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'Just look at those shabby trains in Lisbon': post-arrival disappointment amongst Chinese migrants in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the disappointment experienced by affluent Chinese migrants in Portugal, revealing the discrepancy between their premigration expectations and post-arrival realities and how they overcome this mismatch through recalibration practices. Despite their financial advantage, Chinese migrants often express disappointment and discontent with their migration project, mostly stemming from frustrations with public service inefficiencies, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of cultural stimulation compared to their experiences in China or other global cities. Drawing on 27 in-depth interviews with Golden Visa, D7 passive income visa, work and student mobility migrants, this paper shows how discontent often manifests as boredom in their daily lives in Portugal, as well as a byproduct of privilege and mediated expectations. However, this study indicates that feelings of disappointment upon arrival are not necessarily negative or incapacitating but instead can prompt a proactive reassessment of aspirations and result in adjustment practices such as revision of expectations and priorities, financial recalibration or onward migration.

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Introduction

Chinese migration to Portugal has evolved over the past decades, from 244 in 1980 to a peak of 27,879 in 2023, according to the latest data from the Agency for Integration, Migration, and Asylum (AIMA). Early Chinese migration to Portugal mainly consisted of irregular and unskilled migrants from Zhejiang seeking entrepreneurial opportunities in Western Europe, particularly in catering, import/export businesses, and company creation (Li and Wong 2018; Rodrigues and Gaspar 2021).

Following Portugal's financial crisis (2008–2012), the government introduced investment policies to attract wealthy individuals, with a strong focus on the real estate sector (Rodrigues and Gaspar 2021). As a result, from 2012 onward, labour migrants were gradually replaced by privileged groups, including investors, lifestyle migrants, and highly skilled professionals. Programs such as the Golden Visa, D7 passive income

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visa, and student mobility visas facilitated this shift, attracting Chinese migrants with different motivations than previous generations. Portugal emerged as a desirable destination for Chinese elites seeking a better lifestyle, education, and improved environmental conditions (Carvalho et al. 2021; Gaspar and Ampudia de Haro 2020; Gaspar, Cojocaru, and Wang 2024). Favourable perceptions of Portugal, largely shaped by intermediaries and social networks, further reinforced its status as a top lifestyle destination (Gaspar and Ampudia de Haro 2020).

The Golden Visa scheme, which provided residency in exchange for a €500,000 investment (mostly in real estate until October 2023), was a key driver of this trend. It also offered mobility within the Schengen zone, a pathway to citizenship, and family reunification benefits. Chinese nationals accounted for 50% of all permits issued by 2023 (12,037 visas), with approximately 90% of their investments directed toward real estate purchases (Amante and Rodrigues 2021; Gaspar and Ampudia de Haro 2020; Gaspar, Cojocaru, and Wang 2024).

Another significant migration channel, the D7 Visa, introduced in 2007, grants residency to non-EU citizens with stable passive income, such as retirees or investors, requiring a minimum monthly income of €870 (Gaspar, Cojocaru, and Wang 2024). Over time, delays in Golden Visa processing led some Chinese applicants to opt for the D7 visa as a faster and more affordable alternative.

In addition to these ‘privileged’ migration pathways, starting with 2010s, Portuguese higher education institutions saw a rise in Chinese student enrolments driven by international agreements between Chinese and Portuguese universities. Macau, a former Portuguese colony, played a strategic role in facilitating Portuguese language programmes, while academic partnerships and scientific cooperation between both countries expanded (Rodrigues and Gaspar 2021).

We conceptualise these concurrent mobility channels as a distinct category of privileged migration, encompassing highly skilled professionals, lifestyle migrants, and investment migrants from China whose motivations for migration often overlap, including aspirations for a better quality of life, cleaner air, a milder climate, access to healthcare and education, greater travel freedom, and investment opportunities. These individuals enter Portugal through various relatively preferential visa pathways based on their financial resources, investment capacity, or specialised skills.

However, despite their economic advantage, as this study will show, Chinese migrants often grapple with unmet expectations, such as frustrations with perceived inefficiencies in public services and underwhelming infrastructure, a lack of cultural stimulation compared to their lives in China or other global cities, and relative difficulty integrating into local communities. For some, these disappointments prompt regret and chronic dissatisfaction about their decision to relocate, while for others, they catalyse adaptive practices and resilience.

Based on 27 interviews with relatively privileged Chinese migrants in Portugal—holding Golden Visas, D7 passive-income visas, or student visas—this article examines their experiences of disappointment and the strategies they employ to recalibrate their aspirations and cope with these emotions. Using the concept of disappointment through a temporal lens, we look at how migrants cope with unmet expectations. Specifically, we study how migrants’ pre-arrival aspirations weigh up to their post-arrival experiences and how they manage disappointment when expectations are unfulfilled.

Furthermore, we examine how migrants emotionally navigate between the gap between their initial expectations and the realities they encounter in Portugal through specific adaptation strategies they use to recalibrate their experiences.

