweden, Austria, Ireland, Norway and Denmark (between 10,000 and 40,000 pers. each).

### 3. CHINESE EMIGRATION TO ROMANIA. CONSEQUENCES. CHINESE INVESTMENTS

China's economic opening promoted by Deng Xiaoping<sup>10</sup> after 1985, associated with the collapse of the communist political system in Central and Eastern Europe, triggered a strong Chinese immigration in this part of the Continent, too. The Chinese community in Romania, established in the 1990s, would evolve at a fast pace, setting in the North-Eastern part of Bucharest, the country's capital.

According to official statistics (October, 20, 2011 Census data), 2,017 Chinese live in Romania, but their real number is by far greater, given that many of them dwell here without legal forms. The Romanian Office for Immigration advances the figure of 8,253 persons<sup>11</sup>, that is four times more (Wundrak, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Cultural Diversity in Australia. Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics, <https://www.abs.gov.au>, Nov. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics New Zealand, 2013 Census QuickStats about culture and identity, <https://www.stats.govt.nz>, Nov. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_people\\_in\\_Italy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_people_in_Italy), Nov. 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Under Spanish Census, Jan. 1, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> In 2012.

<sup>9</sup> In 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), the third President of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and of the Central Military Commission of China, was the founder of the "Chinese type of socialism" and of the "socialist market economy".

<sup>11</sup> Source: [stirileprotv.stiri/Romania-te-iubesc-intre-doua-luni-romano-chinezii.html](http://stirileprotv.stiri/Romania-te-iubesc-intre-doua-luni-romano-chinezii.html), Dec. 2015.

In terms of territorial distribution, large numbers are registered in Bucharest city, Romania's capital and in Ilfov County (1,032 and 681 people, respectively), accounting for 85% of all Chinese nationals who live in Romania. In Ilfov County, most of them are found in Voluntari town (359 pers.), in Dobroești (210 pers.) and Ștefăneștii de Jos (72 pers.) communes. Other nuclei of legal Chinese residents in Romania are the counties of Hunedoara (60 pers.) and Buzău (32 pers.), especially in Pârscov Commune (27 pers.) (Fig. 2).

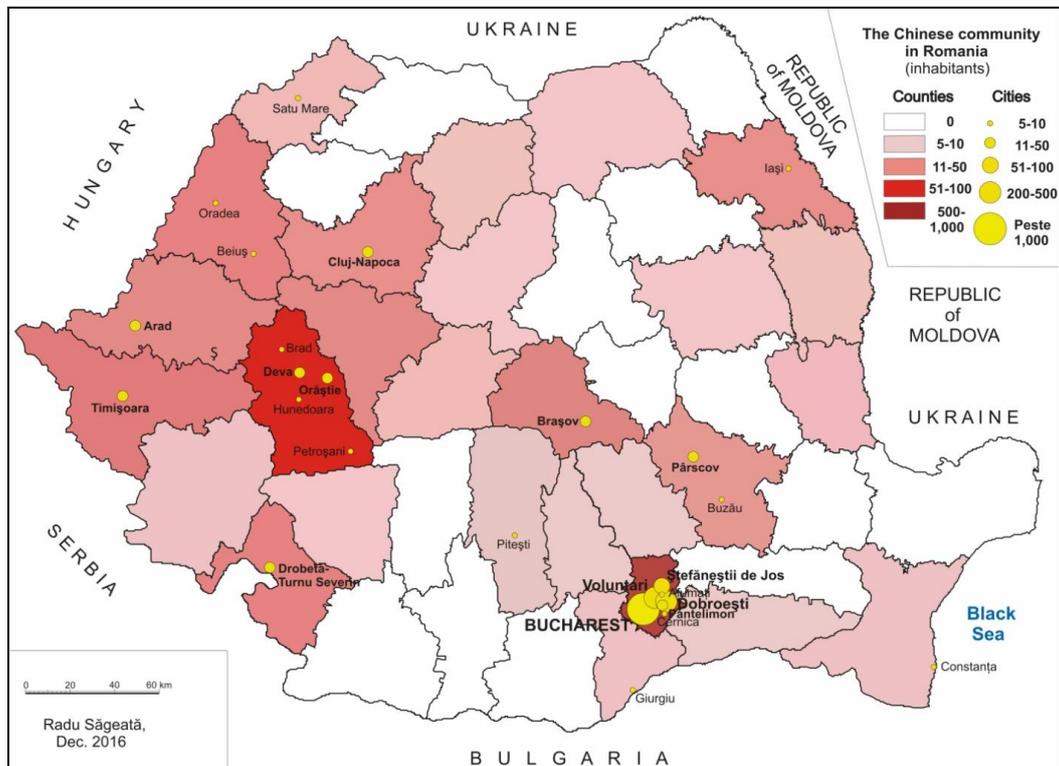


Fig. 2 – The Chinese community in Romania (2011 Population and Housing Census data).

