

The client side of everyday corruption in Central and Eastern Europe: The case of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Romania

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journals.sagepub.com/home/euc**Jing Hiah**

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Abstract

This article provides an in-depth understanding of the corruption experiences of migrant entrepreneurs in transition economies. Drawing from ethnographic research, including 50 qualitative interviews with Chinese migrant entrepreneurs active in wholesale markets, non-governmental organizations, and supervisory agencies in Romania, this article demonstrates that normalization of corruption by migrant entrepreneurs should be understood in the historical context of the wholesale market as a product of post-1989 transition in Central and Eastern Europe. At a social-interactional level, normalization of corruption is revealed through how migrants use decriminalizing language to refer to corruption and perceive corruption as a survival strategy by public officials. Moreover, the legal and outsider status of migrants and their knowledge of the language, rules and laws further determine migrants' position as clients of 'on the spot' corruption.

Keywords

corruption, entrepreneurship, immigration, normalization, Romania, transition

Introduction

Corruption, generally defined as the misuse of public power for private benefit, is reported to be pervasive and affecting the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the transition societies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Börzel et al., 2010: 124–5; Neamtu and Dragos, 2014: 71; but see Saar, 2004: 513). Transition societies refer to countries

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transitioning from a centrally planned to a post-socialist society. Although corruption has been studied widely, most research focuses on the causes and effects of corruption at the societal level or the role of public institutions in relation to corruption (Torsello and Venard, 2015: 34). Studies on the meanings of corruption on an individual level are scarce. Research that does address the corruption experiences of individuals in turn focus on public bureaucracies (Ivković and Shelley, 2005) or elites (Grødeland, 2010). There is limited attention to everyday life accounts of common people and small-time entrepreneurs who are on the client side of a transaction involving bribery (but see Jancsics, 2013; Vorley and Williams, 2015) and even a great lack of attention to the impact of corruption on newcomers such as migrants in the transition countries of CEE (although there have been several studies on the impact of corruption on migrants in the developing countries of Africa; for example, Madsen, 2004; Willemsse, 2015). This study aims to contribute to this literature by examining the everyday corruption experiences of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Romania.

Romania provides us with a relevant case for studying (anti-)corruption. Despite the implementation of various anti-corruption policies since Romania's accession talks to the European Union, Romania still scores high on corruption indicators (Transparency International, 2016). Recently, wide public unrest regarding the plans of the newly established government to pardon or reduce the sentences of Romanian politicians who are guilty of corruption related to abuse of power (*Aljazeera*, 2017) has again made corruption a hotly debated topic in Romania. Yet Romania today is not only dealing with high-level corruption, but, according to the European Commission (2016), corruption in local government is especially problematic. Furthermore, Romania is an interesting context in which to study how corruption affects migrant entrepreneurs, because, unlike other EU member states in the former socialist bloc, it has been able to foster an economy in which relatively many small enterprises operate (Vorley and Williams, 2015).

Corruption is also relevant to the particular case of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs that this contribution focuses on. The few studies conducted on Chinese migrants in CEE report how Chinese immigration cannot be seen as separate from the history of corruption in these transition countries (Nagy, 2011; Wundrak, 2009). Yet these studies only briefly glance at the corruption experiences of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs (but see Chang, 2013). Exploring the corruption experiences of Chinese immigrants can provide valuable insights into how corruption becomes accepted and institutionalized and impacts newcomers such as migrants and their (economic) incorporation into the host society.

To understand the corruption experiences of migrant entrepreneurs, this article predominantly utilizes insights from (legal) anthropological literature (Anders and Nuijten, 2007; Torsello and Venard, 2016) that approach corruption from a contextual perspective and, in doing so, 'reveal the systemic and structural dimensions of corruption' (Anders and Nuijten, 2007: 2). Accordingly, corruption in this article is considered not as an individual act, but as a phenomenon that is institutionalized and embedded in the power relations of society (Anders and Nuijten, 2007: 15). Corruption is not behaviour that deviates from the norm, but rather behaviour that expresses the norm (Van de Bunt and Nelen, 2012: 7–13), granting that moral boundaries exist that delineate which bribes are acceptable to pay and which are not. Although these boundaries are informal, they are institutionalized and consequently adhered to, shaping the interests and strategies of

public officials and citizens (Stefes, 2007: 6). Normalization of corruption is addressed in organizational criminology. Yet organizational criminology primarily focuses on behaviour in an organizational setting, the perspective of those committing corruption, that is, the offender perspective and corruption as white-collar crime (Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Van Wingerde and Van de Bunt, 2015). On the other hand, anthropological approaches to corruption focus on the everyday encounters of petty corruption by common people (Blundo and Olivier De Sardan, 2006: 70–109). Petty corruption refers to relatively small sums of money or exchanges of favours between street-level public officials and ordinary citizens (Van de Bunt and Nelen, 2012: 13–15; Wallace and Latcheva, 2006: 83), which is the focus of this article. Furthermore, this article focuses on the category of ‘on the spot’ corruption, which refers to corrupt transactions between two parties who did not have any prior relationship (Jancsics, 2013). In this contribution I aim to answer the following questions: What are the everyday corruption experiences of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs? How have Chinese migrant entrepreneurs normalized their experiences with petty corruption? And how are the everyday corruption experiences of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs embedded in the broader societal context of a post-1989 Romania in transition?

