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Simeng Wang

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Wang Simeng

# Highly skilled Chinese immigrants in France: Career choices, marriage behavior and political participation

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on highly skilled Chinese immigrants in France, who were born in China and partly educated there then came to France in the 2000s with the intent of pursuing higher education. Once they graduated, they became migrants when they chose to change their administrative status. Compared with other categories of Chinese immigrants in France, such as undocumented migrants, unskilled economic migrants and political refugees, this group of highly skilled people is rapidly growing in number, although it remains understudied. Based on qualitative fieldwork studies conducted since 2010 in the Paris region, this paper sets out with an introduction to the history of Chinese immigration in France and a presentation of the social characteristics of highly skilled Chinese immigrants. The article is then organized around three thematic parts: career choices, marriage behavior and political participation. Using this three-step analysis, this paper aims to paint a picture of the varied living conditions of highly skilled Chinese immigrants in France and to explore how they interact with other Chinese sub-groups living in France (such as low-skilled economic migrants and French-born Chinese) and with the rest of the French population including other ethnic groups. This paper also examines how these highly skilled immigrants play a role with their transnational practices and contribute to the transformation of Chinese society.

## 1 Introduction

In the wake of the Chinese economic boom, mobility between China and Europe has been experiencing new developments. Chinese migration has not only become more diversified in its geographical origins, but also in terms of occupations and motives for migrating. An increasing number of Chinese students stay in Europe to pursue their careers after they graduate. This paper focuses on young Chinese migrants of the first generation who came to France in the 2000s, live in the Paris region and have a relatively large amount of educational and cultural capital. Born in China and partly educated there, this social group came to France in the 2000s with the intent of pursuing higher education. Once they graduated, they became migrants when they chose to change their administrative status, from “student” to

“migrant” for “professional” reasons, “skills and talents”, or “private and family life”. They are skilled Chinese newcomers with economic, social and cultural resources. Compared with other categories of Chinese migrants in France, such as undocumented migrants, unskilled economic migrants, and political refugees, this group of highly skilled young people is growing rapidly in number and yet has been understudied (Wang 2017b).

Based on fieldwork surveys of dozens of such respondents in Paris conducted since 2010, the paper begins by tracing the history of Chinese immigration to France and the social characteristics (number, composition) of this group of highly skilled immigrants. The paper is organized around three thematic parts: career choices, marriage behavior, and political expression and participation. Through this three-step analysis, this paper aims to paint a variegated landscape of the living conditions of this group, and to explore not only how these highly skilled Chinese newcomers interact with other Chinese oldcomers (i.e. shopkeepers and retailers of Zhejiang origin, undocumented Chinese migrants, etc.) and with the rest of the French community (other ethnic groups included) in the host society, but also how the transnational practices of these immigrants contribute to China, their native country. This study based in France provides a comparative perspective with German experiences and touches upon issues such as changes in the structure of Chinese communities across European countries.

## 2 The Chinese population in France: Migratory waves and literature

Most historians agree that there have been three major waves of Chinese immigration to France (Poisson 2006)<sup>1</sup>. The first wave dates back to the early twentieth century when 140,000 workers were recruited for the labor force during the First World War (Ma 2012). The 1936 census counted just over 2,000 Chinese in Paris, some of who were employed in the leather industry (Guillon and Ma Mung 1991). After 1949, following the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, immigration slowed down, but resumed in the 1980s, following China’s Reform and Opening up Policy beginning in 1978.

The second wave of immigration began in 1975, after the eruption of nationalist movements and urban riots in former Indochina (Cambodia, Laos and

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed literature of existing researches on Chinese immigration in France, please refer to the introduction chapter of this volume.

Vietnam). Refugee immigration soared between 1975 and 1980. Many of the first migrants acquired French nationality. Since the late 1990s, a new migration flow has emerged: immigration from urban areas in Northeast China (the *Dongbeis*). These migrants are often middle-aged women, who come alone and leave their families behind in China. Following the launch of the economic reforms, this region, known for its heavy industry, has undergone social and institutional turmoil. Following bankruptcy and privatization of state-owned enterprises, employees ended up unemployed. Since they were experiencing deep social and economic insecurity, many of them decided to migrate abroad (Cattelain et al. 2005).

Far from being considered a unified *community*, the diverse composition of the Chinese population in Paris, in terms of regions of origin, gender distribution and socio-economic status, is because of the different waves of immigration. The so-called “Wenzhou migrants” – whose migration flows date back to the beginning of the twentieth century before they resumed and picked up again substantially in the 1980s – come from rural areas and have a relatively low cultural capital, and emigrate mainly for economic reasons with their whole family. Often benefiting from a social network based on extended kinship and relationships with compatriots, Wenzhou migrants begin by working within an economic structure owned by a member of their community – the three sectors mostly being catering, tailoring and leatherworking – pursuing the project until they may possibly initiate their own family business via tontine at some point. On the contrary, the *Dongbeis*, residing in urban areas and belonging to the middle classes before their emigration from China, they experience a social downgrading once they arrive in France.

Despite all the research devoted to first generation migrants, the social trajectories of intellectual and skilled migrants have received little attention. And very few Francophone sociological studies have focused on descendants of Chinese migrants so far (Wang 2012; Wang 2014), particularly in light of the abundant research investigating descendants of African origin. In this article, we delve into the lives of high-skilled Chinese newcomers who immigrated to France after 2000. Their massive arrival marks the fourth and the most recent wave of Chinese immigration in France (Wang 2017b).