In Bucharest, it is Sector II which registers 886 Chinese residents, out of the 1,032 hosted by the city, that is 85.8% of all those who live in it, and 43.9% of all those who reside in Romania (Fig. 3). There is territorial contiguity between the Chinese-inhabited area (China Town Romania) on the territory of Voluntari and Pantelimon towns, of Dobroești and Ștefăneștii de Jos communes.

Most of these people deal in trading and services (restaurants serving specific Chinese dishes), commercial complex units like *Europa* and *Niro*, developed in the 1990s, are located on the outskirts of Bucharest along the highway to Urziceni Town (Colentina – Voluntari route), and represent an agglomeration of retail stands belonging mainly to Turkish, Arab and Chinese investors. The *Dragonul Roșu* (Red Dragon) Company, set up in 2003 by the *Niro Investment Group* of firms, underlies the *China Town Romania* project, centred on Dragonul Roșu commercial area (142,570 m<sup>2</sup>) which has 10 pavilions with 5,500 shops. Most commodities originate from China, but some one-third of the traders are Romanian nationals. *Dragonul Roșu* commercial complex, employing around 9,000 people (Mureșan, 2015), is visited by some 15,000 potential buyers daily. Beginning with 100% Chinese goods and traders, at present one sees by 30% fewer Chinese operators and only 60–70% goods from China<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Idem.

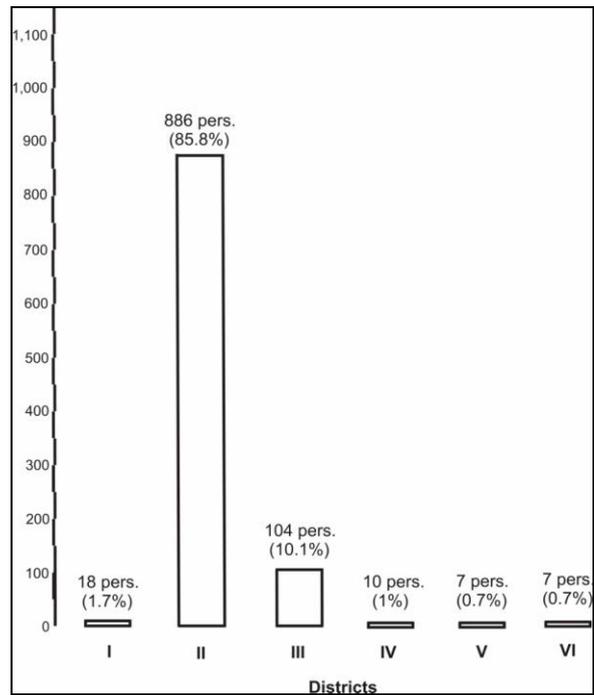


Fig. 3 – The Chinese Community in Bucharest (2011 Population and Housing Census data).

*Dragonul Roșu* (Fig. 4) commercial complex, the core of the China Town Romania Project, will be extended in the Bucharest – Dobroești – Voluntari – Afumați area, where China Business Centre Romania and a residential complex (China Towers), consisting of 12 blocs-of-flats with 600 apartments, are scheduled to be built<sup>13</sup>.



Fig. 4 – “Dragonul Roșu” (Red Dragon) Complex (interior) preserves influences of Chinese architecture (Photo Radu Săgeată, June 2015).

<sup>13</sup> *China vrea în UE cu escală prin România* [China wants to be in the UE with a stoper in Romania], by Adrian Mihai, National Journal Magazine, <http://www.media.imopedia.ro/stiri-imobiliare/china-vrea-in-ue-cu-escala-prin-romania-1370.print.html>, Dec. 2015.

Chinese investment in Romania was a slow-going process, with only ten more important investments having been reported until the second semester of 2001 (Fig. 5).