Our analysis is based on several key assumptions. First, migration is driven by imagination and aspirations (Appadurai 1996; Thompson 2017), making it a decision that inherently involves risk and uncertainty (Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey, and Mazzilli 2023; Kindler 2012) as well as the potential for disappointment (Mazzilli, Leon-Himmels-tine, and Hagen-Zanker 2024; Della Puppa and King 2019; Tucket 2016). In the case of Portugal, its image as a ‘lifestyle paradise’ is often shaped by mid-level actors (such as migration intermediaries, social networks, media) who enhance and promote the country as a desirable destination. These imaginaries foster, in turn, specific expectations about life in Portugal, which may be overly optimistic or incomplete. Upon arrival, when the lived reality does not align with pre-arrival visions, a perceived discrepancy between *what is* and *what ought to be* (Greenberg and Muir 2022) arises, often leading to feelings of disappointment.

Our findings indicate that the frustrations experienced by Chinese migrants upon arrival stemmed from a comparative assessment of their previous lives in China, where they were accustomed to infrastructural sophistication and modern conveniences. While prior research has largely focused on migration from less-developed to more-developed countries, this study reveals a different mobility pattern—one in which migrants move from a context of perceived higher convenience to a setting that requires adjustments both in terms of daily conveniences and overall expectations.

By discussing the recalibration strategies employed by migrants, such as revision of expectations, priorities, financial needs or even onward migration, this article highlights the active way that some privileged migrants respond to disappointment and unmet expectations. These adaptive practices not only reveal how migrants negotiate the tension between aspirations and realities but also contribute to broader discussions on the affective and temporal dimensions of migration and the dynamic processes through which they reconstruct their sense of purpose and belonging. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions about migration, privilege, and the ‘good life’ imaginaries. It challenges narratives of privileged migration as purely aspirational or successful, offering a more complex understanding of how migrants negotiate their aspirations and unmet expectations.

This article is divided into the following parts. It first sets out to describe the theoretical framework which draws from the literature on mobility aspirations and imaginaries (Carling and Collins 2018; Czaika and Vothknecht 2014; Salazar 2011; Thompson 2017), dwells on over-optimistic migration expectations (McKenzie, Gibson, and Stillman 2013) which can drive the gap between anticipated and actual experiences (Alabi 2024; Covington-Ward 2017; Genoni and Ruedin 2024;) and regret in migration decision-making (Mazzilli, Leon-Himmels-tine, and Hagen-Zanker 2024). By employing a temporal approach to aspirations, with the view that aspirations are not static, we examine how they evolve and may lead to disappointment if they do not align with reality (Wang and Collins 2020). The following section explains the qualitative methodology used and the data collection tools. The results section presents the findings of the interviews on how disappointment manifests as boredom and stagnant temporalities, as well as the recalibration strategies used by the migrants. The article concludes with final remarks.

Theoretical framework

The emotional landscape of migration is inherently fraught with expectations, vulnerabilities, and the possibility of regret, discontent or disappointment. Psychological theories surrounding disappointment emphasise the role of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) and the gap between anticipated and actual experiences. Migrants, often driven by idealised notions of opportunity, frequently encounter a reality that diverges from their aspirations. The expectancy theory posits that individuals assess the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes based on prior information and personal motivations (Wigfield and Eccles 2000) and a misalignment between expectations and lived experiences can lead to feelings of regret, frustration, and disenchantment, which are particularly relevant in migration discourse.

In anthropology, disappointment has been analysed as the embodied and affective ways that people inhabit not fulfilled expectations, desires, and demands. More than a mere individual emotional response, disappointment has a social life of its own, it is always relational and situated as it is often the result of comparison between *what is* and *what ought to be* (Greenberg and Muir 2022).

Recognising regret as a largely overlooked dimension in migration studies, Mazzilli, Leon-Himmelstine, and Hagen-Zanker (2024) identified several factors contributing to this gap. Firstly, the avoidance of giving negative accounts of migration is due to the normative expectation that migration is always a success story. Secondly, acting upon regret such as returning means losing all the emotional and material investment into migration and thirdly, because migrants' expressions of regret are stigmatised and labelled not only as 'migration failure', but also as an ungrateful attitude towards the country of destination.

Studies investigating the discrepancies between migrants' expectations prior to migration and their lived realities post-migration (Genoni and Ruedin 2024) have primarily focused on aspiring migrants from Africa in the US and the UK (Alabi 2024; Covington-Ward 2017; Imoagene 2017), Southeast Asia (Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey 2004), Bulgarians in the UK (Manolova 2019), Russians in Finland (Tuuli, Leinonen, and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013), and the Caribbeans in the US (Diamond 2015). These studies highlight how migrants' pre-migration imaginaries shape their post-arrival adaptation and well-being. For instance, Alabi (2024), Covington-Ward (2017) and Imoagene (2017) detail the disillusionment of African migrants in the US and UK, who face job insecurity, cultural barriers, and family pressures despite anticipating financial stability and social mobility. In the same vein, Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey (2004) examined South Asian parents in the US, revealing how pre-immigration beliefs about success create stress and intergenerational tensions. Similarly, Tuuli, Leinonen, and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2013) showed in a longitudinal study on Russian diaspora in Finland how social and economic expectations influence post-migration well-being, emphasising the role of social relationships.