### **3 A very brief history of Chinese high-skilled newcomers’ immigration to France**

Three migratory flows of Chinese students to France can be identified in the time that followed the foundation of the Republic of China in 1912. The first influx dates

back to the Chinese Work-Study Movement in France which aimed at encouraging young Chinese students to go to France (1912–1925) (Barman and Dulioust 1981). During the Second World War (the Sino-Japanese War), the Civil War of 1945–1949 and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the mobility of Chinese students abroad, especially to Europe, halted. Very few left China during this period because of the wars and the ban on getting in contact with revisionist and capitalist culture. The main destination for those who were allowed to leave was the former USSR, especially in the 1950s. The second wave of Chinese students' migration to Western countries occurred in the early 1980s. This movement coincided with the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up Policy launched in 1978.

The third wave of Chinese students to France and also the most important and significant one – that is the focus of this article – took place in 2005. This wave corresponds to the fourth wave of Chinese migration to France including all social categories. After joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, China wished to promote international economic cooperation. The Chinese government therefore sought to develop cultural and academic cooperation on a global scale through events such as the *Chinese Year* in France and the *French Year* events in China. These cultural exchanges took place in two stages: a Chinese Year was set up from October 2003 to July 2004 in France, and a French Year from October 2004 to July 2005 in China. The *Programme des grandes écoles françaises (faguo daxuexiao xiangmu)* was a pioneering initiative for university exchanges within the framework of this French Year in China. Each year, fifty Chinese high school students were selected from all over China and received a five-year grant to graduate from a French engineering school. Even if the program was elitist in nature, the democratization of Franco-Chinese university exchanges has gradually implied less number of future Chinese students going to France. In 2010, during President Hu Jintao's visit to France, the French President confirmed that more than 30,000 Chinese students were residents of France. One year later, China had become the second country, after Morocco, in terms of the number of students present in France. According to *France diplomatie* (French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs 2019), in 2019, nearly 40,000 Chinese students are trained in France. Depending on the study programs, these students have differentiated migration trajectories. At the end of their studies or research contracts, some Chinese chose to change their status from “student” to “salaried or temporary worker”, “skills and talents”, “merchant or foreign artisan”, or to “private and family life” status.

While the recent wave of young Chinese graduates immigrating to France progresses, the flow of unskilled Chinese migrants – like those originating from Zhejiang and Dongbei who immigrated more than a decade ago – is decreasing. France is one of the first destinations for Chinese students wishing to study abroad. According to the *2017 Annual Report on Chinese Youth Study Abroad*

*Trends*<sup>2</sup> published by two education websites, 544,000 Chinese study abroad and China remains the world's leading country of origin for transnational students. Among students who did not receive any grants, the top seven destination countries/regions were the United States (32.9 %), Canada (12 %), Japan (9.8 %), the United Kingdom (9.5 %), Australia (8.3 %), Korea (6.7 %) and France (2.8 %) for the year 2015–2016. According to the same report, financial costs are the main reason for choosing the destination. The fact that French tuition fees are lower, even for business schools compared with those in English-speaking countries, becomes an advantage (not to mention the rich cultural heritage of France) for these students and their parents when they choose a destination country. Internal statistics of the Chinese embassy in France show that, despite a strong imbalance between the fields, hard sciences (theoretical and applied sciences, including the engineering sciences), business studies, and social and human sciences are the three areas favored by Chinese students.

### 3.1 From “student” to “skilled migrant”: Administrative status change

At the end of their studies (or research contracts), these graduates “become” skilled migrants when they choose to change their administrative status. Under Sarkozy's presidency, the conditions to change one's status were tightened. In a speech given in 2012, Nicolas Sarkozy stated that “immigration is an asset but can be a problem”.<sup>3</sup> He thus overhauled the French immigration policy, placing greater emphasis on national identity and the recruitment of highly educated migrants. This restriction has made it more difficult for foreign students to change their status. Applicants for a new status are confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, employers require a valid residence permit as a prerequisite for granting a permanent contract and on the other, the prefecture requires evidence of work, and in the French case a permanent contract, in order to issue a residence permit for work.

Among the people included in this study, skilled Chinese women who hold residence permits for “private and family life” are higher in number than skilled men. This residence card truly reflects the differences between skilled Chinese men and women in their marital status and the connection it has to their

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.eol.cn/html/lx/report2017/> (3 December 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Source: [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/03/03/en-direct-nicolas-sarkozy-en-meeting-a-bordeaux\\_1651572\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/03/03/en-direct-nicolas-sarkozy-en-meeting-a-bordeaux_1651572_823448.html) (3 December 2018).

residence permit. Skilled Chinese women seem to benefit more from administrative resources based on their matrimonial relationship. In other words, as the wives of French citizens, who they are married to or with whom they have a civil union (Pacs), they qualify to apply for private and family resident cards, which facilitate their access to work and other rights in France. Being the spouse of a Frenchman has benefits for them in the labor market, such as their status favoring the signing of a permanent work contract, whereas generally speaking, few skilled Chinese men are spouses of French women.

### 3.2 The social origins and sociability of skilled young newcomers in Paris

Among skilled Chinese migrants, there is a considerable diversity in their social backgrounds and in their schooling in China. Some came to France during their secondary schooling with the goal of being admitted in a preparatory class.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes they moved from urban areas, often provincial capitals, because they did not pass the *gaokao* (高考)<sup>5</sup> in China and were therefore never admitted to Chinese universities. Others were admitted into a Chinese university after passing the *gaokao*, but decided to leave China without a diploma before graduating. These migrants include young Chinese from major cities who are dissatisfied by universities in China, often describing them being of “poor quality”.<sup>6</sup> Once they enroll in a French university, they arrive in France. Finally, there are also Chinese students who graduated from a Chinese university (bachelor’s, master’s or even Ph.D.) and come to France to enroll in graduate courses, ranging from master’s to post-doctorate degrees. All in all, among the group of skilled young Chinese living in France, some were born in Chinese metropolises while others are from a rural background. Nevertheless, the latter also lived in urban China during their bachelor’s, master’s or doctorate studies before they traveled to France.