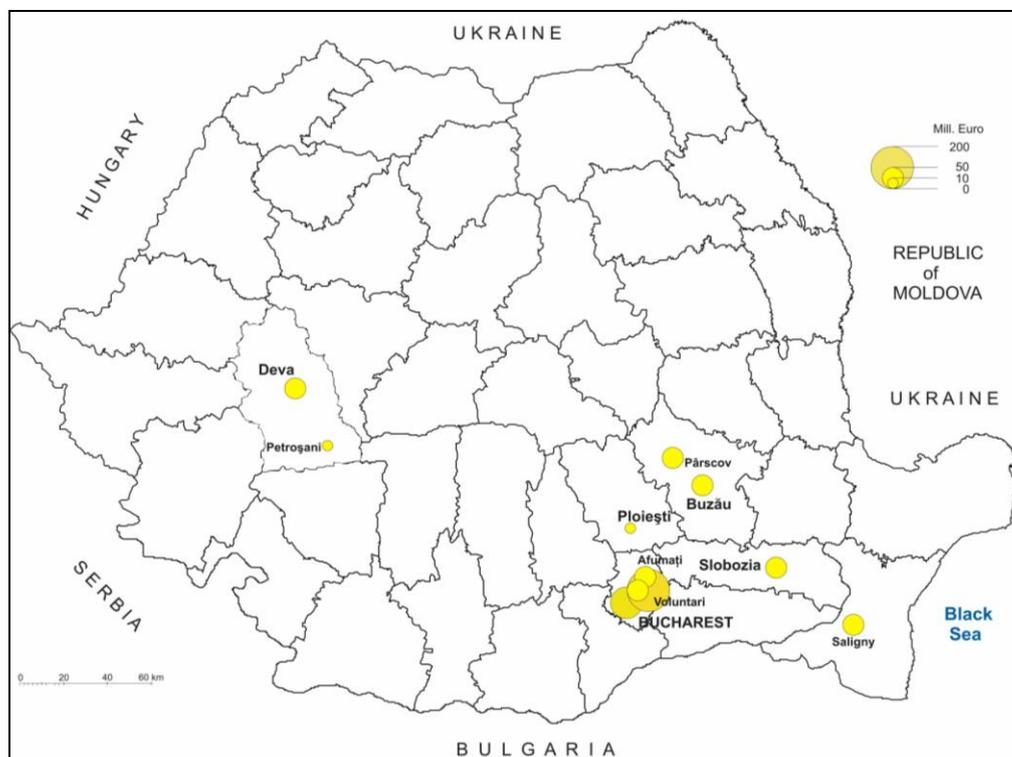


Fig. 5 – The main investments of Chinese capital in Romania (2015).  
1. Counties with Chinese investments, 2. The value of vested capital (mill. euro).  
Data source: Cireașă, 2011.

In addition to the Chinese investment made in the north-east of Bucharest, a few others, yet not that big (under 50 mill. euro), were placed in the counties of Buzău, Prahova, Constanța, Ialomița and Hunedoara some of them being located in the countryside as well.

In 2011, the value of Romanian – Chinese exchanges amounted to 14 billion USD, out of which only 544 mill. represented Romania's exports to China, a negative trade balance, while imports from China would double compared to 2005 (Tiron, 2012).

At the end of 2014, ZTE Company, one of the biggest producers of telecommunication networks in China, opened a services centre in Romania which provided 250 new jobs<sup>14</sup>. This comes besides a new major investment in mobile telecommunications from the Huawei Technologies which, in 2012, had opened a regional centre in Bucharest, providing technical assistance to Central and Eastern Europe, to Northern and Western countries. The Chinese investment for this development was of 6 million euro, with the intention of raising it to 100 million euro until 2018, in addition to the 90 million euro of Chinese investment over 2007–2012<sup>15</sup>. At the end of 2014, Huawei Romania numbered about 1,200 employees, over 70% of them Romanian nationals, it also supplying some 2,500 temporary jobs in the operational units of Romania<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Source: <http://ziare.com/afaceri/investitii-straine/chinezii-de-la-zte-vor-investi-in-romania-veste-buna-pentru-vestul-tarii-1290232>, Mar., 27, 2014; Dec. 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Source: <http://www.capital.ro/seful-huawei-romania-avem-in-plan-investitii-de-100-mil-euro.html>, Sept. 12, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Idem.

China's investment is placed also in the energy sector, especially in building sectors 3 and 4 at the Cernavodă Nuclear Station<sup>17</sup>, as well as in the Rovinari and Mintia–Deva energy estates, in aeolian centrals projects, and in the construction of the Tarnița–Lăpușești water-power plant on the Someșul Cald River (1,000 MW installed power; a 1.16 billion euro investment that will create nearly 1,000 new jobs)<sup>18</sup>.