In general, studies highlighted especially how structural barriers contribute to unmet expectations and migration disappointment. Through a biographical and processual approach, Thomas (2024) examines how various challenges, such as disappointment, language barriers, cultural alienation, racial and ethnic discrimination, intersectional gender issues, limited opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility, and restrictive

immigration policies—interact to influence aspiring Chinese immigrants’ decisions to become ‘ex-immigrants,’ and return to China. Genoni and Ruedin (2024) focus on highly educated migrants, emphasising that elevated aspirations amplify the negative impact of unmet expectations. They argue that highly educated migrants are more likely to face unsatisfied migration expectations and exhibit stronger negative reactions when their aspirations remain unfulfilled. Similarly, Della Puppa and King (2019) reveal how onward migration, often driven by hopes for a better life, can lead to disillusionment when economic and living conditions fail to improve. Based on the experiences of Italian Bangladeshis who migrated from Italy to London, the authors (2019) reveal that their onward migration was marked by disillusionment due to insecure, low-paying jobs, high living costs, loss of time autonomy, and worsened housing conditions. What is more, Tucket (2016) examines migrants in Italy who experience disappointment and failure due to racialised discrimination and limited onward mobility. She links this sense of failure to an imagined migration trajectory, where leaving Italy is seen as the only path to success. Those who stayed and did not achieve ‘flexible citizenship’ reported a sense of failure.

This gap is heightened especially when aspiring migrants frequently harbour over-optimistic expectations regarding income and living conditions in their destination countries, which can lead to disillusionment upon arrival (McKenzie, Gibson, and Stillman 2013). Carling and Collins (2018) emphasise that migration aspirations are often socially constructed, influenced by the successes and failures of peers. This emulative behaviour can lead to heightened expectations, and when these aspirations are not realised, disappointment can ensue.

Besides, studies have shown that migrants often harbour exaggerated views of life in the West, leading to a discrepancy between pre-migration expectations and post-migration realities (Alabi 2024; Covington-Ward 2017; Diamond 2015). Manolova (2019) through the concept of the ‘imaginary West’ examines the idealised perceptions of Western Europe among aspiring Bulgarian migrants who tend to envision it as a place of normalcy, dignity, and existential security. The author argued that migrants prove resilient in the face of initial hardship and precarity due to an idealised vision of achieving a (normal) life in the West. This pursuit of an ordinary, stable life echoes the narratives of Polish migrants in the UK, who similarly emphasised that they migrated not for a better life, but for a *normal* life, symbolised by the simple notion of ‘bread with butter’ (Galasińska and Kozłowska 2009; Morawska 1985).

While extensive research has explored the expectation-reality gap among economically motivated migrants, fewer studies have examined the role of privilege in migration-related disillusionment. Chinese migrants who can afford a golden visa or a passive income visa (D7) in Portugal are far from the symbolic necessity of mere ‘bread and butter’, but it does not mean they are exempt from grappling with various discontents in their migration experience. Affluent migrants from global cities like Shanghai or Beijing often move in pursuit of lifestyle aspirations (e.g. seeking better air quality or schools for children) rather than economic security (Beck and Gaspar 2024). However, they may experience disappointment when the new country is underwhelming in terms of the imagined level of development and quality of life. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, urban disparities and cultural alienation challenge their assumptions and expectations

about West life revealing how privilege and pre-migration imaginaries shape adaptation and satisfaction.

Also, it should be added that social networks play a crucial role in shaping these expectations. Especially, the information shared on social media platforms may often disseminate idealised images of life in Europe, which may not accurately reflect the complexities and challenges of migration (Sanfilippo and Weiner 2016; Thunø and Li 2020).

Not least, one should consider the temporal dimensions of migration aspirations when understanding disappointment. Migration scholars have emphasised recently that migration aspirations are not static but evolve over time, influenced by personal experiences and changing circumstances (Wang and Collins 2020). This temporal optic suggests that initial aspirations may become sources of disappointment if the realities of migration do not align with the expectations formed during earlier stages of life. Czaika and Vothknecht (2014) further explore this interaction, positing that aspirations can be both a cause and a consequence of migration experiences, which complicates the emotional responses associated with unfulfilled migration goals. Czaika's study points out that potential migrants often have reference-dependent expectations shaped by the economic conditions in their home countries. However, when migration does not lead to the fulfilment of better life aspirations, it can bring about acute disappointment, even more exacerbated by the initial optimism surrounding the migration decision (Czaika 2014). Similarly, Schiele (2020) shows that life satisfaction deeply affects migration decisions and having a clear understanding of the outcomes of their actions can improve migrants' satisfaction with their experiences.