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4 The preparatory classes are part of the French post-secondary education system. They consist of two very intensive years (extendable to three or exceptionally four years) which act as a preparatory course (or cram school) with the main goal of training undergraduate students for enrolment in one of the *Grandes Écoles*.

5 The Chinese national college entrance examination which is the equivalent of the French *baccalauréat*.

6 On the ranking of Chinese universities, see Wu 2018. According to the evaluation of his team, there are eleven items that help rate a Chinese university, based on a series of criteria, such as the publications of professors, international cooperation, the quality of undergraduate students.

No matter which discipline they study, these skilled Chinese youths get together based on their educational institution and socialize within the associative networks. The networks being the associations of former students of Chinese universities or French schools, also called alumni associations. Within such associations, various forms of friendly activities are organized. One of the objectives is to create a network of mutual support among former students of the same school. Some professional associations are also set up bringing together groups of universities or schools, some examples being The Association of Chinese agronomists in France (AACF) bringing together the alumni association of INRA and Agro-ParisTech, the Association of Chinese scientists and engineers in France bringing together alumni from French engineering schools and Chinese universities, and so on. Cultural interest groups (cooking, art, sports, etc.), economic interest groups (sharing pragmatic information on the economic aspect of migrants' lives, for example, how to invest in real estate in France) and groups based on political interests (forums dedicated to political news) are also networks that exist. These loci of sociability can exist in the real world, implying face-to-face interactions, or on virtual platforms. Registration with these associations and participation in associative events are described by Chinese skilled migrants as a sign of actual belonging to a group and of developing one's social network. This sociability develops from the intra-associative scale to the inter-associative scale. This network of twenty associations was built with the aim of acting as the elitist interface between China and France. However, it remains closed to other sub-groups of the Chinese population, such as the descendants of Chinese migrants, including the most skilled among them as well as low-skilled newcomers.

## **4 Career choices of Chinese high-skilled newcomers**

After graduating, students trained in business schools mostly work in the economic and financial sector as bank employees, tourist guides, import-export traders, investors, sales consultants, and other such profiles. As for those trained in the social and human sciences – history, law, sociology and political science – they tend to work in teaching, research, artistic professions and the media. Some of them decided to go back to China and to try their luck in the Chinese scientific labor market (Guiheux and Wang 2018). Among those graduating from natural and engineering sciences, some work in the public sector (professors, civil servants) while others move to the private sector (finance, IT, environment, etc.). Some of them choose to become self-employed as tourist guides, import-export



traders in luxury goods, investors in Bordeaux wine estates, and the like. The professions that are emerging in the era of globalization contribute directly to the French economy. Some of them choose to acquire French nationality and also participate in French political life. This young generation of overseas Chinese, members of a so-called elite, have caught the attention of the Chinese government. Working on their transnational trajectory thus makes it possible to analyze Franco-Chinese diplomatic relations on a micro-social scale and to understand globalization from below.

For example, we have been interested in a group of commercial agents residing abroad and selling foreign products to Chinese consumers in China via online transaction platforms or software. Named *daigou* (代购) in Mandarin, literally translated as “buying on behalf of someone else”, these commercial agents, who are permanent residents in France, act as intermediaries between French manufacturers or traders and Chinese consumers. Our qualitative analysis sheds light on the social profiles and trajectories of the *daigous*. We illuminate how each *daigou* chooses to carry out this activity as well as examining the social conditions at the meso- and macro-levels which allow the emergence of this sector.

#### **4.1 Social conditions allowing the emergence of *daigou* sector: The Chinese economy in the global production chain, the role of new media in economic transactions, and China as a consumer society**

A few decades ago, former traders of Wenzhou origin began their careers trading labor-intensive products targeting the French market, manufactured by their compatriots in France or exported from China, especially from the Yiwu region. This was the time when China, considered as the world’s factory, offered very cheap labor. As a result, these Wenzhou traders were less specialized in the trade flows of French products sold in China, and even less in e-commerce. Over time, China’s economic development has greatly increased the purchasing power of China’s middle and upper classes (see the statistics of Ministry of Commerce). Thus, the structure and direction of trade flows between China and France have been profoundly reconfigured.

In addition to the shift in the Chinese economy in the global production chain, there is a growing use of new media in the field of remote economic transactions. Social networking platforms, such as WeChat (created in 2011), offer communication support. Money transactions are easier to operate, instantaneous

and do not require sharing banking data between merchant and customer, thanks to such payment applications as Alipay (created in 2004) and WeChat (in the “portfolio” function). According to a survey conducted by Exane BNP Paribas among 5,500 Chinese e-consumers residing in 48 cities, 35 % of customers buy luxury products via *daigous* compared to 45 % who buy online via Chinese sites, 13 % via foreign sites, and only 7 % who order directly via the luxury brands’ site (Solca 2015).

## 4.2 Becoming *daigous*: Multiple trajectories and relatively homogeneous social profiles

Leiqi decided to become a *daigou* in 2013, two years after her recruitment in an advertising agency, where she was still working on permanent contracts when I last interviewed her. She explains this choice as “good timing”: on the one hand, she was able to change her residence permit (from “student” to “employee”), and on the other hand, she was beginning to have greater control over her salaried work, which according to her was “routine” and “not very demanding in terms of time and energy”. These working conditions have allowed her to develop her activities concurrently as a *daigou*. Her professional profile is representative of a majority of the respondents, of which some are employees from various sectors (engineers, computer scientists, salesmen,<sup>7</sup> etc.) and who became *daigous* keeping in mind financial interests.