In what follows, I first discuss the notion of small-scale bribery in transition societies and outline the research context of Chinese migrant entrepreneurship in post-1989 Romania. I then provide insights into the methods and fieldwork of this study. Thereafter, I present the perspectives of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs on small-scale bribery through ethnographic materials focusing on the meanings of corruption, the strategies developed to benefit from corruption, and the role of migrant status in relation to corruption. Finally, I present my conclusions.

Background

The normalization of petty corruption in transition societies

Anthropological insights into corruption underline the importance of the broader political, economic and cultural context in which corruption and discourses of corruption take place (Anders and Nuijten, 2007). Structural corruption in former socialist states should be considered as a transitional phenomenon (Börzel et al., 2010: 124–7; Neef, 2002). During the transition period, the retreat of the state took place faster than the legislation to control market activity could be implemented (Wallace and Latcheva, 2006: 84), which led to a growth of the informal economy and consequently corruption (Börzel et al., 2010). The informal economy refers to a process of income generation that is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated (Castells and Portes, 1989: 12). The informal economy comprises two types of activities: first, illegal activities that break regulations and laws and, second, a-legal activities, those activities not covered by regulations and laws. In transition contexts, various activities were a-legal because existing laws were inadequate to cover them during the earlier days of transition, such as street trading but also immigration. Other activities have continuously been outside the law, such as self-provisioning, or activities that are partially regulated, such as the family firm (Wallace and

Latcheva, 2006: 82–3). At a social-interactional level, the link between informal activities and corruption is hence that the latter can contribute to the existence of the former in two respects. First, paying public administrators a bribe can make it possible for citizens to undertake all sorts of informal activities and get away with no or less severe punishment (Vorley and Williams, 2015). Second, because informal activities also include a-regulated behaviour, corruptive practices can be considered to be a form of informal social control, emerging from a lack of formal supervision (Wundrak, 2009: 10). Furthermore, low salaries for public officials might further encourage corruption in a context in which there is little oversight of certain behaviours. This meaning of petty corruption is termed ‘survival corruption’ – corruption as a survival strategy by street-level officials who ask for a bribe to generate extra income to compensate for their low wages (Van de Bunt and Nelen, 2012: 14–15).

Furthermore, various different types of petty corruption can be characterized. Blundo and Olivier De Sardan (2006) distinguish four types of petty corruption that relate to non-bond based, but what Jancsics (2013) coins as on the spot corruption. The first type refers to commission paid for illicit services by users of administrative services to officials who can provide access to unfair advantages, exemptions or discounts. The second type is unwarranted payments for public services, which includes payments to public officials for services that ought to be free. The third type is gratuities, which are similar to gift-giving in that they are given after one has been pleased with the service delivered. The fourth type is levies or tolls that are extorted by public officials but citizens do not receive any kind of service in return; this type of petty corruption is considered more generally to be a form of extortion. Although these four basic types of petty corruption represent separate categories, they have fluid boundaries. In practice, the categories might overlap (Blundo and Olivier De Sardan, 2006: 71–9). Furthermore, an important aspect of these different categories is the different perceived degrees of acceptability between the various types of petty corruption. The degrees of acceptability depend on the extent to which bribing has a coercive character and the extent of agency citizens have in agreeing to pay a bribe (Anders and Nuijten, 2007: 6; Blundo and Olivier De Sardan, 2006: 79; Jancsics, 2013).

Although citizens might have agency with regard to paying a bribe, making them better off in their opinion, corruption should still be considered problematic. Corruption should be regarded as a product of power imbalances in society. Wealthy and politically well-connected citizens have more possibilities for enrichment through corruption (Anders and Nuijten, 2007: 17). Jancsics’ (2013) empirical study shows how the social class of citizens plays an important role in ‘on the spot’ corruption. Although individuals with a middle-class or elite background are less willing to engage with on the spot corruption and as a consequence might become victimized by street-level bureaucrats, they are often able to undo the harm or disadvantage done to them by utilizing their social networks. Through their social networks they are able to influence administrators higher up in the organization. Working-class citizens or entrepreneurs more often involve themselves in reciprocal exchanges in establishing a corrupt transaction (Jancsics, 2013). Furthermore, some authors have argued that corruption should be considered as a form of citizenship. Those who know how to access the networks of the parallel economy and

the subsistence made possible by this economy can be considered as citizens (Haller and Shore, 2005: 7).

Finally, various authors have underlined the importance of the performance, discourse and language through which corruption is normalized by actors (Anders and Nuijten, 2007: 17). Gupta (1995) focused on how discourses of corruption in post-colonial India are related to the way citizens view the legitimacy of state authority. Other studies stipulate the importance of language: how people speak about corruption gives information about how people (normatively) perceive corruption. Previous studies describe how corruption is referred to as ‘bite’ in Mexico and ‘tired money’ in Indonesia (Anders and Nuijten, 2007: 18). These ways of talking about corruption underline how corruption is not necessarily considered to be morally wrong. However, other studies report on terminology used in which corruption does have a negative connotation, such as *ni yoog* for ‘man of little value’, referring to corrupt individuals in Burkina Faso (Blundo and Olivier De Sardan, 2006: 31–2).