Also attractive to Chinese investment is the transport infrastructure, with a high-speed railway to be built on the Vienna–Bucharest–Constanța line<sup>19</sup>.

The Chinese interest in agriculture covers the import of food products (mainly meat, wine, cereals and bee honey), and industrial equipments. Food exports to China will grow to ca. 1 billion euro/year, that country's total investments in Romania reaching up to 8.5 billion euro<sup>20</sup>.

However, the main problem facing the authorities is connected with the extent to which the Chinese can integrate, they often stating that, not being familiar with Romanian, they do not understand the rules of this country.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The biggest diaspora worldwide is not only demographic, but also economic. The post-war economic progress made by the South-East Asian states is largely due to the Chinese communities. The cheap labour-force that came from China, Taiwan or from South-East Asia has stimulated the economic development of Western Europe and North America.

On the other hand, implementing liberal-type reforms in the Chinese economy, encouraged migrational fluxes and the establishment of a powerful Chinese diaspora that contributed to improving international relations, creating new commodity markets and implicitly infusing foreign capital in the Chinese economy. As a result, the Chinese economy has constantly developed over the last three decades, surpassing the phase of a poverty-stricken economy and succeeding in solving major problems of food and clothing for millions of people, while creating important export availabilities. The former Chinese emigrants, or their followers, actual millionaires, started coming back to their homeland and provide new jobs.

However, despite the strong Chinese community existing in Romania, the Chinese presence is still below the possibilities offered by the Romanian market, what they are dealing in is mostly the import of goods and making small investments in family business (trade, services and the small industry).

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.** The research for this paper was conducted under the research plan of the Institute of Geography, "Geographical studies on the evolution of the ethnical structure after 1990".

#### REFERENCES

- Cireășă, D. (2011), *Harta investițiilor chineze în România*, România Liberă, 30 June 2011, <http://romanaliberă.ro/economie/finante-banci/harta-investitiilor-chineze-in-romania-229884>.  
Hoerder, D. (2002), *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium*, Duke University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Source: <http://www.ziare.com/economie/comert/discutii-la-ccir-china-e-interesata-de-investitii-la-cernavoda-si-lauda-rom-expo-1353923>, Mar. 10, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Source: <http://evz.ro/investitiile-chineze-in-romania-intra-in-faza-galopanta-1069580.html>, Jan. 4, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Idem.

<sup>20</sup> Data presented at the Economic Forum "China – Central and Eastern Europe", Bucharest, Nov. 2013, <http://www.stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/summit/-important-la-bucuresti-prima-vizita-a-unui-premier-al-r-p-chineze-dupa-19-ani.html>.

- Hrițcu, Mirona (2009), *Milionarii chinezi fabricați în România*, Capital, 29 oct., <http://www.capital.ro/detalii-articole/milionarii-chinezi-fabricati-in-romania-126390.html>
- Look, L., Walton, Chee-Beng, T. (edt.) (2010), *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas, Brill.
- Miller, Barbara (2011), *Chinese Australians want apology for discrimination*, <http://abc.net.au/news>, June 30, 2011, Nov. 2015.
- Mureșan, R. (2015), *Cât produce anual fabrica de bani Dragonul Roșu, cu peste 5 500 de magazine și 9 000 de angajați*, <http://www.zf.ro/companii>, Dec. 2015.
- Rahimy, Tina (edt.) (2009), *Representation, Expression & Identity. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Inter-Disciplinary Press, Publishing Creative Research, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net>, Nov. 2015.
- Săgeată, R. (2014), *Globalization and New Ethnic Minorities in Romania*, vol. Territories and Identities in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, Institute of Geopolitics Cześćochowa, pp. 258–270.
- Tiron, Mirabela (2012), *Chinezii au făcut o fabrică de cărămizi de 15 mil. euro în Constanța*, <http://www.zf.ro/companii/chinezii-au-facut-o-fabrica-de-caramizi-de-15-mil-in-constant-9506028>
- Wundrak, Rixta (2010), *Die chinesische Community in Bukarest. Eine rekonstruktive, diskursanalytische Fallstudie über Immigration und Transnationalismus. Aus der Reihe: Theorie und Praxis der Diskursforschung*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Yu-Sion, L. (1994), *Chinois de France: un siècle de presence de 1900 à nos jours*, Edit. Mémoire Collective.

Received December 15, 2016