Depending on the time invested in these activities, the type of products marketed and the commission (5 %–15 %, which can be negotiated), *daigous* I have met earn between 1,200 and 5,000 euros per month. The remunerative nature of this activity also appeals to another profile of respondents, who are self-employed workers in the fields of art and culture: performers, artists, bloggers, etc. Since they lack a regular income, these respondents consider their *daigou* activity to be a part-time job.

Ten years ago, when I came to France for my bachelor degree, I did part-time jobs: washing dishes in a restaurant, being a waiter in a café, picking apples in Normandy. . . To me, “daigou” is a similar kind of job. You don’t need a degree. All young people, even older ones, as long as they have time, a smartphone, a WeChat account and some start-up funds, can do it. If you want to do it properly, it takes time and energy but the advantage is that it pays off much better than other odd jobs. You know, we should be thankful to

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<sup>7</sup> These are salaried salesmen in luxury goods or cosmetics shops who pursue *daigou* activities on the side while continuing to work in their main profession.

the Chinese economy and its many consumers for paying for our food this way [laughs]!  
(Aiqiu, 28, singer, interview conducted in May 2015 in Paris)

A third type of *daigous* comprises women in a specific stage of life: young mothers and/or future young mothers. All of them have left their jobs because they are pregnant or take care of their young children. Having spent a lot of time on neonatal and perinatal care forums in Mandarin, they gradually discovered the demand for maternal and infant products such as powdered milk, strollers, diapers and toys, among others, and as a result decided to become *daigous* in this sector. Yue, 36, is an engineer and former employee of a French company. A mother of two children, Yue has resigned from her job and worked full time as a *daigou*:

I launched this activity by chance. As I was browsing the forums for Chinese mothers four years ago, I realized that these mothers attach great importance to their babies' food products, following the fraught milk crises in 2004 and 2008.<sup>8</sup> Since they knew I lived in France, some of them asked me to send them boxes of milk powder by mail. Thanks to social networks, demand grew. So I said to myself, 'Why not work in this sector?' This sector was not as developed as that of luxury products. In addition, these non-perishable goods are needed over a relatively long period. In the sense that a baby grows and his milk, toys will always have to be changed, so the need is constantly present. And Chinese parents do not hesitate to spend for their children [...].

(Interview conducted in April 2013 in Paris)

Since 2016, Yue's sales have experienced an upsurge with the end of the one-child policy in December 2015. Some of her clients are going through a second pregnancy. And in an urban family from the middle and upper class, the child still occupies a central place. This leads to households allocating a relatively high share of the budget to the child.

Overall, it is difficult to estimate the number of Chinese *daigous* in France. Some French journalists speak of "hundreds" of them working in Paris (Fortat 2017). The data I collected during the interviews, which combine the points of view of various actors, offer some additional information on this subject.

On average, I welcome about 100 Chinese clients, two-thirds of whom are *daigous*.

(Elsa, 32, Chinese saleswoman at Hermès in the Galeries Lafayette, interview conducted in December 2014 in Paris)

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**8** This refers to the melamine contamination of milk in 2008. Some batches of fluid milk and infant milk produced in China contained toxic melamine for ten months to make them appear richer in protein. Tens of thousands of cases of patients who have been affected were reported.

To my knowledge, there are thousands of young Chinese, often women, working as *dai-gous*. They are not competitors to me [...].

(Mr. Liu, 41, of Wenzhou origin, Chairman and CEO of a cross-border e-commerce company in Paris, interview conducted in April 2015 in Paris)

In sum, the examples above demonstrate the capacity of these skilled migrants who are *dai-gous* “to be from here and from there at the same time” (Santelli 2010, 393). It also illustrates the central role that they play in the process of “globalization from below” (Tarrius 2002) based on the study of intra-professional as well as inter-professional practices (with the oldest Chinese migrants in France, that is, those of Wenzhou origin, including some entrepreneurs and traders) in the *dai-gou* sector. These skilled migrants, who are endowed with the most social and cultural resources in the host society, foster the circulation of goods, capital, lifestyles, services and knowledge alike (Wang 2017d).

## 5 The deregulation of the matrimonial market in a transnational context: Marriage behavior of high-skilled Chinese migrants in Paris

Skilled migrants who wish to settle down abroad are confronted with a matrimonial market in France that is very different from the Chinese one, in terms of both representations and actors. In order to speak of a matrimonial market, one must first situate it within the framework of general sociability of these high-skilled migrants. This sociability, as shown above, is mainly one among one’s peers. The language barrier – some Chinese have studied in France in English-speaking programs and therefore not all of them can speak French – is one of the main reasons why their sociability and meeting prospective spouses<sup>9</sup> is restricted to a relatively homogeneous population in terms of ethnic origin,<sup>10</sup> which means of Chinese origin. However, language is obviously not the only factor that accounts for choosing the prospective spouse’s ethnic origin. To understand the various factors, we first analyze the case of skilled Chinese men.

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<sup>9</sup> None of those interviewees had registered at dating sites.

<sup>10</sup> It is also necessary to note the relative homogeneity in terms of social origin, even though there is a segmentation within this population.