Contextualizing migrant entrepreneurship in post-1989 CEE and Romania

Dear Embassy,

You’re my home abroad, you are our parent. We wander abroad and fight hard for a small home. Our efforts, our silent presence and we live on the edge of the exotic. We have no complaints, we persist because we believe. Now look at the rampages of ANAF.¹ Dear Embassy, You preach to us, you want us to formalize our operations, you want us to abide by the law. Simple words, but the pressure is hard. Is it that we do not want to formalize our operations? No, it is not. They have problems in this system. We are all thieves. If you are not a thief, you will not be able to survive. Things have been like this for 20 years. Now they want to change or whatever they want, I don’t know. But from what I see, hear and have experienced, I have found that they are a group of bandits. Have you ever experienced that you first get a fine of tens of thousands, and afterwards they close your warehouse and shops and tell you ‘case closed’, we will not speak of it anymore? Is this normal for a country ruled by law? Is this normal life in a democratic country? Dear Ambassador, parent, would you please stand up for your fellow brothers and sisters for righteousness? We would like ANAF to handle our Chinese businesses in a legitimate way of law enforcement.

(Translated excerpt from an anonymous letter posted on WeChat, October 2015)

In October 2015, the above letter surfaced on the instant message app WeChat, and was shared and distributed by Chinese migrants living and working in Romania. In the letter, an anonymous Chinese migrant entrepreneur pleads with the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Romania to intervene in the recent national coordinated anti-tax evasion action ‘Operation Crystal’ by the fiscal anti-fraud department of the Romanian tax authority (ANAF). During Operation Crystal, dozens of ANAF officials carried out daily enforcement actions in the wholesale markets. Because the majority of Chinese migrants in Romania own a business in these markets, they were severely affected by Operation Crystal. The operation lasted over 10 weeks, weeks in which the markets generated little business: patrons did not visit because they were afraid of being targeted by the authorities and many shopkeepers were heavily fined because of a lack of compliance with tax regulations. These fines run into the tens of thousands of euros, which cost some

their entire business. Accordingly, many stories about Chinese immigrants returning back 'home' were widely shared. As the above quote shows, tax evasion is strongly related to corruption among enforcement officials. Therefore, Operation Crystal should in a broader perspective be considered as an anti-corruption measure (Ionescu and Buhur, 2016: 23). Tax evasion and other irregularities by businesses in the wholesale sector had previously been quietly accepted owing to corruption among regulatory agencies. Public officials turned a blind eye to the irregularities in the businesses on the condition that business owners paid them a bribe. Chinese entrepreneurs were enraged by Operation Crystal, because they had conducted business in this manner for years, adhering to the 'exotic' institutional context of Romania in which corruption is structural. Furthermore, Operation Crystal was considered unfair not only by the Chinese migrants but also by locals and other (migrant) entrepreneurs:

They started without announcing [the tax controls]. They check your books for the last five years. This is not constructive. 100 percent of the people make mistakes. But before there was an arrangement [between entrepreneurs and public officials]. They understood us then. They helped us. The officials know about this [former] arrangement [but] pretend to know nothing . . . Before they were encouraging a parallel way. The law was allowing the unfair business. Now they are closing their eyes. I believe that there will be a new law released that will pardon the people doing unfair business, that, from that law onwards, you will begin to clean up your business. This is not only about Dragonul Rosu [the wholesale market], this is about the whole of Romania.

(Kurdish migrant entrepreneur, conducting trade for over 17 years in Romania)

Undeniably, there are also entrepreneurs active in the wholesale market who think positively about ANAF's intervention. For instance Dan, a successful local Romanian entrepreneur who sells imported German products, finds that corruption generates unfair competition and limits the tax income for the Romanian government.

Although this article concerns the specific case of the wholesale market in Romania, the embeddedness of corruption in wholesale markets is not exceptional. Wholesale markets are fairly emblematic of the post-1989 transition and can be found in various cities of CEE (Marcinićzak and Van der Velde 2008; Sik and Wallace, 1999) with similar issues of corruption (Chang, 2013; Hüwelmeier, 2013; Nyíri, 2011; Williams and Balaz, 2005). The inception of these markets relates to how, in the earlier years of CEE in transition, cheap and also a variety in goods and products were in great demand, because product scarcity inherited from the communist era plagued these countries (Vorley and Williams 2015: 2). This demand for goods was supplied by Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs offered various products that were not previously available in CEE (Marcinićzak and Van de Velde, 2008). Attractive visa requirements in Hungary played a further role. Budapest became one of the most important destinations for new migrants in CEE. Through Budapest, migrants spread to other parts of CEE, including Romania (Wundrak, 2009).

In Romania, the first Chinese migrant entrepreneurs arrived right after the fall of the dictatorial regime of Ceausescu in 1989 and the consequent opening up of the Romanian

market for trade. These entrepreneurs quickly made economic profits through trading in various products that were not previously available in Romania. As Ana, a retired self-proclaimed first-generation Chinese migrant entrepreneur in post-1989 Romania, reminisces:

People would stand in line and buy sneakers from us. The size of the shoes did not matter. They would buy them for their brother, their uncle, cousin or neighbour. We did good business.

(Ana, 60 years, retired Chinese entrepreneur)

Romania's migration and trade policy was not fully established and well regulated right after transition. The unregulated character of economies in transition was actually what drew the migrant entrepreneurs in the first place. Migrants and their products could enter Romania easily and cheaply because of corruption among border guards and customs officials (Chang, 2013; Nagy, 2011; Nyiri, 2011). After their arrival, the entrepreneurs sold their products straight out of their suitcases on public squares. In the next two decades this textile and shoe trade flourished, and the informal trading developed into a more formalized situation of an open air market for retail, and later on into a state of the art wholesale market with more than 10 buildings named *Dragonul Rosu*, or the Red Dragon market. *Dragonul Rosu* is where the ethnographic fieldwork for this article focused on.