Underexplored so far, regret and disappointment should be normalised as part of migration decision-making, as Mazzilli, Leon-Himmelstine, and Hagen-Zanker (2024) have noted, because migration is not a straightforward journey. Some individuals may regret migrating but still choose to stay in the destination country, while others may feel unhappy with certain aspects of their migration experience but remain committed to their decision to migrate and continue living there. Others, despite feeling trapped in an unsatisfying migratory status, extend it under the guise of temporariness, which eventually evolves into a condition of *de facto* 'permanent temporariness' (Cojocaru, 2021).

In this study, we focus on intermediary feelings of disappointment, before deep regret and a sense of failure take over the migration project. We elicit feelings of discontent, frustration, disillusion, or disenchantment that migrants may experience upon arrival which are not necessarily negative emotions, incapacitating or disempowering the individual, but may be in fact proactive feelings which incite action and recalibration.

Methods

The data comprises 27 semi-structured interviews (conducted between November 2023 and February 2024). Respondents were recruited via purposive sampling on Chinese social media (Little Red Book and WeChat) and snowball sampling. The sample includes highly qualified Chinese migrants in Portugal with diverse visa types: Golden Visa, D7 (retirement/passive income), student, and professional visas. Some graduates employed on work contracts still held student visas. The participants (10 men and 17 women) were aged 24–56 (mean: 35), all born in China. One held U.S. nationality, four Portuguese

(including two Macao passports), two were undergoing naturalisation, and two intended to acquire Portuguese citizenship. All participants hold bachelor's degrees; five were pursuing doctorates, one was retired, four relying on passive income (three were previously employed at major companies in China), six entrepreneurs, and eleven professionals. Most originated from first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.

Seven interviews were conducted in person (at coffee shops or offices), while the rest were conducted via Zoom. Interviews were conducted in Chinese (the native language of the third author) and lasted between half and two-and-a-half hours, with an average duration of one hour. Recordings were transcribed and translated from Chinese into English for analysis and interpretation. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' university and relevant ethical commission.

Findings

Pre-arrival imaginaries: Portugal as a desirable destination

The pre-arrival imaginaries of Portugal as a 'desirable destination' for Chinese migrants are predominantly shaped by meso-level actors (migration intermediaries, lawyers, real estate brokers, among others) and spread through various channels such as migration agencies, real estate firms, social media, and even through networks of family and friends who have already migrated. As found previously (Beck and Gaspar 2024), Portugal's appeal is mainly motivated by its environmental quality, education, healthcare, and overall lifestyle. These arguments are framed as part of the European lifestyle depicted as more balanced, focusing on leisure, work-life balance, and a slower pace, which is attractive to Chinese families and retirees. Not least, visa programmes like the Golden Visa and D7 are advertised as relatively straightforward pathways to residency and, eventually, citizenship, including the benefit of freedom of movement within the EU (Gaspar and Ampudia de Haro 2020). Other key pull factors for Chinese aspiring migrants include better education opportunities for children, access to high-quality healthcare, and a generally slower, more relaxed lifestyle compared to the fast-paced environments of major Chinese cities (Beck and Gaspar 2024).

Post-arrival realities

As referenced above, disappointment in migration often emerges when expectations, such as an improved lifestyle, career opportunities, or personal fulfilment, are not achieved (Alabi 2024; Covington-Ward 2017; Genoni and Ruedin 2024; Mazzilli, Leon-Himmelstine, and Hagen-Zanker 2024). For Chinese migrants, this may be shaped by their pre-migration imaginaries of Portugal as both a land of tranquillity and cosmopolitan vibrancy. Overall, Chinese migrants express a mild level of satisfaction with Portugal's lifestyle benefits, yet they seem underwhelmed and under-stimulated. Considering the typically implicit expression style of Chinese speakers, who avoid strong terms like 'utter disappointment,' we classified attitudes based on the overall tone of the interviews. Three participants exhibited a strongly negative attitude and clear dissatisfaction, and six participants expressed a relatively positive attitude but also voiced specific concerns. The remaining 18 participants were generally neutral (with four slightly negative), yet all

conveyed varying degrees of disappointment, which influenced their overall satisfaction with life in Portugal.

In addition, as noted earlier, the participants in this study arrived in Portugal through one of three pathways: the Golden Visa, the D7 visa, or international student mobility. These visa schemes are promoted as relatively straightforward routes to obtaining residency and even citizenship after five years in the country. However, while the legislation may look promising on paper, actual implementation deficiencies may cause frustration, particularly due to the slowness and entropy of the administrative procedures.