## 5.1 “I’m not meeting anyone [that I want]!” : Men facing the reconfiguration of the matrimonial market

Born in 1978 to parents who were public servants, Libai comes from Beijing. After working in China for three years, he graduated from Beijing University in natural science and came to Paris in 2003 to pursue a master’s degree in a business school. Upon graduating, he was offered a permanent position in a Japanese company based in the Paris region. Fluent in French, English and with an intermediate level of fluency in Japanese, Libai explains to me the likely manner in which he will choose his future spouse:

Anyway, I’ll rather take a Chinese woman. [...] I am an only child and the eldest boy among all my cousins for my grandparents on both sides. This position of first son, first grandson is oppressive. Every time I go back to China, people ask me when I will offer them a baby Zhang [Libai’s last name] and when I will definitely go back to China. I see that my parents are growing old, and I don’t know what to do. . . [sighs] In order to make things less complicated in the future, I’d rather find someone who will one day be able to come back with me to China, so I would rather she be a Chinese woman. If she’s a foreigner, she has to be ready to leave France with me. It wouldn’t be that easy for her! Besides, I don’t know what they would think of a Western wife and a Metis baby: if that happened, they’d probably be in a state of shock [laughs].

(Interview conducted in February 2013 in Paris)

The position of “first son, first grandson” within a filiation implicitly implies “procreation”. This social representation, which Libai’s grandparents and parents passed on to him, conditions the choice of his spouse, by taking into account his potential project of returning to China. Besides, in this interview he also implicitly shares his hypothesis on his parents’ view on “procreation”, which would probably be based on the category of “race”. For them, their son, still single at 36, is a *shengnan* (剩男, “left-over man”). Thus, they set up several arranged Skype dates. Libai’s marriage has thus become a source of tension between him and his parents:

These Chinese women, whom my parents find for me in China, do not correspond to who I expect my partner to be. I’ll give you an example. Well, I was attacked once on the street. With one of the girls introduced to me by my parents, we talked about it. She told me right away: ‘Why do you want to stay in France? There seems to be blacks and Arabs everywhere!’ And I got angry right away because I couldn’t tolerate that kind of talk. That girl, for example, never set foot in France. How can she know? Besides, she only wanted to talk about shopping, luxury goods. [...] How narrow-minded! Unfortunately, she is not the only one, the other girls I met were all the same, very materialistic and superficial [sighs]. That’s why, after a few such experiences, I thought that it should be among Chinese women living in Paris, those more open-minded, those who have already travelled, that I might find my partner.

(Interview conducted in February 2013 in Paris)

When Libai looks at skilled Chinese women in Paris, he realizes that the least “racist” or “materialistic” are either quite happy to be single, or already in a relationship, or do not meet his criteria of beauty. Consequently, he is still single and lonely:

When I lay in bed at night, I wonder how it is possible that I’ve ended up like this. If I hadn’t set out [emigrating from China], I would be less picky and things would be much simpler. I feel trapped between the two countries, the two mentalities.

(Interview conducted in March 2013 in Paris)

His loneliness is not only because of the fact that he is single, but also is derived from the dilemma between the social norms that he tries to appropriate with his social status as the only child in the family and “first son, first grandson” and the consequences of his transnational mobility. The consequences being the internalization of new social references and the emergence of his own aspirations.

A gender approach appears necessary in this regard, as well as a gendered differentiation of marriage among Chinese skilled migrants. Among migrants, it is expected that men, unlike women, return to China one day to care for their parents. In marital representations, a married woman is expected to leave her family of origin, and thus she constitutes a “lost good” for her parents, whereas a man who gets married is the one who acquires good for his family.<sup>11</sup> A gift is given from the groom’s family to that of the bride during the wedding ceremony. This gift is conceived of as a reimbursement of material goods following the departure of the bride from her family: her parents lose not only some workforce, but also a guarantee of future assistance in the symbolic sense, when they become dependent. In this sense, it might be understandable why skilled Chinese women may feel “freer” than men to marry a foreigner, who does not systematically plan to settle in China one day. They are less “concerned” than men by this “duty to return” to China (Wang 2013; 2015). Having witnessed extra-ethnic relationships, skilled Chinese women engage in diverse matrimonial practices such as formation and management of the couple and forms of dyadic practices. An analysis of these practices follows using a social mobility approach and moving from an inherited position to a position acquired in a transnational context.

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<sup>11</sup> About the economic issue of marriage in China and money-proof conjugal relationships, please see Xu 2005; Zheng and Yang 2003.

## 5.2 The matrimonial practices of Chinese skilled women: Transnational socialization through the prism of intimacy

The economic dimension of married life – who pays what? – can become a source of tension between partners and force skilled Chinese women to adapt new matrimonial norms. Channa, 30, a psychologist, tells us about her socialization process:

In China, the man pays for everything in a couple. The norm is ‘if you love your wife, you must pay for all her expense’. At first, I was disturbed by the fact that here we [with her husband, a French architect] kept separate accounts. The first time he asked me to pay the bill at the restaurant, I said to myself, ‘Damn, he doesn’t like you that much.’ Afterwards, I talked to some French friends and I finally understood that this was not the problem. Money is not the only signal of love. But, well, it took me a while [to figure it out]. [laughs] (Interview conducted in September 2012 in Paris)

Not all Chinese women make these adjustments smoothly when it comes to intramarital economy. The enduring “it is the man who pays for everything” concept introduces forms of economic-sexual exchange within the couple, with the mobilization of bodily and sexual resources in exchange for economic resources in a relationship. Jiecuì’s words, as a business school graduate and saleswoman, is revealing in this respect (see below).

### 5.2.1 Economico-sexual exchanges within the couple

Thomas [salaried manager in a nightclub] pays for everything when it comes to our expenses. Sometimes, he gives me money to pay for my own errands. I live on his money and he provides me with material comfort and the possibility to stay in France. If I break up with him, I’ll be nothing. So I’m afraid he may walk out on me and I’m anxious, all the more so because there are many girls at his workplace.