Methods and fieldwork

This article is part of a larger research project (2013–ongoing; Hiah, forthcoming) that compares labour relations in Chinese migrant businesses and the impact of labour exploitation and human trafficking policies in the Netherlands and Romania through multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). This particular contribution is based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews, that I conducted between November 2014 and May 2016 in Bucharest, Romania. Despite its methodological limitations, ethnography in this specific project proved invaluable because it provided the opportunity to build longer-term relationships and therefore gain access to and rapport with Chinese migrants in Romania. According to local NGOs and governmental organizations that I consulted, access to the research group was challenging. This challenge was underlined by the fieldwork. The fieldwork showed that Chinese migrants experienced general mistrust in Romania and also directed this mistrust towards me on initial contact. This distrust, as explained to me by several respondents, is connected to the highly competitive environment in which Chinese migrants work and do business, their (perceived) vulnerability to corruption and discrimination by broader Romanian society; and (narratives on) past conflicts in the wholesale market that resulted among others in arson and physical violence between entrepreneurs; and, finally, narratives on (Chinese) organized crime syndicates that are (supposedly) active in the wholesale markets. As a result, migrants were very cautious about making contact with me and about sharing both personal and entrepreneurial information at first, granting that corruption experiences were relatively more easily shared than, for instance, entrepreneurial

information. Additionally, ethnography proved important to be able to get insights into the everyday experiences of Chinese migrants with small-scale bribery.

I self-identify as a second-generation Chinese migrant from Western Europe. Sharing a Chinese migration background with respondents played a helpful role in gaining access to the research group through location-targeted selection followed by chain referral methods. Respondents often emphasized sharing a similar migration background with me. To gain access and gather data, I used different strategies, including joining in volunteering work at a local religious centre frequented by Chinese migrants; enrolment in a Romanian language class for Chinese nationals; visiting respondents' businesses in the market place; 'hanging out' with respondents, their families, friends and acquaintances in their leisure time, including visiting recreational parks, the mall and (Chinese) restaurants together. The primary language used during the participant observation and interviews was Mandarin Chinese.² Several interactions and interviews were conducted in English with respondents and professionals who were well versed in English. My findings should be considered to be of an exploratory nature and limited to the specific context of this study.

Included in this article are qualitative ethnographic and semi-structured interviews with in total 50 respondents, of whom 20 were Chinese migrant entrepreneurs. Their ages range from 22 for the youngest, a daughter of a merchant family, to 60, a retired merchant. The mean age is in the early thirties. The children of entrepreneurs were in their early to mid-twenties and the entrepreneurs who kept shops for themselves were generally in their forties. Of the entrepreneurs, 12 were women and 8 were men. The majority of respondents' businesses can be characterized as micro businesses because they employed fewer than 10 employees. Many of the firms were run together with family members. The great majority of entrepreneurs conducted trade in bulk. The goods sold in these shops were diverse: jewellery, lighting, clothes, shoes, backpacks and fishing equipment. In addition to the Chinese entrepreneurs, I interviewed 4 non-Chinese entrepreneurs/shopkeepers active in the market; of these, 2 had a Romanian background and 2 a Turkish migration background. I also interviewed 13 professionals and/or students who were in contact with and possessed information about the Chinese entrepreneurs. The great majority of the entrepreneurs and professionals respondents are Chinese nationals, with only the exception of the beforementioned 4 non Chinese entrepreneurs and two professionals with, respectively, Taiwanese and US nationality. Finally, I interviewed 13 different Romanian NGOs and governmental agencies active in the domains of migration and labour (exploitation). The names of the respondents used in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

During the participant observation fieldwork, I jotted down notes that I later summarized. A voice recorder taped half of the qualitative interviews. However, it was not always possible to record because not all respondents gave their permission and some settings were unsuitable for recording. The fieldwork notes, summaries and transcribed interviews were analysed by thematic as well as open coding strategies and pattern analysis using qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. Corruption or small-scale bribery, referred to as '*xiao fei*' by respondents, was not included in the initial interview topic list, but it emerged during the fieldwork as a meaningful aspect of the everyday life of Chinese migrants in Romania. Accordingly, after realizing the importance of *xiao fei*

during the initial fieldwork stage, my research included *xiao fei* in its scope. A further definition and operationalization of *xiao fei* will be discussed in the next section.

Findings

Corruption as xiao fei (小费) and a survival strategy

Xiao fei is how Chinese migrant(s) (entrepreneurs) referred to the paying of small-scale bribes to public officials. The literal translation means small fee or expense. *Xiao fei*, in line with the findings of Lam (2015), was translated by English-speaking respondents in this study as ‘tips’ or ‘tipping’. The official noun or verb for a bribe or bribing is not commonly used. Remarkably, it is not common practice in China to tip for regular services such as eating at a restaurant or staying at a hotel (Liu, 2014: 14; Wu et al., 2015: 17–30). When abroad, Chinese migrants who do tip, often do so out of respect for the local mores. The participant observation showed that Chinese migrants in this study often gave a tip when eating at a Romanian restaurant but not when eating at a restaurant owned by an entrepreneur with a Chinese migrant background. In short, the same terminology of *xiao fei* is also applied to situations when tipping does not refer to paying bribes to public officials. The negative connotation of bribery is thus normalized by applying the terminology of *xiao fei*, which refers to a positive action where you pay an extra small fee because you appreciated the service.