Some accounts revealed a sense of disappointment related to underwhelming urban infrastructure, scenic landscape and overall convenience. As with the Bulgarian or Polish migrants harbouring idealised visions of life and normalcy in the West (Galasińska and Kozłowska 2009; Manolova 2019), the overly optimistic or high expectations about Portugal may stem from the long-standing association in the Chinese cultural imaginary of Europe with a high standard of living and advanced development, an image that often falls short in Portugal's case. Other sources of discontent include higher-than-expected living costs, excessive bureaucracy, and slow public services. Challenges such as finding housing and accessing social services often prove more complex and time-consuming than anticipated. Additionally, administrative, practical, and logistical issues—particularly the inefficiency of immigration government agencies like AIMA (Portugal's Agency for Integration, Migration, and Asylum) —add to these frustrations.

A recurring theme of disappointment in the narratives was related to infrastructure, as highlighted by Liangzhi, a top professional in his 50s, who works for a Chinese company and moved to Portugal on a D7 (passive income) visa. *'The first thing many feel when one arrives here is, my God, this place is not even as good as our third-tier cities. Many of our third-tier cities also have high-speed trains. Just look at the shabby trains in Lisbon ...'*

Public infrastructure like trains often serves as a proxy for growth, efficiency and progress, values deeply ingrained in the Chinese imaginary of progress but appear lacking in Portugal. For Liangzhi, trains constitute symbols of progress and convenience, and, in this sense, his disappointment is not limited only to a perceived failure of public services but could indicate a broader frustration with the country's state of affairs. High-speed trains, which are fast and efficient, may symbolise dynamism and excitement, while 'shabby trains' evoke slowness and a sense of stagnant temporality.

On top of the underwhelming infrastructure, Liangzhi is bothered by his disrupted family plans. His wife and son remained in China while waiting for the family reunification process, which has taken longer than anticipated. As a result, Liangzhi is uncertain whether it makes sense for his family to join him, especially since his son will soon turn 18. His account reflects a common narrative among some migrants who relocate with high hopes, only to face unforeseen structural difficulties and underwhelming realities at the destination country.

Qiang, a man in his early thirties, completed his graduate studies in Portugal. Due to the pandemic, he was stranded in Portugal, and after his internship became a full-time job, he decided to stay. His first impressions of Portugal were not particularly enthusiastic: *And then there's this little place, and there's a university, and it's kind of boring. But the environment is good, the air is good, the weather is good. Yes, it's nice but boring.* Despite acknowledging the positive aspects such as good air quality, weather, and environment,

these factors seemed insufficient to satisfy a young professional's (such as Qiang) quest for stimulation and vibrancy.

A perceived lack of recreational options in Portugal was a topic that was featured several times in participants' accounts. Yumei, a Golden Visa mother-of-one in her fifties, lives in Portugal with her husband and daughter. Her sense of dissatisfaction is related to the perceived lack of leisure options, compared to China, where high-density urban planning often integrates various forms of entertainment readily accessible in different parts of the country. *'But nothing in this place is like anything in China (...) Nothing. Well, because if you want to skate, you have to go to the ice factory in Viseu. And if you want to bowl, you have to go to that Aveiro place. If you want to look at the snow or go to Estrela Mountain, you'll have to see if it falls this year. So, boring, very boring. It's just the sea ...'*

Yong, a Chinese professional in his thirties who came to Portugal through a D7 visa, is quite direct when declaring, *'let's just say, I wouldn't live in this country if it weren't for an EU identity. I don't think there is anything special about Portugal.'* His lack of emotional attachment denotes an instrumental approach to living in Portugal for the sake of gaining an EU residence.

Discontent as boredom and privilege

Chinese migrants often articulate their disappointment in terms of boredom. More specifically, interviewees express boredom as a form of overall dissatisfaction and a perceived lack of stimulation, which is particularly tied to the slow pace of life and isolation or recreational diversity. For many of them, life in Portugal may seem too 'calm' or 'boring' and unengaging compared to the bustling urban lifestyle and material comfort they left behind in China. In the quintessential statement of Yumei, a Chinese woman in her 50s on a Golden Visa, Portugal has *'good mountains and good rivers, but life is so boring'*.

Including *privilege* in the intersectional equation adds complexity to the analysis. Emotional and existential concerns—such as boredom—may seem more pronounced in the case of skilled migrants who, in principle, have the resources to overcome practical migration barriers (e.g. legal status, financial instability). Thus, their privileged background and prior life of convenience shape particularly high expectations of Portugal and the unexpected gap between their imagined migration experience and reality creates room for disappointment.