Beyond the economic interest, Jiecuì also benefits from another advantage: according to her, the civil union she contracted with Thomas enabled her to be offered her first permanent job contract:

The “French spouse” status helped me a lot. On the one hand, I appear credible and stable since I have committed myself here and, on the other hand, my employer knows that I will not use my work to get my papers! (Interview conducted in November 2012 in Paris)

To keep her relationship intact, she chose to invest in her body through diets, beauty programs, clothing and accessories purchases. As for Thomas, he

admits to deriving rather symbolic benefits from this relationship since he says, “people appreciate it” when you have a Chinese girlfriend because “they are the most fantasized about”, but it is also a good “bet” for his own professional career because “the future nightlife and luxury market will be in China!”

If Jiecu mobilizes her bodily resources most of the time, it is because, at this stage, she has no other type of resources. The promise of economic, linguistic, and social benefits for Thomas’s professional future in China also contributes to the care for the couple’s relationship. Therefore, the scope of economic-sexual exchanges with mixed couples can extend both geographically – affecting several different countries – and chronologically – depending on the migration project that may change over time.

### 5.2.2 Engagement patterns and the age gap

Beyond this economic dimension, the people surveyed also face a disconnect in other aspects of relationships, such as the modality of engagement, ideas about having children, or the age gap between partners. So Han, 27, a journalist:

My ex and I broke up because of it. [...] I couldn’t have sex with him. I wanted to wait until it was serious before we’d sleep together. (Interview conducted in January 2013 in Paris)

Like some Chinese girls of her age, Han is confronted with the taboo concerning sex before marriage, i.e. the normative prescription to preserve her virginity.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the romantic “schedule” that she internalized appears “incomprehensible” or even “ridiculous” in the eyes of her ex-spouse, a French-Belgian novelist.

In Milu’s case, her partner’s advanced age and the modality of their engagement – civil union – became the main source of problems in their relationship. She was born in 1982 in a family of storekeepers, in a city in southern China. Milu arrived in France at the age of 21. She earned a Master’s degree in Educational Sciences and now teaches Mandarin in a language school. Her husband, Tim, in his seventies, is a French psychoanalyst of Dutch origin who has his own practice.

Milu introduced Tim to her parents by sending a picture of him during a Skype conversation since Tim was absent. According to Milu, her parents were extremely “shocked” by his age. Two seconds after receiving the picture, her father snapped at her: “What on earth [...]! He looks older than me! Think

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<sup>12</sup> This representation is not shared by all the girls of her generation.



carefully before you get back to us.” And her parents logged off. Milu views Tim’s advanced age as a “good point”, which accounts for his experience and kindness. But such a relationship with a forty-year gap between a woman and a man is referred to pejoratively in Mandarin as *laoniū chī nēncǎo* (老牛吃嫩草, “an old buffalo eating tender grass”).

In addition to this age difference, Milu’s parents consider their civil union – there is no equivalent in Chinese society – to be “unacceptable”. They demand that she engages in a “real marriage”. During a trip to China, after learning that their daughter was living with Tim, Milu’s parents were highly critical:

Father: Now that he has everything he wants, why would he still consider marrying you?

Mother: What your father means is that you have given up on the things he should get only after marrying you. Besides, I hope it’s not only you who does the housework.

(Interview conducted in May 2011 in Paris)

The discourse of Milu’s parents, firstly, expresses an interpretation of the consequences of this cohabitation in terms of sexual capital on her marriage prospects. Unlike in France, where living together can be a first step for a couple before they get married (Derfouli 1996), young Chinese women still suffer from derogatory ideas about cohabitation, which remains an act of “emancipation” from their families (Wang 2007). Their comments also reveal their vision of the significant age gap between the two partners because, given Tim’s advanced age, Milu’s parents are concerned that their daughter may become her husband’s servant.

In the face of her parents’ reservations regarding her relationship, Milu tries to convince them with various arguments.<sup>13</sup> She says that the most “effective” argument for them is likely to be the material comfort that Tim provides her:

I know my parents, they’re very materialistic. So I’m blunt and tell them: “You know why I’m allowed stay in France? It is thanks to my residence permit for private and family life. How did I get my permanent job? Thanks to this status, again.”

(Interview conducted in June 2011 in Paris)

It is interesting to mention this discrepancy between Milu’s own appropriation of a “deviant” romantic relationship and the argument she uses to justify this

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<sup>13</sup> She referred to the democratization of divorce in China to show that “it is useless to get married if it is not the right person”, the material comfort she has with Tim, his qualities, etc. 3,104,000 couples were divorced in 2012 and the “gross divorce rate” was 2.3, up 8 % from 2011. From 2000 to 2012, the number of divorces increased much faster than the number of marriages (average annual growth of 7.5 % and 3.6 % respectively), see Wang 2013, 46.

relationship to her parents. This is due to the difference between the two systems of matrimonial norms. With her parents, she has to emphasize the instrumentalization of her loving relationship in economic, administrative and social terms – everything Tim brings her in the context of transnational migration – to convince her parents that it is a “good” engagement.

It took three years for Milu’s parents to finally accept this relationship. However, Milu never introduced Tim to her friends in China, nor mentioned his age for fear of being “judged”. She made this choice after people made remarks about her relationship in France – in the street, at the prefecture and even at her workplace:

When people bump into a couple like ours, they are brutally judgmental and hurl insults at us! Obviously, that hurts Tim’s feelings. Now, when we go out, he wears in a leather jacket, with a colorful shirt, well, like a young rocker!