In addition to normalizing corruption by using de-criminalized terminology, the respondents in this study also normalized the motivations of public officials asking for a bribe:

They are not bad people, they earn very little money, the people in this country are poor. This way they help us and we help them.

(Lu, 42 years old, Chinese migrant entrepreneur)

Thus, instead of viewing bribe demands as morally wrong, the migrants rather argued that Romania is a poor country and, accordingly, Romanian public servants get paid poorly. In the study by Madsen (2004) on the impact of corruption on undocumented migrants in Johannesburg, corruption was also widely perceived as extra income for badly paid police officers. Bribery was considered structural and ‘normal’. Among respondents in underlying study, the idea of bribery as a survival strategy of police officers is only part of the widely shared discourse of Romania as a poor and developing country. This idea of Romania as backward was related to migrants’ experiences in a diverse range of social domains, including education, healthcare and law enforcement.

With regard to law enforcement in Romania, the Chinese migrant entrepreneurs widely agreed that it is lacking, resulting in much legal uncertainty, but at the same time this lack also creates ‘flexibility’ in the application of rules and laws. This flexibility has been considered attractive, or, as a Chinese migrant white-collar worker phrased it: ‘The more backward a country is, the more profit can be made’ (Fan, 40 years). The issues with corruption are in this sense perceived as an opportunity. Alex (24 years old and a

second-generation Chinese migrant entrepreneur) explains that, although many Chinese entrepreneurs have left Romania because of Operation Crystal, only some have gone back to China; others immigrated to other countries to trade, including Latin American countries:

But the conditions [in Latin America] are not so good, they are very bad. Many Chinese go there. I have one friend, she will go there . . . to make life, struggle for life. They have lived in Romania for over 10 years, and they would like to stay here, not go back to China, but [they won't stay in Romania because] they make no profit. When they pay taxes they make a loss. If they can stay, pay taxes and make a profit, they will. The big problem is that, when they pay taxes, they make no profit. The products are too cheap. The Chinese should organize everyone at the same time and raise the price of products. But it is hard to organize this.

Furthermore, the discourse of Romania as a poor country was supported by the experiences of Chinese immigrants with giving charity to their Romanian employees or other locals they personally knew. A great majority of the respondents helped local Romanians financially by lending them money, buying food and giving them second-hand products.

In short, Chinese migrants in general, and Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in particular, have normalized the practice of corruption through tapping into widely shared discourses of corruption as a survival strategy by public officials in a context of widespread poverty. As a result, many migrant entrepreneurs view the lack of supervision as an entrepreneurial opportunity.

Corruption as a strategy for informal activities and circumventing bureaucratic red tape

The findings reveal that the motivations of entrepreneurs to pay *xiao fei* are also related to the following two strategies. The first strategy is related to diverse informal activities carried out by the entrepreneurs – which are in turn often applied to keep the prices for their products low (Williams and Balaz, 2005: 539). The second strategy is related to circumventing long bureaucratic processes for both business purposes as well as in daily life. The types of petty corruption that the respondents encountered or initiated regarding informal activities and to circumvent bureaucratic red tape varied from commission paid for illicit services and unwarranted fees for public services (Blundo and Olivier De Sardan, 2006: 72–5). Yet the boundaries between these two types of petty corruption were not clear cut, because the migrants were themselves in general unaware whether they were paying for a service that they had the free right to or they were receiving an illicit service in return. In the interview with Oana, a 40-something, migrant Chinese bookkeeper who has been employed by several different Chinese migrant businesses in the past, she spoke fiercely about the informal activities of the Chinese migrant entrepreneurs: ‘They commit all kinds of informal and illegal activities and they [the Chinese] should be happy that authorities are taking bribes.’ The informal activities that Oana refers to consisted primarily of the evasion of taxes. Alex even claims that:

Every company has problems with the registered amounts of goods. [It is] because of competition ... they evade taxes ... the amount of goods [in the administration] is not correct ... even in big companies. I don't believe that if you're an entrepreneur, it can't be that you don't evade taxes. Because when you import goods, you have to pay a lot of costs. If you were to pay the full price, it would be impossible to import these products. If they have to pay all the costs, the price of the clothes will increase, the clothes will be very expensive [and] Romanians cannot pay the price of these clothes.

(Alex, 24 years old, second-generation Chinese migrant entrepreneur, active in Dragonul Rosu)

The fieldwork underlined that the majority of entrepreneurs did not fully comply with tax regulations (for example, Giang et al., 2016). This evasion of taxes takes place through different type of activities: first, as Alex's quote above shows, through evading payment of the full VAT when importing goods from China; second, by skimming – underreporting the total generated revenue to evade taxes. At the market it seemed to be customary that with the purchase of goods a buyer is not given a receipt. It was not just entrepreneurs who benefited from conducting business without receipts. It was argued that customers preferred to buy goods without a receipt. During Operation Crystal, many entrepreneurs complained about their loyal patrons who would no longer buy from them because entrepreneurs had to report on the goods they had sold. Furthermore, evading tax obligations in the market is tempting because business is still mainly conducted in cash. Also, during visits to market stalls of entrepreneurs with whom I was acquainted, I observed them store large amounts of money bills in cross body bags.