Minmin, a Chinese woman in her thirties, who is on a work visa, links her feelings of boredom in Portugal to daily life inconveniences (such as fast-food delivery or accessible logistics), which contrasts with the efficiency and low-cost services in China. In Portugal, high labour costs make these conveniences less affordable or available, in contrast with what she considers normal in China. Her privilege of normalised convenience fosters a strong expectation of what *ought to be* in stark contrast with *what is* (Greenberg and Muir 2022). The discrepancy between these two disrupts her sense of everyday routine which she links to feelings of boredom and stagnation. In addition to invoking that life in Portugal is 'too boring', she emphasised that *'there are many things that need to be done by yourself, unlike domestic takeout and logistics, which are very convenient. The labour costs in Portugal are very high.'*

Many of these quotes express disappointment and boredom as an outcome of a comparative judgement of Portugal to China, often in terms of infrastructure, convenience, and entertainment options. For some, like Yong, boredom arises from viewing Portugal as a means to an end (e.g. EU citizenship) rather than as a fulfilling place to live (instrumental relationship with the place). Furthermore, the absence of familiar cultural or social stimuli contributes to feelings of alienation and monotony. For Minmin and Liangzhi and other interviewees, daily frustrations related to the inefficiencies and inconveniences of daily life in Portugal trigger disengagement and boredom. Despite Portugal's natural assets of clean air and pleasant weather, the lack of recreational options, convenient services, and infrastructure creates a persistent disenchantment with the country. All in all, these expressions of discontent as boredom reveal a more profound dissatisfaction which goes beyond frustrations caused by a lack of activities and entertainment. This discontent points to a recurring theme in migration narratives: the clash between romanticised visions of a destination (Appadurai 1996; Thompson 2017) and the complex, often less glamorous, realities encountered upon arrival (Mazzilli, Leon-Himmelstine, and Hagen-Zanker 2024).

Ideal vs. real temporalities of the 'good life'

The migration experience often involves a reorientation of time, a temporal adaptation to the new rhythms and accommodation of new routines (Cwerner 2001). Heidegger (1927 [2008]) views boredom as an experience that forces individuals to confront time and meaninglessness. The slower pace of life in Portugal, especially in rural areas, contrasts with the fast-paced urban lifestyles many migrants experienced in China. This temporal shift may contribute to feelings of stagnation or purposelessness and might compel bored migrants to re-evaluate their decision to migrate.

Even though aspiring migrants are initially drawn to Portugal for its scenic landscapes, and slower pace of life, over time, Chinese migrants coming from overstimulating and bustling urban centres in China may come to experience this tranquillity as boredom. Compared to megacities like Beijing or Shanghai, even urban centres like Lisbon or Porto are smaller, quieter, and less dynamic.

Additionally, business-oriented migrants like Liangzhi, a D7 professional, might find that the professional or entrepreneurial opportunities are less lucrative than expected. Similarly, highly skilled Chinese such as Yumei, the Golden Visa entrepreneur and mother, struggles to build networks with locals. She feels that social life in Portugal is centred around tight-knit local communities that are difficult to access, leading to a perceived sense of social exclusion. Overall, Chinese migrants often invoke feelings of alienation, whether due to language barriers, cultural differences, or subtle exclusionary practices in social or professional spaces.

In some cases, disappointment with the host country extends to disappointment related to migration as a whole and with the state of affairs in the world, particularly the geopolitical order and global labour market. Baoyong's dissatisfaction goes as far as questioning the rationality of migration entirely, the value of relocation across borders, and whether the social and emotional costs of migration are worth the economic gains. Feeling that migration has not delivered the opportunities or improved quality of life he had hoped for, he questions the value of uprooting their lives in the first place.

'Let's be fair and say that if a Chinese [worker] has a boss, then it is the same as in China: 996 (9 am to 9 pm, six days a week) and 007 (24 hours a day, seven days a week). What is the difference? [The only thing that changes] is the exchange rate. What difference does it make if you're in Lisbon or Berlin? No difference. The outside world has nothing to do with you, right? If you can find a good job in China, then why do people come here, to this place, [to a place that is] unfamiliar [to them]? The whole situation, how should I put it, gives me the feeling that it is a mess, the whole of Europe.'

Managing disappointment: recalibration

As outlined above, the feelings of frustration or disappointment the participants experienced upon arrival, while significant, were not overwhelming to the point of incapacitating their actions, as would be the case of migrants who feel trapped between legal, economic, and emotional constraints, in a limbo of unfulfilled expectations, unable to either return or move forward (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015). Instead, this initial discontent catalysed adaptation and adjustment of expectations (Carling and Collins 2018) in their daily lives and long-term plans.

After balancing the pros and cons, Chinese migrants resorted to certain adaptive practices such as revising expectations and plans (1), revising financial arrangements (2), revising priorities (3), as well as revising intended duration of stay (4), considering onward migration or even return to China.

Revision of expectations and plans

Some migrants were compelled to revise their expectations and plans due to unexpected difficulties related to daily practical matters or immigration regime bureaucracy. In some cases, the time and effort required for setting up a business, bringing their children to study in Portugal, or family reunification proved to be longer and more complex than anticipated, causing some interviewees to adjust their timelines for long-term goals and, to some extent, temper expectations.