(Interview conducted in April 2012 in Paris)

As a migrant, graduate and skilled young woman, the simple fact that she goes out with an elderly Frenchman means that Milu is subject to being glowered at by others who question her motivation and also her skills. She says: “It seems that a Chinese woman living with an older Frenchman cannot be but a whore from Belleville!” (Interview conducted in April 2012 in Paris)

### **5.2.3 The different ways of using the romantic relationship for the migration project**

Even if Jiecu and Milu both benefit from material comfort and administrative security thanks to their relationships, how they manage this relationship is different. Jiecu invests in her physical appearance to show herself to her advantage and mainly mobilizes her bodily and sexual resources in exchange for economic goods from Thomas at this stage. In contrast, Milu, because of the age gap, gives more importance to cultural and social resources than to bodily resources. Like all migrant women, these Chinese women have learnt to negotiate with their partners according to particular physical, economic, social and cultural resources. We can thus see the effect of social class on symbolic benefits within the relationship since these women construct their romantic relationship differently according to their migration projects.

In this section, by adopting both a transnational and a gender approach, I have focused on the matrimonial trajectories of young skilled Chinese in Paris. Structured by the male social roles – of sons and husbands – and the resulting pressures, mainly coming from their parents living in China, skilled Chinese

men face more difficulties than skilled Chinese women in finding a future spouse. Skilled women tend to integrate the benefits of their marital status into their migration projects. Therefore, they speak about the conflicts that can emerge between partners in terms of sexuality, economy, age and type of engagement. They elaborate on various (sometimes symbolic) prescriptions to maintain their romantic relationship according to the different types of capital at their disposal, not only in the present here in France, but also for the future in China (Wang 2017c).

## **6 Political resocialization of highly skilled Chinese in Paris and their political expressions**

In the last part of this chapter, the process of political resocialization of highly skilled Chinese immigrants in Paris and their expression of political views is analyzed. Compared with other categories of Chinese migrants in France, such as undocumented migrants and political refugees, this group of skilled young people seems open to revealing the process of political resocialization in different political contexts. This is firstly because of the singularity of their perception of citizenship-related issues in a migration context and secondly their relatively high propensity to express their political opinion publicly (Poliak 2002) and finally their capacity of moving between national spaces.

### **6.1 Ethnography of political speeches: Places of investigation**

Using an ethnographic approach, the political expression of the respondents during their everyday sociability, both online and offline namely comments on French and Chinese news articles, online group discussions, demonstrations, public lectures and so on is observed. For three years, the activities of three professional networks and seven interest groups was tracked in three ways: participating in organized events in person, collating exchanges sent by email or posted on forums, and recording instant discussions taking place in chat groups (e.g. WeChat). It should be noted that each network has its mailing list and its chat group with a new online chat group being created and registered participants added prior to an event. The multiplication of these online groups allows us to observe all discussions conducted collectively before and after public debates in the spaces in which they occur. It was notably in professional networks and interest groups that various debates regarding topics that were

on the political news developed namely the future of the European Union and monetary policies, the diplomatic relations between China and Europe, the welcoming policies of migrants in France, the terror attacks against Charlie Hebdo, the terror attacks on 13 November 2015 in Paris, elections and political parties in France, etc.

48 interviewees were contacted over time, with whom semi-directive interviews and participating observations were conducted as complementary material to the data collected during public debates. It was in daily life, during meals, sports activities, tourist visits and conferences not dealing with politics (in total more than 200 hours were spent with these interviewees), that I was able to observe the ways in which political events were discussed by these skilled migrants. The material collected in the informal spaces of everyday life has allowed the description of political discussions produced in spaces not dedicated to political discussion. In other words, “third places” (Oldenburg 1989) and “third spaces” (Wright 2012) are both conducive to the strengthening of citizenship for the individual and therefore for the observation of the process of political resocialization.

## **6.2 Learning to become active citizens**

These skilled migrants gain knowledge on the organization of political life in France and more generally, their experiences in a democratic country, and this contributes to the “development of their political consciousness” (Gamson 1992, 176). In other words, the citizens’ attitude is favored. For example, the right to protest is the first element that appeals to skilled Chinese in French society. It is probably because strikes, demonstrations and their consequences are directly related to their daily lives (Wang 2019). Some interviewees commented on the right to protest as a means of contrasting Chinese and French societies. In other words, their political views often stem from a comparison with the Chinese political system. The political assessments by these skilled migrants cannot be detached from their previous politicization in China.

### **6.2.1 For a global civil society: Intermediaries between French and Chinese political life**

Certain respondents comment on Chinese media platforms and play a role as intermediaries between cross-border political news, in addition to their main profession. Their writing, in the form of essays and online reviews, deal with

French and sometimes European political news. For the last two years, the political events these contributors focused their attention on were the terror attack on 14 July 2016 in Nice and the terror attacks on 7 January and 13 November 2015 in Paris. Among the fifteen articles directly addressing these three events, the analysis by these authors have covered numerous topics including Muslim civilization, relations between France and Islam (since the crusades), territorial segregation, the extension of the state of emergency, political parties and elections, support and assistance to the victims of the attacks, migration policies, refugees welcoming policies, among others. Terms such as *anquan / bu anquan* (safety / unsafety) or *kongbu zhuyi / kongbu fenzi* (terrorism / terrorist) are not very present in these contributions, unlike the reports in the Chinese press as well as the comments by Chinese experts living in China when writing about these events.

Regarding cross-border news flows,<sup>14</sup> one interviewee, Qiang, claims to be an expert in French news thanks to the two positions he occupies: first of all, being a resident in France, he can collect first-hand material about the events in question. Secondly, his job as a researcher requires a certain level of unbiased and scientific approach to topical affairs. In his endeavor to distinguish himself from the Chinese experts living in China, Qiang sends his essays to a digital media publication based in Shanghai, which was founded in 2014 and pays great attention to analyses and news reviews made by young Chinese residing abroad. In addition, the site favors contributors trained in the social and human sciences.