Furthermore, the data show that other informal activities such as the informal employment of Romanian employees and the selling of goods retail are widespread. With regard to informal employment, the Chinese entrepreneurs would argue that it is the wish of their employees to be hired informally. The employees prefer to receive the whole sum of money without social security fund deductions. My interview with the Romanian Labour Inspectorate showed that the authorities are well aware of the problems concerning widespread informal labour in the market, yet they tolerate it. Local Romanians found this understandable, because the economic and employment benefits the market creates are important on a local level (but see Crush et al., 2015: 3). Although selling products retail was not allowed in the wholesale markets, it was still a common practice. I often bought items retail in the markets. During Operation Crystal, many businesses were fined for selling products retail. Consequently, I observed during one of my market visits that, after the first week of Operation Crystal, businesses would put up signs with the message that they do not sell products retail.

My findings also show that *xiao fei* is used to circumvent long bureaucratic processes for both business purposes and everyday life. Regarding business purposes, entrepreneurs used *xiao fei* to attain business permits or goods at customs in a timely fashion. Alex, a second-generation migrant entrepreneur, confided to me how he paid €500 extra to get a work permit at a local migration office to get it on time, although he complained that the process was still long and bureaucratic – he was sent back and forth to get the proper paperwork done. One of the wealthier entrepreneurs, Mrs Hong, trading in women's clothing, explained that she could not do any business at the moment because she

had trouble with getting her imported goods through customs. The customs officers expected her to pay them *xiao fei* but, because she refused, her goods were held for a month. I, too, experienced the lengthy bureaucratic process of acquiring a permit to stay in Romania for the purpose of my visit. I had visited the immigration office over five times, and every time new information was given. I finally received my permit two days before I was finishing up the fieldwork and leaving the country.

The experiences of Chinese migrants with paying *xiao fei* outside entrepreneurial activities included paying bribes to attain or extend official documents such as their driving licence. Two respondents had been able to buy their driving licence for approximately €200. One of these respondents, Meng, had already failed his driving test twice and, owing to a lack of time (he was soon returning to China), he preferred to pay off the examiner and not take his chances with taking another test. It is additionally important to note that paying *xiao fei* for official documents at governmental institutions was predominantly in relation to local administrators. Many Chinese nationals were aware of the difference between the so-called ‘headquarters’ of institutions and the local departments of institutions. For example, the work permit Alex paid *xiao fei* for was issued by a local immigration service point. Alex claimed: ‘They are scumbags there, this would not take place at the city centre [where the headquarters of the General Directorate of Immigration can be found].’

The governmental headquarters are under close scrutiny by the Romanian government, and the officials working there are supposedly better paid, so they would have less reason to demand bribes (Navot et al., 2016). *Xiao fei* was furthermore paid by Chinese migrant(s) (entrepreneurs) to gain access to services such as: receiving good and speedy healthcare; proper education for their children; sending packages at the post office; and crossing border control (which will be discussed in more detail below). With the exception of crossing border control, local Romanians were also accustomed to paying (small) bribes for these services. Maria, a highly educated Romanian, would give the post office clerk 10–15 lei more when sending packages abroad: ‘This way the packages will be more swiftly dealt with,’ she explained.

In sum, *xiao fei* is interwoven with the everyday life of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs and does not just affect their entrepreneurial activities. Two strategies to benefit from petty corruption have been widely shared: to make informal entrepreneurial activities possible and to speed up bureaucratic processes at local administrative level.

The client side of corruption: The migrant status

The practice of *xiao fei* should also be understood in the context of the migrant status of the Chinese entrepreneurs. The data suggest that migrant status contributes to the (perceived) vulnerability and consequently an increased (perceived) need to buy certainty through bribing. The first aspect of how this migrant status translates into a (perceived) vulnerability is the legal status of Chinese entrepreneurs in Romania. The second aspect is their lack of fluency in the Romanian language, along with their lack of knowledge of rules and regulations. Third, and finally, is the (perceived) discrimination against and outsider status of migrants in the broader Romanian society.

The majority of respondents in this study had a temporary work permit of one or five years to conduct business. The entrepreneurs found the procedures for attaining a work permit to be expensive and bureaucratic. When you first arrive in Romania you will be able to apply for only a one-year work permit. This means that after six months you will have to start the procedure to extend your work permit. Many rumours circulated about Chinese entrepreneurs who had a business but did not hold the necessary permits. Several irregular situations also applied to respondents in this study. Mr Lu (42 years old) held a student permit while actually being full-time self-employed. Alex's mother was deported after she was found working at the market while she had only a residence permit for family reunification. She changed her name in China to be able to come back and apply for a work permit. Corina (32 years old, Chinese student) had a Bulgarian residence permit because she could not get a Romanian one. In addition, the procedure to acquire permanent residency or Romanian citizenship is very difficult and lengthy. Although Romanian nationality was perceived to be desirable, very few entrepreneurs thought it was necessary, because (with a sojourner mentality – Siu, 1989) they argued that they would eventually return to settle 'back home' in China.