Mengli, a GV woman in her 40s, lives with her daughter in Portugal while her husband works in China. Mengli described an entirely structured initial family migration plan. The intention was sequential migration: she and the children would establish themselves in Portugal, and her husband would follow after putting aside enough savings. *'Before we emigrated, we also had plans, that is, uh, I brought the children here first, and then (...) [the husband] would come over here (...) after working hard for a few years, (...) he could also find suitable job opportunities here. However, from the looks of it now, that is, maybe it won't be like that.'*

This reflects a pre-migration imaginary of a good (future) life, dependent on successful family reunification and labour market integration. However, due to structural barriers (e.g. lack of job opportunities for her husband in Portugal) and personal challenges (e.g. family separation), the family had to recalibrate their plans. The fact that Mengli acknowledged that the original plan was no longer feasible and accepted it might not materialise demonstrates an adaptive strategy to preserve stability for herself and her children in Portugal.

Similarly, Liangzhi initially expected a quick family reunification process to ensure his son continued his studies in Portugal. *'I have been in Portugal for two years, and I have been waiting for my family reunion. My child was 15 years old when I came here. Now two years have passed, he is already more than 17 years old, which completely disrupted my original plan.'* The two-year delay in family reunification, during which his son turned 17, made his original plan for him to graduate from a Portuguese high school no longer feasible. These new circumstances prompted Liangzhi to admit that *'Now I am not sure whether the child will come or not'*. His recalibrated yet ambiguous position suggests that he is actively rethinking his family's trajectory while still pursuing what is feasible in his migration project. Disruption of the original plan gives way to a more uncertain and fragmented vision of the future.

Mengli and Liangzhi's accounts represent examples of recalibration and adjusting practices due to changing circumstances. While their original plans included clear steps (family reunification and finding a job/school enrolment), unforeseen delays (temporal disruptions), compelled them to modify their timelines and expectations, shifting their planning from certainty and predictability to ambivalence but also openness to alternative outcomes. The tendency to maintain flexibility and keep one's options open aligns with the concept of 'intentional unpredictability' or 'deliberate indeterminacy,' as identified by McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni (2017) in their study of post-Enlargement Polish migrants in the UK. Due to external factors which they cannot control (e.g. job market limitations, bureaucratic delays), some migrants choose to focus on what is attainable in their power.

Revising financial arrangements

Lulu, a D7 visa holder in her mid-30s, framed her choice to stay in Portugal as one driven by practical constraints rather than aspirations, suggesting an unwillingness to expend energy on major life changes. *'When you reach middle age, you can't move, um, because it's a bit too strenuous for me to carry my mother and all the daily necessities, so I don't want to bother. I just want to retire here quietly. If I had been ten years earlier, I would share it with anyone and say, I suggest you all choose an English-speaking country and not come to Portugal. Well, because I feel that learning a minor language is too tiring.'*

Lulu's desire to retire in Portugal 'quietly' suggests a shift away from economically driven migration toward a strategy of stability and cost-saving in later life. More crucially, her reasoning points to life-stage dependency as she sees migration as more feasible and beneficial in earlier life stages when individuals have more adaptability and fewer responsibilities (e.g. caregiving for her mother). In terms of cost-benefit analysis, she criticises Portugal's 'minor language', implying that its economic benefits do not justify the effort required to integrate linguistically.

Higher-than-expected living costs in Lisbon can push migrants to re-evaluate their residency intentions. Fangfei, a Chinese PhD student in Portugal in her 30s, emphasises financial mobility and flexibility as her primary adjustment strategy, reflecting a willingness to relocate based on cost-benefit analyses of living expenses. *'Another reason is that I think the rent in Portugal, especially in Lisbon, is very high. According to my current situation, I can live anywhere. So, I don't think it's necessary to stay in Portugal.'*

Unlike Lulu, Fangfei does not see herself constrained by age or life stage factors, which allows her to consider lower-cost options elsewhere. Fangfei stating that she ‘can live anywhere’ points to a global outlook in which younger migrants view mobility as part of a lifestyle, marked by economic pragmatism and career plans, rather than emotional ties or family duties.

These cases illustrate the diverse strategies migrants employ to adjust financially in response to life goals, constraints, and economic limitations. Lulu’s account suggests that financial strategies and migration decisions evolve with age, caregiving responsibilities, and not least physical capacity. On the other hand, young mobile citizens like Fangfei prioritise affordability and economic opportunity over long-term integration.

Revision of priorities

Some accounts indicated a revision of priorities and trade-offs in the quality-of-life goals. A reshuffle of priorities implied that some of them started to place more value on education, accessible and trustworthy healthcare or clean air compared to fast trains and diversified delivery services. As shown in previous research, a hypercompetitive school environment in China is traded for a more friendly, relaxed educational approach in Portugal (Beck and Gaspar 2024). New aspirations come to the front, such as prioritising children’s well-being or family relationships over traditional markers of success (e.g. wealth accumulation).