The existence of this type of digital sites promoting a scientific outlook on politics favors opinion pieces on foreign news by skilled Chinese residing outside of China. Beyond the motive of “enabling the Chinese of China to hear another voice”, as Qiang put it, some interviewees explain their writing by the rights and duties of a transnational citizen. For Tianji, conveying cross-border information without being judgmental or clichéd is part of a collective “social responsibility”, reflects a “civic attitude” (Chen et al. 2015) and demonstrates a collective identity (Gamson 1992) which ensures the persistence of the link between the two media landscapes but also the two political spaces. Other respondents report that they publish articles driven by a need to contribute to “advancing” Chinese society and “improving governance” in Chinese society.

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**14** On the intricacies of cross-border information flows and the reception of foreign affairs in the digital age on Sina’s microblogs, see Jiang et al. 2016. According to the authors, Chinese elite microbloggers have a good understanding of electoral politics in the United States. Regarding the online political participation of Chinese residing abroad, see for example Parker and Song 2007.

One interviewee, Xueli, compares the governance tools in China and France through her discussion on the state of emergency. If Xueli is able to comment on Chinese politics with French politics as a starting point, it is probably because of her university training (doctorate). She is well-versed with legal and political concepts alike and commands tools to conduct comparative analyses when needed. This proficiency, which is not only theoretical but also methodological, enables her to become an intermediary in cross-border flows of political news, a task that requires intellectual engagement.

During the process of political resocialization, transposing political topics through writing is less frequent the other way round: few educated Chinese publish their comments on Chinese policy in French in the French media. There are two main reasons that came up during the interviews. Firstly, French linguistic proficiency not being high enough in order to do so and secondly, the preparation for future professionalization in China. Since some interviewees plan to return to China, they consider it best for them to begin publishing in Mandarin. It is thus essential to take into account the situations in which the actors' communication is produced (Cardon et al. 1995), especially in the case of transnational migrants circulating in different political spaces.

## 6.2.2 The differentiated processes of political resocialization

Within the group of skilled migrants, it is the very same group of the most politicized Chinese – intermediaries in the cross-border flows of political news – who organize political rallies in France and public conferences and debates in Chinese. While those close to the pole of economic dominance seem less interested in Chinese politics, particularly in terms of democratization, advocacy and civil society, they spend more time reading French news on security-related issues in particular.

A public conference devoted to analyzing the attacks on 13 November 2015 hosted five young Chinese graduates in social and human sciences. Among the 68 participants, more than half work in the private sector: banks, insurance, consulting, fashion and luxury, import-export, hotels, trading, among others. The reasons given for participating in this conference include: “It concerns our daily life!”, “the opportunities to exchange our opinions on the matter in Mandarin are scarce.”

Generally speaking, within the group of skilled migrants, differentiated processes of political resocialization take place. These respondents reconstruct their relationship to politics and have different opinions on political subjects because of their distinct social characteristics. Some of them, often trained in

human and social sciences, act as intermediaries in the flow of cross-border political information and in that way actively participate in the democratization of Chinese society. Others, especially those working in the economic sector, show their disinterest in democracy-related topics in Chinese society. It seems illusory to analyze the political comments of these skilled Chinese migrants without taking into account the composition of the group, the interaction between its members and their heterogeneous politicization.

Finally, the Chinese migrants that were studied are educated with an average level of post-graduate education. They are not only individuals occupying dominant positions in the economic sector, such as multinational companies or finance executives, but also people with distinctive social and cultural traits. The spatial and temporal dimensions of the political expression of these migrants needs to be highlighted. When changing their living environment and political regime, these respondents learn to become active citizens and appropriate various online and offline forms of expression of political opinion including public debates, rallies, demonstrations, online publications, etc. The temporality, especially between the emigration from China and immigration to France and all the phases of resocialization that accompany this migration process, is a central element in the evolution of their political speech.

Following the interviewees in various places of social encounters (political in large part) – events, public conferences, comments of French news for Chinese Internet users, among others – allows the observation of the complexity of their political expression: the conditions of expression and the political speeches of interviewees are marked by the plurality of their intellectual, professional, emotional and humanitarian engagements (Wang 2017a).

## 7 Conclusion

Beginning with a historical account of Chinese high-skilled immigration to France, this chapter analyzed the living conditions of this group through three points of entry: career choice, marriage and political expression and participation. Being transnational migrants with distinguished resources (of economic, cultural and social nature), these young skilled Chinese migrants contribute to a globalization from below through their economic activities such as intermediates trading between French producers and Chinese consumers living in China. With regard to marriage, facing a deregulation of the matrimonial market in a transnational context, women and men have different matrimonial choices. Men often suffer from the challenges in meeting a prospective spouse. Skilled

women, for their part, tend to integrate the benefits of their marital status into their migratory projects. They thus are more exposed to extra-ethnic conjugal relationships and demonstrate differences in terms of sexuality, economy, age and mode of engagement. Regarding their political expression and participation, the respondents reconstructed their relationship to politics by learning about citizenship. Interviewees also have different opinions on political issues depending on their previous social trajectories. The figure of the *transnational citizen and intermediary between French and Chinese political news* is identified among these high-skilled newcomers, usually trained in social and human sciences.

Through a three-step analysis, this chapter draws a differentiated landscape of the living conditions of the group of highly skilled Chinese immigrants in France and explores how these newcomers interact with not only other Chinese migrants (such as shopkeepers and retailers) and their children, but also with the French indigenous community (other ethnic groups included). With regard to methodology, collection of the empirical material was possible thanks to both the ethnographic approach and the social proximity between the author and her interviewees. Group dynamics – generally speaking the sociability modality of staying among them – also undoubtedly made it easier for respondents to speak.

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