Having a Chinese passport and a temporary residence permit proved to make the migrants more vulnerable to corruption at the border. Although the majority of the Chinese migrants agreed that the border crossing has improved considerably in recent years, in present-day Romania they often encounter demands for bribes at the border. It is notable that Romanian citizens are not subjected to bribery at the border, although corruption at border crossings was explained by Romanian locals in terms of a socialist heritage. Owing to the lack of a formal migration policy, the first Chinese entrepreneurs who arrived in Romania after 1989 were able to cross the border only by bribing border guards (Wundrak, 2009). Suzy narrates an instance in which she was stopped at the border:

They asked me into a small room. I have to open the luggage they said. Afterwards they asked me: 'You brought wine or tobacco?' I said: 'No, just my clothes and some fruit from China'; after that, because I speak good Romanian, I told them I am working in a big company. They replied: 'Ok, you can go.'. Because they can see I am not so easy to control. But some small Chinese businessman, no. They cannot understand what they are asking or they think that they really took something that they shouldn't have. They think, 'Ok, that [paying a bribe] is a better way.' So I was in that situation a few times. I was upset. It is better now, but it still exists.

(Suzy, 33 years old, former employee of a Chinese corporate business)

I, too, observed bribe demands at the border crossing when I was invited for a long weekend to Bulgaria by a respondent and her family. I observed how my travel companions bargained with the officers at the border crossing. Although there was supposedly nothing wrong with their passports, the respondent and her husband still gave in to the officers' demand for a bribe. This check at the border fits within what has been described as a type of petty corruption – as toll and levy (Blundo and Olivier De Sardan, 2006: 77). The Chinese themselves were aware of their differential treatment at the border. Many respondents argued that someone with a (West) European passport would be treated

better at a border crossing. These findings show similarities with what has been described as a perceived hierarchy of passports in which Chinese nationals perceive their own passports as weak compared with the passports of West European countries (Sheridan, forthcoming). In addition, the Chinese perceived that the embassy of the PRC in Romania rarely assists Chinese migrants when they have problems in Romania, which further contributes to their feelings of vulnerability (for example, Chen 2010).

Second, as Suzy's anecdote underlines, language and social status play a further role in the client side of corruption. The data revealed that language was a considerable problem for Chinese entrepreneurs. Only a minority of the Chinese entrepreneurs in this study were fluent in Romanian. During the fieldwork, I was often asked by respondents to function as an interpreter and translate English to Mandarin Chinese. For this reason, many Chinese entrepreneurs employ Romanians as sales(wo)men. This was also an explanation of why sales(wo)men are paid well for their employment, more than workers who actually do all the heavy lifting or carrying goods from the warehouses to the shops (for example, Williams and Balaz, 2005). Second-generation Chinese migrants, although often educated in the Romanian language, are currently still very young and can provide only limited help in interpreting for their parents and community members. Consequently, Bucharest is home to a vast translation and interpreting industry to 'cater' to the needs of the Chinese migrant community. In this industry, both Romanians and fellow Chinese nationals make good money from interpreting (documents) and filling in paperwork to request residence and work permits. Although various NGOs offer these services free to (Chinese) migrants, many NGOs reported difficulties in reaching the Chinese migrant community in Romania because of language and cultural barriers. Chinese migrants were therefore unaware of the NGOs' services. In addition, migrants who did speak the local language better, and/or were well versed in English, explained that they were better able to bargain with government officials. However, speaking the language well did not always promise better outcomes, because the (perceived) outsider status of and accordingly discrimination against migrants in Romania also played an important role.

Experiences of (perceived) outsider status and discrimination were predominantly related to the domains of interpersonal social interactions, housing and law enforcement. Several respondents claimed that the inhabitants of certain neighbourhoods where many Chinese migrants lived were hostile towards Chinese migrants. Respondents who attended university felt excluded by their Romanian peers in class, who made rude remarks about Chinese migrants in Romania and subsequently did not want to interact with them. With regard to the housing market, several respondents encountered landlords who refused to rent their apartments to them. Two NGOs confirmed the discrimination in the housing market in Romania. However, they claimed that discrimination is targeted not only at Chinese migrants, but also at migrants and minorities in general. The discrimination in the housing market would partly explain why there are several apartment complexes in Bucharest in which solely Chinese migrants live. With regard to law enforcement, the Chinese migrants believed that they were treated unequally by police officers when compared with local Romanians. For instance, Kwang argues the following when he addresses the unfair treatment of his wife in earlier traffic accidents:

Romanians are less disadvantaged by corruption. Romanians know the laws better. Chinese people are often scared of the police, also in China. Next to being disadvantaged at the market, you also notice how they are disadvantaged for instance in a traffic accident. When a Romanian makes a traffic mistake, the police will first believe the Romanian and not the Chinese.

(Kwang, retired academic, in his late sixties)

The experiences with reporting theft or burglary to the police were likewise, in general, negative. Police officers often turn the Chinese away when they want to report a crime. The police would argue that they do not understand them and only an official interpreter may translate the formal proceedings. In addition and paradoxically, because of their experiences with law enforcement officials in taking bribes in the entrepreneurial context, the Chinese entrepreneurs did not think of the police as a reliable service that they could turn to when needed. They rather perceived the police as corrupt. Turning to the police for help would instead create an opportunity for the officers to demand a bribe.

To conclude, legal status, language fluency and experiences of outsider status and discrimination are contributing factors in the (perceived) vulnerability of Chinese migrants in Romania. This suggests that (Chinese) migrants are more vulnerable than local Romanians to petty corruption.