For instance, Shuxian, a GV professional in her 40s who lives with her husband and two children in Portugal, framed migration as a sacrificial investment in her children’s education. She made the deliberate choice to focus more on their children’s education opportunities rather than achieving personal or professional goals. *‘It’s all about, you see, for the sake of my children’s education, I can even emigrate and start again from scratch, wash dishes. I came with this kind of mentality at that time.’*

Her willingness to perform manual labour, such as ‘washing dishes,’ suggests a readiness to downscale her lifestyle and re-enter the labour market in less prestigious occupations. This reflects a broader trend among migrant parents who often endure downward occupational mobility to support the long-term upward mobility of their children. An example of a similar downscaling of expectations can be found in studies of migrant women working in domestic labour in Italy (Cojocaru 2021; Boccagni 2017). Unable to find jobs that align with their qualifications, they find meaning and purpose in sending remittances and supporting their children’s education. On the other hand, Shuxian’s emphasis on education also exemplifies how financial sacrifice is justified by deeply held cultural or familial priorities in the Chinese culture.

Revision of intended duration of stay – Disappointment as an impetus for onward migration

It is common in migration trajectories that expectations that fail to align with lived realities trigger a reassessment of one’s migratory path. Some participants felt dissatisfaction so strongly that they considered changing their migration plans entirely, as Thomas (2024) showed in his biographical analysis of Chinese returnees. While some viewed their stay in Portugal as an experimental and short-term phase from the beginning,

others reshaped their settlement plans into onward migration to other destinations or even considered a return to China. Yumei's (a Golden Visa mother-of-one in her fifties, living in Portugal with her husband and daughter) account below points to the role of anticipation and hope in shaping disappointment but also how disappointment can foster aspirations for onward migration.

I'm disappointed in this place ... because in my imagination it didn't quite match (...) I wasn't very satisfied with the immigrant life that I imagined. So, part of it is, because ... you looked forward to it. That is, when I was at home, ah, it was quite good abroad. After you came, there were good things, but there were also many bad things. Right, so I said I wanted to use this as a springboard to a better European country, a better one.

Disappointment leads Yumei to reimagine Portugal not as a destination *per se* but as a 'springboard' to 'a better European country.' Moreover, the idea of onward migration (finding a 'better European country') reflects a hierarchical view of countries where other destinations can align more closely with her aspirations of opportunity and quality of life.

Conclusions

Pre-migration imaginaries motivate the journey but also may set the stage for disappointment if realities underwhelm expectations. By examining forms of disappointment and discontent along with recalibration strategies of Chinese migrants living in Portugal, this paper underscores the power of imagination and the fluidity of migration trajectories.

Based on in-depth interviews with relatively privileged Chinese migrants in Portugal, we show how they often articulate disappointment as a sense of boredom and temporal stagnation. These discontents, however, are not merely passive but serve as drivers of recalibration, prompting them to reimagine their aspirations, revise their priorities, or even pursue onward migration. Hence, this study addresses disappointment not merely as an emotional response but also as a catalyst for reimagination and a critical analytical lens for understanding how migrants reconcile aspirations with realities. The findings of this research contribute to theoretical debates on migration by emphasising the emotional and temporal dimensions of mobility and privilege (Czaika and Vothknecht 2014; Wang and Collins 2020). They illustrate how privilege does not insulate migrants from disappointment but rather frames the way they respond to it.

Disappointment among Chinese migrants in Portugal is shaped by intersecting factors such as age, gender, education, and visa type, each influencing expectations and recalibration strategies. Different migrants experience different kinds of discontent. Younger migrants, like students and early-career professionals, as was the case of Fangfei, more readily consider onward migration as a solution than migrants who are older or have family duties. Middle-aged migrants, particularly those with families, face bureaucratic delays and family separation, dealing with the disruption of specific plans, as seen in Liangzhi's delayed family reunification or Mengli's reassessment of her husband's relocation. Gender dynamics also play a role, with women, especially mothers and caregivers like Shuxian, frequently prioritising children's education over personal careers, while men like Yong express a more instrumental approach, viewing Portugal primarily as a stepping stone to EU residency. Highly educated migrants expect smooth professional

transitions but may struggle with a lack of well-paid jobs. Furthermore, visa type also structures discontent. Golden Visa holders like Yumei anticipate ease and preferential treatment but may feel let down by unexpected delays, while D7 retirees like Lulu face a language dilemma whether to invest in learning Portuguese or rather focus on other skills. Ultimately, disappointment is not merely an emotional response but an incentive for migrants to adjust their priorities and reimagine their trajectories based on their circumstances, personal factors, plans and structural context.

Understanding the gap between pre-arrival imaginaries and post-arrival realities is crucial for future policy and support structures. It is also important to situate the feelings of disappointment within structural conditions such as perceived limited economic opportunities or insufficient support infrastructures for newcomers. For Chinese migrants, having access to more accurate information about the legal processes, financial realities, and everyday challenges of living in Europe or Portugal would allow for better-prepared transitions, minimising disappointment or the feeling of unmet expectations. Additionally, future studies need to consider the effects of disappointment on mental health and the emotional labour involved in coming to terms with these discontents.

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