Conclusion and discussion

Based on six months of multi-sited ethnography in Romania, this article provides an in-depth understanding of everyday (anti-)corruption experiences of migrant entrepreneurs in transition economies in which corruption is systemic. Where previous works on corruption in transition economies have focused on public bureaucracies or corruption at the high governmental level, this study has looked into the everyday experiences and meanings of corruption among common people by exploring the case of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs active in the wholesale trade markets in Romania. Included in this study are a total of 50 qualitative ethnographic and semi-structured interviews, comprising 20 interviews with Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs and 30 interviews with Chinese migrant professionals, students, Romanian entrepreneurs, NGOs and governmental organizations active in the domains of migration and labour. Ethnography proved invaluable in gaining access to the research group of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs because they were distrustful and perceived themselves as vulnerable. Ethnography provided the possibility of building longer-term relationships with the entrepreneurs and participating in their everyday life. The findings of this study should be carefully interpreted because they are of an exploratory nature.

This study demonstrates that, to understand the relationship that Chinese migrants have with corruption, it is important to view Chinese immigration and entrepreneurship in the historical context of the transitioning societies of CEE in general and Romania in particular. From a societal perspective, corruption is part of the everyday functioning of the wholesale market in Romania owing to its historical development, which started from informal suitcase trading in the early years of transition and developed into what is today a state of the art market for wholesale. As a result, corruption became part of the everyday

realities of the Chinese migrant. This 'normalization of corruption' at the level of everyday interactions shows itself through the decriminalizing language used by migrants to refer to corruption as 'xiao fei', a small fee or tipping. Secondly, migrants also normalized corruption by drawing on the widely shared discourse of corruption as a survival strategy by public officials in a context of widespread poverty. In this so-called 'politics of corruption', corruption affects only weak states with rudimentary democratic structures and corruption is identified as one of the main causes of poverty and underdevelopment. This discourse is not only widely shared by respondents in this study but also represented by various influential international reports on corruption (Anders and Nuijten, 2007: 8).

Although petty corruption is part of everyday life for Chinese migrants in Romania, the practices of petty corruption are influenced by an unequal distribution of power in society. The findings of this study showcase three factors that are relevant when considering the client side of corruption from a migrant perspective. First, migrants are dealing with administrative procedures related to the temporary character of their permission to stay, procedures that create opportunities for public officials for petty corruption. Besides, there is much on the line when corruption concerns fundamental aspects of living, such as the right to stay and work. Second, migrants are more susceptible to discrimination by public officials, owing to their (self-perceived) outsider status in the wider Romanian society, which makes them less well off in a situation of corruption. Third, language fluency and knowledge of local rules and laws, which in part might coincide with a migrant background, play a further role on the client side of corruption. Those who speak the local language and know their rights, the rules and the appropriate procedures are not easily duped by public officials. Intersectionality with class, as underlined by previous research (for example, Jancsics, 2013), might play a further role. Petty entrepreneurs often did not speak the local language or English and therefore had more difficulty in rejecting a demanded toll or levy. Migrant white-collar workers who could also speak English were more easily able to refuse to pay a bribe. In line with these findings, the idea of corruption as citizenship to an extent holds, as migrants on the client side of corruption encounter more barriers and do not always benefit from corruption as local Romanians do.

Furthermore, this study adds to the understanding of the impact of anti-corruption measures in a society in which corruption is systemic. This study finds that anti-corruption measures are perceived as illegitimate by migrant entrepreneurs because the measures break with the status quo. In addition, it is not only the anti-corruption measures themselves that are perceived to be unfair, but also the way the measures are carried out in practice. The measures do not acknowledge the crucial role public officials played in establishing practices of *xiao fei* and informality in the previous three decades. On the contrary, the Chinese migrant entrepreneurs and therefore popular local Romanian discourse perceive that businesses in the wholesale trade are badly treated and they argue that, in the meantime, few of the public officials guilty of corruption have been fired or reprimanded. This suggests that the perceived fairness of corruption measures depends on (visibly) addressing the problem from both sides, not just the clients paying bribes, but also the public officials guilty accepting bribes.

From a European Union perspective, corruption in CEE and in Romania in particular is considered a serious and political problem, harming the EU as a whole by lowering

investment levels, impeding the fair operation of the internal market and reducing public finances. In the particular case of Romania, corruption originally formed a barrier to EU accession, resulting in a postponement of membership status from 2004 to 2007 for Romania. Likewise, Romania's membership of the Schengen Area is still under way because of concerns about deficiencies in the areas of rule of law and anti-corruption. This study suggests that the fears about porous Romanian borders are still relevant today. Chinese migrants have faced extortion or have benefited from paying tolls and levies when crossing borders and importing goods at customs. At the same time, these findings underline that corruption at the border takes place less often than before. Still, it is hard to say whether or not anti-corruption efforts such as Operation Crystal have been effective and are signalling a different era, especially considering that the decade of progress achieved in the anti-corruption fight in Romania is threatened to be overturned by plans for legislative changes introduced by the new government elected in 2016. The legislative changes would make it harder to prosecute high-level corruption and endanger judicial independence, developments that certainly do not seem to suggest moving forward in the fight against any type of corruption.

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Notes

1. ANAF (Agentia Nationala de Administrare Fiscala – National Agency for Fiscal Administration) is the fiscal anti-fraud department of the Romanian tax authority.
2. Mandarin is the lingua franca of China.

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